Manifesto for *Ethnography*

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This is an ‘open’ manifesto welcoming readers, writers and researchers. Do not think of this manifesto as ‘a law’, a set of rules to be followed, a collection of recipes to be applied, a system to be adopted. In no sense is our aim to construct a grand, systematic, waterproof, ‘ready-made’ theory/methodology counterposed to other scholastic ‘ready-mades’. Instead we hope that this manifesto and this journal will be read as enabling and ‘sensitizing’, theoretically and methodologically, approaches to lived culture, worldly experiences and practical sense making. That is, we hope this manifesto is ‘put to work’ in helping to produce a wide range of ethnographies, thereby being developed, refined and criticized without ever being locked up as a given system of thought. We plan to publish responses to and elaborations of this manifesto in future issues. Perhaps we have only one disciplining base line: a belief in, to quote the American philosopher Martha C. Nussbaum, ‘reason’ as having/carrying a ‘special dignity that lifts it above the play of forces’ (1997: 38) conditioned by the knowledge that reason is also a ‘worldly knowledge of practice’ for the conduct of everyday life as it grapples with the play of those forces. More of this later.

What is ethnography for us? Most importantly it is a family of methods involving direct and sustained social contact with agents, and of richly writing up the encounter, respecting, recording, representing at least partly in its own terms, the irreducibility of human experience. Ethnography is the disciplined and deliberate witness-cum-recording of human events. As arguably the first ethnographer, Herodotus, said in arguably the first ethnography, *The History*
(1987: 171), ‘So far it is my eyes, my judgement, and my searching that speaks these words to you’. ‘This-ness’ and ‘lived-out-ness’ is essential to the ethnographic account: a unique sense of embodied existence and consciousness captured, for instance, in the last line of Gerald Manley Hopkins’ poem ‘As Kingfishers’, ‘What I do is me: for that I came’. The social body is the site of this experience engaging ‘a corporeal knowledge that provides a practical comprehension of the world quite different from the act of conscious decoding that is normally designated by the idea of comprehension’ (Bourdieu, 1999: 135).

The understanding and representation of ‘experience’ is then quite central, both empirically and theoretically. As William James says, ‘Experience, as we know, has ways of boiling over, and making us correct our present formulas’ (1978: 106). We do not want to lose, indeed we will emphasize, the openness and richness of this category, but there are two important contexts which anchor how we see it.

First are the symbolic forms, patterns, discourses and practices which help to form it and give it shape, so that the ethnographic enterprise is about presenting, explaining and analysing the culture(s) which locate(s) ‘experience’. Second, and more widely, for us the best ethnography also recognizes and records how experience is entrained in the flow of contemporary history, large and small, partly caught up in its movement, partly itself creatively helping to maintain it, enacting the uncertainty of the eddies and gathering flows dryly recorded from the outside as ‘structures’ and ‘trends’. To borrow the formulation of E.P. Thompson, we see human beings as ‘part subjects, part objects, the voluntary agents of our involuntary determination’ (1978: 119). Ethnography and theory should be conjoined to produce a concrete sense of the social as internally sprung and dialectically produced.

Of course ethnography is an established practice within a variety of disciplines with their own internal histories, most prominently in anthropology, for which it serves as distinctive method and professional rite of passage. From various quarters, a series of theoretical challenges have been mounted against what are taken as its inherently uncritical humanism and impenitent empiricism, not to mention the heated topic of ethnography’s historic tie to colonialism or to the powers of the age. Ethnographic accounts can indeed assume an active centred agency in charge of its own history making and also assume, sometimes, that the whole meaning of a phenomenon is written on its surface. To avoid these dangers we seek and endeavour to promote not simply the idea of humanistic ethnography, but of a ‘theoretically informed’ ethnographic study.

Poststructuralist and postmodernist critiques have challenged the self-assumption of ‘ethnographic authority’ pointing to a discursive naïveté in ethnographic writing which is unconscious of the ways in which it ‘writes’
(Clifford and Marcus, 1986) and makes culture rather than discovering or reflecting it. We recognize that ethnographic practice and writing has to be aware of its own location and relatedness to the world, this awareness itself reflecting some of the symbolic and structural positioning of all human subjects, all human experience. Equally, though, we do not want to lose the strengths and continuities, the very biases of the ethnographic tradition in the layered and evocative, socially and historically conditioned, presentation of located aspects of the human condition from the inside, understanding that discourses/ideologies cannot be treated as if their constructed contents can be equated with lived outcomes. Further, we must utilize these strengths for the, perhaps now more critical than ever, contribution ethnography can make both to the critique of over-functionalist, over-structuralist and over-theorized views and to the positive development of reflexive forms of social theorizing, allowing some kind of voice to those who live their conditions of existence.

The aim of Ethnography is to be(come) of interest across the board of the social sciences and the humanities, especially to: sociology in all of its branches, anthropology, history and human geography, linguistics, education and pedagogy, the arts, health studies, media and cultural studies. While this constituency is huge there is a problem in pitching a methodologically defined journal into a subject defined academic world. To focus our appeal we propose below a fuller sense of our approach by identifying four distinguishing features which clearly characterize our project and separate it from competitor journals. These define the kind of interest, writing and readership which we are aiming for in ways which connect, integrally, to positions, orientations and debates within all the main social scientific and humanistic disciplines. These are also lines of connection or parameters which make for a global relevance allowing ‘place-bound’, necessarily always local, ethnographic writing to carry across the world.

**Distinguishing characteristics of Ethnography**

1. The recognition of the role of theory, as a pre-cursor, medium and outcome of ethnographic study and writing. For us, though, theory must be useful theory in relation to ethnographic evidence and the ‘scientific energy’ derived from the effective formulation of problems, rather than theory for itself. It must be of help in understanding social phenomena in relation to ethnographic evidence. So we are not interested in ‘grand theory’, ‘pure’ scholastic reason or ‘abstracted’ empiricism. We seek to promote ‘theoretical informed-ness’, ‘sensitizing concepts’, ‘analytic points’, all means of teasing out patterns from the texture of everyday life, from ‘pure’ descriptive ethnography. These may sometimes be gathered and mobilized for more connected theoretical contributions, but while we do, in general, see ourselves
absolutely within a broad project of the reflexive understanding of contemporary society, we do so primarily from a basis within the ethnographic observation of continuity and change.

We are pluralistic and historical in our view of what may count as relevant theory, but it must have aspects of generalizability and bear upon some main organizing feature, or principle of change, within contemporary society. Interdisciplinarity, comparative field work and multiple methodologies would all aid to reach the goal of making the journal a propitious and fruitful meeting ground for different disciplines that still go about producing their knowledge largely in isolation from (if not scorn for) each other. An important feature of the journal will be to offer a platform for the continuing excavation and re-assessment of the conditions of production, effects and potential applications of the ‘classic’ texts and authors of the ethnographic tradition. A particular focus will be on the theoretical and practical discussion of the scope of ethnographic methods to identify, record and analyse ‘ordinary’ human practice, its openness and unpredictability, in context, and of the potentials of the method to produce ‘surprise’ (Willis, 1980): to produce knowledge not pre-figured in, and a basis for refinement and reformulation of, starting out theoretical positions. We argue that ‘theoretically informed’ ethnographic writing has a crucial role to play in reshaping ‘theory’ and in finding accommodations between, as well as forging new lines and directions from, social theorists.

2. The centrality of ‘culture’. This is not to be narrowly understood in a textual or discursive kind of way but in the broad sense of the increasing imperative for all social groups to find and make their own roots, routes and ‘lived’ meanings in societies undergoing profound processes of re-structuration and de-traditionalization, processes which are eroding the certainties of previous transitions and inherited cultures, as well as inciting them to re-establish themselves in new forms. To put it more theoretically, the contemporary disarticulations between ‘social being’ and ‘social consciousness’ have raised the salience of ‘culture’ as an ‘independent’ and all pervasive category, interpenetrating, continuous with, running parallel to established social forms. As Bohman argues, ‘social phenomena are shot through with indeterminacy and open-endedness’ (1991: vii). A very important role of the concept of culture is its way of indicating and expressing the always existing mode of indeterminacy in human life – that it can’t be reduced to economic and social conditions. Symbolic production and meaning-making can never be a mirror of their environing/encompassing conditions of existence because they work through forms of consciousness and self-understanding. Equally, though, this ‘autonomy’ must be understood in relation to the conditions of existence within which humans act, work and create. Cultural change cannot be entirely free floating. It can’t disconnect from its moorings, whether contemporary and social or historically as embedded experience within cultures.
and cultural orientations which are inherited. It is autonomous because of the unpredictability of the ways in which it consciously and unconsciously ‘handles’, productively and reproductively, the social, not because it abolishes the social. It is exactly the showing of relations of indeterminacy embedded within the social (socio-economic constraints) which is the source of elegance, the ‘travelling quality’ beyond place and time, in the best ethnography. The latter shows the autonomy of culture as an expression/form within larger processes of social production and reproduction. In this regard we can see that the ‘postmodern fallacy’ lies, not in its recognition of diversification and individualization at the cultural level, but in the cutting of the latter’s social moorings. Only because it effectively declares the end of ‘the social’ can postmodern thinking and analysis establish culture as a ‘floating signifier’. When it accurately sees fundamental cultural change as sometimes blotting out the immediate landscape, it inaccurately deduces that the social has been eclipsed forever. Individualization, for instance, cannot be understood as synonymous with individualizing processes, but rather as a result of social processes of differentiation and diversification producing individualized feelings and forms.

A more panoramic and extended view shows an ever-increasing importance of the cultural to the social. Consent must increasingly be secured for the exercise of power and the whole field of ‘culture’, as the play of symbolic powers, has come to offer the most sophisticated arena for understanding how this is organized and achieved. The renewed importance of everyday cultural practices, understood from below, is picked up in different ways by virtually all of the sub-categories and hyphenates of the social sciences. The economic, political, juridical, ideological, institutional ‘levels’ have to be understood very importantly through the cultural representations and practices in and through which they appear and are justified. The ‘cultural economy’, commercialized production, distribution and consumption of cultural artefacts and products, occupies an ever growing place in contemporary capitalism. No social relation or process can be understood without the mediations of culture, part of a contradictory and profound tendency towards a practical democratization of the capacity for meaning-making so that any intervention, project or analysis has to ask, even if prescriptively, ‘what does this mean (as consequence and outcome too) for those affected’. Our focus here must be on the materials-in-use and sensuous practices of ‘meaning-making’ in historical and social context with an eye open especially for picking up and theorizing the emerging outlines of ‘emergent’ cultures and cultural forms, and for understanding and charting their significance with respect to more adequate theoretical formulations concerning the relations between human creativity, culture, the traditions of culture and structure.

3. A critical focus in research and writing. This is to be understood not in a
narrowly Marxist or Frankfurt School manner, but in the broadest sense of recording and understanding lived social relations, in part at least, from the point of view of how they embody, mediate and enact the operations and results of unequal power. This is to trace and to try to make explicit, in ways difficult within lived practice, the lineaments of what Dilthey calls ‘to be aware of being a conditioned being’ (cited in Pickering, 1997: 172). Important, too, is the ethnographic and theoretical tracing of responses to power and of how the interests and views of the powerful are often finally secured within processes and practices which may seem to oppose dominant interests.

Part of the problem for the social sciences now is that, as we have seen, the postmodern and poststructuralist turns have written out ‘the social’ which in turn decisively writes out the political. Since ‘the social’ is dead, poverty, for instance, is moved away as if it were only a mediated text, not ‘reality’. Postmodern thinking thereby loses its radical and progressive edge, except perhaps in localized segments of the academy. To keep alive and promote an ethnographically rooted notion of the cultural which is socially embedded is to keep alive social hope for the social and human sciences. *Ethnography* will insist on the ethnographic recording of lived experience within the social but also explore and present cultural questions around how it comes to be that many of the subjective beliefs, practices and actions of social agents act, finally, against their own interests, at least understood as future objective life chances: the study of how the autonomy of culture is practically engaged, as well as eroded or disengaged, in concrete sites of human endeavour.

Other important themes will include: where field access is possible, exploring how power is lodged within the taken-for-granted meanings and everyday practices of the powerful; tracing shifting relations of power in various sites, institutions and transitions as they are ‘lived’, experienced and handled, by subordinate groups; the forming power over subjectivity of dominant discourses, social representations, media and commodity forms as well as the folk cultural literacies and practices which penetrate and creatively ‘other use’ these forms; ‘glimpses’ of other possibilities and orders of power embedded in lived practices, without ever losing sight of their complex, contradictory and unintended consequences.

4. An interest in *cultural policy* and *cultural politics*. This is broadly conceived, again, as the politics, interventions, institutional practices, writing and other cultural productions within ‘public spheres’, or capable of opening up new ones, that bear on the possibilities of ordinary meaning-making especially in relation to emergent cultures and to human practices involved in making sense of, as creatively living through, profound structural and cultural change. This will include encouraging the mobilization of theoretically informed ethnographic work in relation to specific and general policy
questions, but more generally we aim to re-connect and commit academic work with and to larger social projects and with the identification and formulation of the different possibilities of ‘social becoming’ in an era of intense change. We must explore the role of critical ethnography in developing conscious and evocative policy forms which help to make explicit embedded logics, so that social actors increasingly become more agents of their own will, but within some sociological frame, somehow understood, conditioning and setting its limits of possibility – changing the social within the social.

Central here is the question: what are the social, cultural and economic, possibilities and limits for the transformative power of agency? The loss of a knowable community (a diversified society) needs a social science striving for social relevance. Policy for Ethnography is not so much a question of ‘applying’ scientific theory and findings to an outside given, as of developing what might be termed procedural policy work, that is utilizing theoretically informed ethnographies to expand the resources of knowledge and information which social actors use to understand their own position and the likely consequences of particular courses of action, so absorbing concepts and theories about them into their actual practice. Associated with this is the aim to circulate knowledge about different ‘forms of life’ between different social settings and to seek comparatively to test the forms of possible or imagined worlds against and within the grain of actual human lives.

There are, to take but one concrete example, varieties of ‘youth projects’ promoted in locations all around the world, but they are usually driven by adult or ‘expert’ notions of citizenship or more often now ‘employability’. Rarely are these initiatives conditioned by ethnographic evidence concerning actual ways of life among the young, yet more rarely by statements from youth groups concerning their own aspirations, priorities and agendas.¹

**Theoretically informed methodology for ethnography (TIME)**

It is necessary to say something further about our sense of the role of theory in ethnography. We are not interested in ‘grand theory’ for its own sake. Though it is important and legitimate, we do not want to provide ethnographic evidence simply to exemplify or adjudicate between opposing and pre-existing theoretical views. We have a view of the relation of theory to the ethnographic study of social and cultural change, of how it brokers the relations between the other three distinguishing characteristics of our project. This is what we call TIME: a theoretically informed methodology for ethnography.²

Pascal warns us, writes Bourdieu, against ‘two extremes: to exclude reason, to admit reason only’ (1999: 72). Most basically we are interested in recording and presenting the ‘nitty gritty’ of everyday life, of how ‘the
meat is cut close to the bone’ in ordinary cultural practices, and presenting
them in ways which produce maximum ‘illumination’ for readers. If you like
we are interested in producing ‘Ah ha’ effects where evocative expression
through data hits the experience, body and emotions of the reader. These
are moments where new understandings and possibilities are opened up in
the space between experience and discourse, at the same time deconstruct-
ning and reshaping the taken for granted in a particular response to the shape
of the social order, a response which transcends dichotomies such as
public/private, social/individual. ‘Ah ha’ effects fuse old experiences with
new ones, thus opening up readers’ minds towards new horizons.

However, the ‘nitty gritty’ of everyday life cannot be presented as raw,
unmediated data – the empiricist fallacy, data speaking for itself – nor can
it be presented through abstract theoretical categories – the theoreticist
and idealist trap, the lack of interest in empirical findings. TIME sees the best
form of this relation – data/theory – in the ‘surprise’ (Willis, 1980; Trond-
man, 1997) that each can bring to the other. Engagement with the ‘real’
world can bring ‘surprise’ to theoretical formulations – for instance, as
Garfinkel pointed out long ago, concrete living subjects aren’t the ‘cultural
dopes’ of much structuralist theory – and theoretical resources can bring
‘surprise’ to how empirical data is understood – bringing a class or femin-
ist perspective to understanding the ‘raw’ experience of unemployment for
instance. TIME recognizes and promotes a dialectic of ‘surprise’. This is a
two-way stretch, a continuous process of shifting back and forth, if you like,
between ‘induction’ and ‘deduction’. Ethnography is the sensitive register of
how experience and culture indicate, as well as help to constitute, profound
social and structural change, but that change and continuity in change has
to be conceptualized in ways not contained in ethnographic data itself. The
trick is to bring that ‘registered experience’ into a productive but unfussy
relation to ‘theory’, so maximizing the illumination of wider change. TIME
seeks to establish analytically productive relations between theory and data,
two most important poles or dimensions of the dialectic of ‘surprise’, so
escaping the usual banishment of ‘theory’ to the ghetto-ized ‘Theory Section’
devoid of ‘Ah ha’ effects.

And on the theoretical side of TIME’s shuttle, the criterion for relevance
is maximum power in relation to the data for purposes of illumination, not
theoretical adequacy or sophistication for its own sake. ‘Analytic points’ can
be made without recourse to a full account of the whole intellectual history
of the traditions from which theory is drawn: the necessity is for sufficient,
perhaps quite brief, account of the specific theoretical work that a concept
or view can bring to the subject of study, its usefulness in context. Bourdieu
again, quoting Pascal: ‘I cannot judge of my work, while doing it. I must do
as the artist, stand at a distance; but not too far’ (Bourdieu, 1999: 8). New
or innovative conceptual tools can also be developed, not out of, but in
relation to the ethnographic evidence. All this does require some degree of
attention to the integrity of the conceptual tools or views being mobilized,
but not respect for the traditional boundaries of subject areas or ‘grand
traditions’.

TIME is relevant here in another non-acronym sense. Even though the
final write-up need not show every stage, the dialectics of ‘surprise’ need
time and can unfold only over time in relation to the researcher’s own
‘experience’, field and theoretical. The synchronic structuralist universe of
the simultaneous relation of parts is not relevant to a process of data col-
collection and theoretical reflection building on each other. The sequencing of
work on unlike materials is specific and historically bound: it can’t come in
any old order. Just as the narratives of the field unfold over time and place,
so do they in relation to theoretical understanding. The ‘scholastic’ is ‘free
time, free from the urgencies of the world, that allows a free and liberated
relation to those urgencies and to the world’ (Bourdieu, 1999: 1). Ethno-
graphers use that time, a long time, outside of the scholastic universe, in the
field of the urgencies of the world, to try to figure out what it means to be
social, in the deepest sense of that word, never wholly freed themselves.

What is generally required at the ‘theoretical side’ of TIME (back to the
acronym now) is the development of a theoretically informed, sensitive and
flexible vocabulary, or a practical sense of relevant theoretical sites for
casting the maximum illumination, including the formulation of open and
energetic questions, on to a given topic of study. In this light it is not helpful
to reference our enterprise to specific traditions of theory. Different tra-
ditions and subject areas have their own terms and metaphors for picking
up what are often common concepts, but for us it is the practical issue of
what is theoretically at stake with reference to a particular phenomenon
which is of interest and which must be indicated. If you like we understand
theoretical sites as working at an intermediate level, as interfaces between
social theory and ethnographic data. You could say that we are indicating a
‘halfway house’ between theory and topic, connecting up relevant theo-
retical insights, concepts and tools (from where ever they may come) which
can be taken together because all can be applied to a specific topic or theme.
Several particular sites or dimensions, usually including class/race/gender,
age and nationality too, as base line considerations, may be relevant to a
specific concrete study. Theoretical sites carve out relevant sensitizing
dimensions of the social theories of our time but remain sufficiently open
and plastic to be able to recognize empirical questions and to register ‘sur-
prise’. They must be open to and allow the formulation of questions without
automatically generating given answers. They must be capable of unfolding
and developing themselves in dialectical relation to ethnographic data.

TIME also raises possibilities within critical studies applied to policy
issues. Despite its strong institutions the public legitimation of social science
is questioned. Too much of the knowledge produced has become more or less irrelevant to the ‘nitty gritty’ of how social actors experience and attempt to penetrate and shape their conditions of existence. The social sciences and humanities have a tendency to become self-referencing discourses with theories related only to other theories in everlasting chains of the history of ideas rather than of the world. But TIME has the possibility of striking off these chains by bringing its dialectic of ‘surprise’ into engagement with culture and civic issues. This requires a dialogue between ‘scientific knowledge’ (knowledge produced by specialist institutions) and other kinds of knowledge, especially the practical common sense and self-reflexivity of common culture. Again this should be seen as a two-way process. TIME must be open to be surprised not only by its empirical data in the research process but also by responses to it from different public spheres.

And within those responses too might be ‘surprise’ among social agents and a re-interpretation of their own experience in relation, for instance, to the unintended consequences of their own actions over time. The ‘Ah ha’ effect in them for them, exposing the different triggers for different kinds of social becoming. Out of the dialectic between ‘sensitizing concepts’ and ethnographic data can come evocative and imaginative answers to questions, analytic points and ‘Ah ha’ effects. TIME is not only a theoretical informed methodology for research, it can also be a method and catalyst for self-reflexivity and self-examination in common culture: making positions and dispositions in social space seen/revealed in an evocative way – glimpses of freedom flashing.

TIME can be open not only to the ethnographic register of lived culture, but also to its directly expressed ‘problems and questions’, understanding its data and theory as the practical source of symbolic meaning within everyday life, which its own ‘illuminations’ can add to or be tested in – making its own contribution to the moving of the ‘truth question’ to the public sphere. This does not mean that TIME can provide more ‘scientific truths’ compared to other methodologies or theories or whatever. TIME has to move with all that moves it. But in doing so it might provide a usable methodology for investigating constraints and possibilities in social reality, for exploring margins of freedom as the future as well as the past embedded in the present. The crisis of the social sciences need not be an unending crisis. It is possible to regain a critical and dialogical consciousness.

**Format of Ethnography**

*Ethnography* will publish pieces in a variety of formats and styles including epistemological tracts, photographic essays, experimental narratives and work ‘fresh from the field’. It will also regularly include special features:
Thematic issues: examining topics of wide scholarly as well as civic interest that bring together enquirers from several disciplines who do not normally engage with each other.

Reviews and Interviews: review essays, symposia and debates as well as shorter reviews of the most important new books and publications, encounters with major figures in the field whose work has impacted theory, methodology and practice of ethnographic inquiry.

‘Field for Thought’: a forum for ideas, polemics, short papers and pointed interventions that do not usually appear in polished scholarly format. This rubric will debut in the second issue of the journal with comments on and replies to the manifesto.

‘Ethnography’s Kitchen’: a ‘how-to’ section featuring critical reflections on the practice of fieldwork designed to foster reflexivity in ethnography so as to clarify and bolster the standards of the craft. Nancy Scheper-Hughes inaugurates the opening of this section with her ‘Ire in Ireland’ published in this issue.

‘Tales from the Field’: experimental or narrative pieces that take the reader into a particular social world and convey the ‘feel’ of an event, relation, situation, place or phenomenon through depictive techniques and textual devices that foreground lived experience and carnal presence.

Notes

1 For an example of a youth project, at least in part, attempting both, see P. Willis et al., 1988. For a close-up study of the actual doing and talking of youth in a French working-class project see David Lepoutre (1997). For a study of actual language use and its implications for educational policy and practice, see Rampton (1995).

2 This is not an attempt to impose a new ‘paradigm’, but a mnenotechnic device to remind us of the theoretical embeddedness of ethnography. Nor do we imagine that every piece of work must combine all the elements discussed here. Often the best ethnography involves a theoretical sensibility and sensitivity, not evident, but just below the surface.

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References


