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Introduction: Under suspicious eyes – surveillance states, security zones and ethnographic fieldwork

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Introduction

Whilst doing fieldwork on a natural disaster in Gilgit-Baltistan, the high-mountainous area of northern Pakistan, Martin Sökefeld interviewed Mohammad Ali (name changed), a friend who worked with a major NGO engaged in rural development, in his office. For two hours they talked about damage, compensation and plans for rehabilitation. A few weeks later, Mohammad Ali stated that immediately after Martin's departure he had been visited by officers representing four different intelligence agencies, one after the other. They all wanted to know what the two had talked about. In recounting this story, Mohammad Ali joked about the paranoia of 'the agencies' in Gilgit-Baltistan. This, however, was not a one-off but rather a regular experience.

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When the power relationship is not in favour of the anthropologist: reflections on fieldwork in Gilgit-Baltistan

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Abstract: Without doubt, a great deal of fieldwork is monitored or influenced by government or intelligence services; yet, ethnography about such circumstances is rather exceptional. The reason for this, as I understand it, is the power that is attributed to the publication – and through it also to the ethnographer – possibly being harmful, due to the notion that publications can harm the researcher him- or herself, interlocutors or subsequent researchers. But is the researcher really as powerful as such a view proposes? Taking ethnography as a comprehensive project, i.e. comprising both ethnography and an ethnographic process, it should be clear that the ethnographer is often far from being in a position of power, regarding both ethnographic counterparts as well as powerful institutions and bureaucratic organisations. These elements affect not only the lives of the people anthropologists use to study, as Laura Nader (1972) proposed, but the fieldworker as well, by influencing his or her research possibilities and experiences and thus the ethnographic view and output. Examining my fieldwork under surveillance in Gilgit-Baltistan, the main concern of this contribution is to look at such power relations and how they influence the research. Setting the stage with an ethnographic encounter with intelligence officers, the article continues with a short discussion of the challenges of carrying out fieldwork under surveillance, followed by an overview of common surveillance practices in the region where the fieldwork took place. Subsequently, it offers a concise ethnography of fieldwork under surveillance, followed by an analysis of the premises on which the intelligence officers I encountered may have engaged as well as the local and cultural logic behind their engagement. I conclude with the proposition that the researcher is often far from being the one who decides about defining the terms of the research, ethnographic relationships or encounters.

[Pakistan, Gilgit-Baltistan, agency, fieldwork, power, surveillance]

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Disciplines, silences and fieldwork methodology under surveillance

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Abstract: Research in countries with extensive controlling regimes, such as the People's Republic of China, is a challenge to social anthropologists, who are supposed to live for extensive periods of time in the field, conduct in-depth interviews and engage in participant observation. Research in 'sensitive' (*mingan*) regions of China such as Xinjiang and Tibet, where surveillance is additionally enhanced, raises further methodological and ethical issues. Being monitored by the state links to fundamental questions of how to collect research material and how to work with research participants. The societal fear created by omnipresent and threatening surveillance destabilises social relations and affects ways of communicating, thereby creating multiple silences. Moreover, the awareness of the risk that the researcher brings to her informants results in self-censorship during fieldwork as well as in research output. This paper discusses these different forms of muting, by focusing on methodological challenges of 'hearing' silences.¹

[disciplines, self-censorship, structural muting, silences, fieldwork methodology, surveillance, China]

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¹ The first draft of this paper was presented at the EASA meeting in Tallinn in 2014. I would like to thank the co-panelists and our audience for their feedback. I also thank Sabine Strasser, Martin Sökefeld and the two anonymous reviewers for their very helpful comments. I am grateful to the Swiss National Science Foundation and the Research Network 'Crossroads Asia', funded by the German Ministry for Education and Research, for their generous support of my research.

What are you *really* looking for? Ethnography while (feeling) under surveillance

Anna Zadrožna

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Abstract: Establishing rapport, trust and credibility is crucial for undertaking proper fieldwork. In areas of conflict or heightened political tensions, however, establishing this type of bond can become a challenge. Seen as a spy, an agent or simply as a suspicious outsider, the ethnographer may never gain trust. Moreover, s/he can become a subject of (counter-)surveillance, whereby s/he is observed and controlled; consequently, the feeling of being under suspicious eyes may alter the research output and possibly cause anxiety and unease. In this paper I explore how (the feeling of) being under surveillance influences the ethnographer, the research process and the knowledge she produces as a writer. Are there spaces and issues that should be silenced or field sites to be abandoned? And what can s/he learn from the experience of being under surveillance in the field?

[(counter-)surveillance, protective surveillance, difficult fields, fieldwork ethics, embodiment]

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Fieldwork under Forced Protection: the suspicious gaze of children in Colombia's Medellín

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Abstract: In this article I use the concept of 'forced protection' as lens for rethinking my fieldwork in Colombia's second city Medellín during the late 1990s, under the surveillance of minors – armed groups of teenagers and children who exercised territorial control over urban space. Forced protection is conceptualised as part of the fast growing private security industry that has emerged across the globe, since the 1990s. This industry particularly expanded in contexts such as Colombia where the supply of a workforce trained in warfare increased in the wake of peace initiatives and the demobilisation of irregular armed groups. I reveal how the ambiguous relationship between forcibly protected civilians and their young protectors draw me into the established logic of surveillance and explain the irony of experienced surveillance in reference to the trope of the 'evil child'. I conclude that my fieldwork exemplifies an ironic dimension in Marcus's (1997) generative concept of complicity since I would hardly have arrived at an idea of the potential and paradoxes of surveillance under forced protection had I not had the opportunity to expose myself to its irony through participant observation in a popular neighbourhood during the crucial period of the late 1990s.

[forced protection, security industry, youth, 'evil child', disputed urban territories, Medellín, Colombia]

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Learning not to ask: Some methodological implications of studying Eritrean refugees in Ethiopia

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Abstract: This article is based on ethnographic fieldwork carried out with Eritrean refugees in Ethiopia and analyses how the practices of surveillance, suspicion and mistrust hindering the research foster a critical reflection on methodology. The investigation was characterised by multiple levels of silence, lies and mistrust that became key aspects in both comprehending the past experiences, daily lives and imagined futures of the research participants and analysing the relationship between topics of research and methodology. Mistrust and suspicion are not merely defensive tools against outsiders; they also emerged inside the community, because of insoluble uncertainty about the relationship of everyone with the Eritrean diasporic state. The article shows that silence and mistrust cannot be reduced to the effects of governmental institutions, even when they are highly repressive and pervasive. Rather, they are part of historically rooted social and cultural frames that affect everyday life and intergenerational transmission: they are embedded in unreflective behaviour such as *habitus*, and they are at the core of reflective practices through which social boundaries and feelings of intimacy are drawn. The intent is to overcome the Western logocentric model of communication and to show silence not as an interruption in conversation. From a methodological point of view, the essay tries to rethink silence and mistrust in the ethnographic encounter, considering them as essential parts of the analysis.

[Mistrust – Eritrean refugees – research methodology – silence – social boundaries – fantasies of the state – logocentrism]

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Under Suspicious Eyes: Work and Fieldwork in a Steel Plant in Kazakhstan

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Abstract: This article deals with the ambiguous role of suspicion in industrial production and anthropological knowledge production and reflects on the experience of conducting fieldwork under watchful eyes in a foreign-owned former Soviet steel plant in Kazakhstan. Furthermore, it addresses how fieldwork must adapt to and is influenced by suspicion on the shop floor. By taking one of the steel plant’s sub-departments as an example (DSF, the iron ores crushing and sorting factory) I address the peculiarities of fieldwork inside the gates of a steel plant and touch upon issues of access, ethics, politics and constraints related to the labour process. I analyse the reasons behind the suspicion of managers and workers, the ways in which it manifested itself in interactions and how I dealt with the issue in the fieldwork situation. The final part of the article is devoted more generally to how suspicion impacts on work and sociality on the shop floor, namely how it plays a role in production relations and how recent shop floor restructuring has accentuated its importance. Workers’ diffidence to each other appears to work as a flexible, indirect and disciplining device that plays into the hands of managerial control. Although effective in managerial logic, it also undermines good managerial practice, thereby eroding the capacity of the plant to address its fundamental problems.

[Work discipline; trust; suspicion; fieldwork; steel industry; Kazakhstan]

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Afterword

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These excellent papers show how far ethnography has come since the invitation by reflexive anthropologists, some 30 years ago, to inspect our ethnographic practice more closely. Offering multiple cases of the ethnographic analysis of fieldwork under surveillance, they compel us not only to rethink our standard research methods based on building trust and empathy but also to sharpen our analysis of the power relations in which that research takes place. The editors state in their introduction that fieldwork under surveillance is not fundamentally different from “normal” fieldwork but simply illustrates some of the specific constraints that amplify the dilemmas and difficulties of all ethnographic research. Although I agree with that view, I think it is precisely the confrontation with cases of extreme surveillance like some of these that enables us to see such dilemmas and difficulties more clearly.

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