

This book is dedicated to our innumerable interlocutors in the "field" without whose involvement such an endeavor would be unthinkable.

Edward Schatz
Toronto, Canada
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INTRODUCTION

Ethnographic Immersion and the Study of Politics

EDWARD SCHATZ

As long as political scientists continue to study politicians, some of us certainly will want to collect data through repeated interaction with these politicians in their natural habitats.

—Richard F. Fenno Jr. (1990, 56)

When Richard Fenno studied U.S. politicians in their "natural habitats," he was exploring uncharted professional terrain. For decades, very few students of American political life had embraced approaches that encouraged close, face-to-face contact with the people being studied. The dominant perspective among Americanists that a political *science* should aspire to the research methods and designs prominent in the natural sciences meant little professional and institutional space for ethnography.

If political science had been a methodologically plural discipline, it would have embraced the value of ethnographic approaches. The study of politics in the 1990s and 2000s, however, suffered from a narrow view of what constitutes legitimate research methodology. Ignoring Feyerabend's warning that "the best protective device against being taken in by one particular language is to be brought up bilingually or trilingually" (Feyerabend 1979, 91, as quoted in Deising 1991, 50), many scholars were seduced by the "language" of the technological cutting edge. Made possible by unprecedented and widely available computing power, statistical techniques and the logic associated with them became hegemonic among students of politics.¹

Whether or not this research produced substantive research findings that justified such an enthusiastic embrace,² the study of politics risked not capitalizing on its historic strengths—its eclecticism (Sil and Katzenstein

2005) and its ecumenicalism (Kasza 2001). It risked marginalizing long-productive, nonstatistical approaches as somehow “prescientific” or inherently “inferior.” Prominent scholars who proclaimed the value of nonquantitative approaches in fact advocated their use only insofar as they served the purposes of a “quantitative worldview”—that is, as raw data that might eventually be reduced to quantities and subjected to statistical tests.³

Scholars who did not share the assumptions or predilections of dominant approaches pushed back, often under the mantle of “qualitative methods.” Some argued that many important political phenomena lend themselves poorly to quantification (Kasza 2001). Others contended that widely used quantitative approaches can easily mislead—either because they underemphasize the path-dependency that characterizes the development of human communities (Pierson 2004) or because they make problematic assumptions about the homogeneity of variables (Ragin 2000; Schram 2004).

This push-back produced a variety of changes to professional political science and a series of fruitful and interesting, though ultimately unresolved, discussions about what the study of politics ought to look like (Monroe 2005). With the possible exception of the American politics subfield (where intellectual ferment about methodology and method remained less pronounced), scholars became increasingly interested in the “how” of political research to ensure a self-aware, and therefore more insightful, discipline.

Beyond “Qualitative” Methods

These were welcome changes, and the category “qualitative” proved useful in implementing them, but this book argues that it is time to get more specific. The word *qualitative* obscures much variety in approaches to inquiry. Beyond a basic family resemblance, interviews, historical process-tracing, archival work, discourse analysis, and ethnography (to name a few) are methods that are useful in different ways. In this volume, we take stock of one kind of “qualitative” work—ethnography—and ask what it has contributed to the study of politics and how it can become more useful in the future.

This endeavor began, as many do, informally.⁴ Hallway discussions, chats at conferences, listserv threads, side conversations, and the like—many of them facilitated by the so-called Perestroika movement (Monroe 2005)—helped to crystallize what we might call, to take liberties with Benedict Anderson’s (1983) phrase, an “imagined community.” A web of com-

mon approaches to the study of politics linked many of us, although few had thought consciously about giving this group a name. Indeed, it would be an exaggeration to call it a community-in-waiting; if this community was constituted by a web, it was a web that strained to keep its integrity. In some cases, professional, generational, or geographic distances made it difficult to recognize the strands that existed. In other cases, philosophical commitments and prior training highlighted what individuals linked by the web had to *disagree about*, rather than what they had in common.

Frequent, public invocations of the category “qualitative” nonetheless spurred our sense of commonality. We knew from our readings, research, and training that ethnography has made and continues to make important contributions to the study of politics, even if mainstream social science sometimes leaves these contributions in shadow.⁵ We also knew that ethnography and “qualitative” methods were not one and the same. In a series of conference panels, roundtable discussions, and a workshop, we sought to put our collective finger on the nature of these contributions.⁶

Ethnographic approaches have long informed political science—albeit from the margins—and especially so among those comparativists who conduct field research abroad. (Given the discipline’s development, this has typically meant outside the United States). An early proponent of ground-level, field-based techniques, David Apter reflected on his suspicion of the grand theories that were popular early in his career, cautioning that “a global approach, whether dressed up in the language of structural-functional analysis or some other, would remain useful only superficially. One needed to know more—that is, to understand more deeply the specific context of events—a pull toward what is called ‘area studies’” (Apter 1973, 5).

Although sensitive to context, Apter’s ontology was a realist one; he took as relatively unproblematic the existence of a reality external to the observer that could, in its essential if complex features, be discovered. Capturing the thrill of discovery, he commented:

Field work is exciting. It is like working with the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. One gradually discerns a pattern. The rules for finding the pieces and interpreting the pattern—these are much more complex. For one thing, broad themes and large units are hard to fit into a narrow quantitative mode as such and need to be translated into indicator variables. These, while they may be capable of being programmed and manipulated, are rarely generalizable for the macro unit. Thus the search for ultimately quantitative, indicator variables capable of standing as surrogates for analytical ones became a long-time concern [of mine]. (Apter 1973, 5)

Most of today's political ethnographers would share Apter's attention to empirical complexity, even if they abjured his search for "ultimately quantitative . . . variables." Like Apter, James C. Scott, the comparativist scholar most associated with political ethnography, would call for greater nuance in our theoretical accounts, questioning the received wisdom about peasant rebellions (Scott 1985) and emphasizing the role that "hidden transcripts" (that is, conversations and interactions among members of subordinate groups) play in generating possibilities for resistance (Scott 1990). More than Apter, however, Scott engaged in participant observation as a technique; also, unlike Apter, Scott was uninterested in constructing crisply bounded quantitative data as a route to generalization or predictive theory. His substantive insights ultimately call into question the very possibility of predictive theorizing. Riding the tide of interpretivist ethnography in anthropology, Scott anticipated by at least two decades the emergence of a robust interpretivism in political science.

Comparativists have not had a monopoly on the political ethnographic tradition. Among the widely recognized contributors to the American politics subfield, for example, was Richard Fenno, whose willingness to follow politicians to their "natural habitats" has already been noted in the epigraph. While Fenno's substantive insights about Congress have been absorbed and considered by others, the subfield's mainstream has nonetheless been uninterested in engaging the challenges implied by Fenno's epistemology.

This book builds on the tradition of political ethnography, asking what role ethnography plays and what value it potentially brings to the study of power. Put most directly, we argue that close, person-to-person contact that is attuned to the worldviews of the people we study is invaluable for a science of politics. Taken as a whole, the volume suggests that ethnography helps ensure an empirically sound, theoretically vibrant, epistemologically innovative, and normatively grounded study of politics. This empirical, theoretical, epistemological, and normative added value exists for those working from a variety of ontological starting-points and using a range of epistemologies. The chapters that follow will flesh out these claims.

Beyond this core agreement, however, we disagree about much. Like any vibrant community, ours is rife with internal debates, discussions, and tensions. The intellectual common ground we discovered quickly gave way to the constructive airing of differences. In this volume, then, we seek *both* to represent the utility of ethnography for the study of politics *and* to highlight key axes for debate and discussion. We agree that any attempt to grapple

with the value of ethnography must be true to the internal diversity that constitutes a web of political ethnographers.

What Is Political Ethnography?

How do we define the contours of political ethnography? In cultural anthropology, where ethnographic approaches are *de rigueur*, dissensus reigns about what constitutes, and ought to constitute, the approach. Its character is similarly contested in this volume. Nonetheless, we might discern two core principles undergirding our understanding of political ethnography. The authors of the following chapters embrace these two principles in varying proportions and with varying degrees of enthusiasm. Some scholarship is ethnographic in *both* ways, but only one of these two principles needs to be present for a work to qualify, by this volume's definition, as ethnographic.

First, most scholars equate ethnography with participant observation. That is, immersion in a community, a cohort, a locale, or a cluster of related subject positions is taken to be the *sine qua non* of the approach. The volume's subtitle highlights the centrality of such immersion.⁷ The premise is that one must be "neck-deep" in a research context to generate knowledge based on that context. This characterization, of course, is merely a starting-point. It conveniently brackets important questions: does valid observation always require participation? Of what duration and intensity should participant observation be? How much immersion is necessary, appropriate, ethical, and fruitful? What kinds of knowledge can be generated through the use of such methods? These are natural questions to ask, and anthropologists for decades have addressed them in serious and sustained ways.⁸ It says much about the sociology of academic political science that we feel a need to advance such a fundamental claim about ethnography's value. We hope that, once the discipline no longer views participant observation as a marginal research method, it will confront these bracketed issues.

A second and less common understanding of ethnography also emerges in this volume. In this understanding, ethnography is a *sensibility* that goes beyond face-to-face contact.⁹ It is an approach that cares—with the possible emotional engagement that implies—to glean the meanings that the people under study attribute to their social and political reality.¹⁰ Thus, while some scholars equate ethnography with participant observation, one may nonetheless abstract *from* participant-observation qualities that inform a more general ethnographic sensibility.

If ethnography is a sensibility, participant observation is only one among the methods that might be used. Close familiarity with and analysis of any collection of human artifacts (texts, cultural products, and so on) can generate an ethnographic study by revealing the meanings people attribute to the world they inhabit. It is in this sense that James Scott's (1998) *Seeing Like a State*, although itself not the direct product of participant observation "in the field," is infused with a profound ethnographic sensibility, detailing the inner logic that guides modern states in their efforts to remake physical and social space. It seems unlikely that a scholar could operate with an ethnographic sensibility without having at some point conducted participant observation; indeed, Scott's ethnographic sensibility emerged from previous work (Scott 1985, 1990) that relied centrally on immersion.¹¹ Nonetheless, the two understandings of ethnography—one as ground-level method, the other as sensibility—are conceptually distinct.

If an understanding of ethnography as participant observation is more traditional, an understanding of ethnography as a broad sensibility emerges from the challenges of studying the contemporary social world. As global links become more vibrant and complex though technological, cultural, and ideational change, traditional forms of participant observation must be modified. As Comaroff and Comaroff (2003, 151) ask, "How—given that the objects of our gaze commonly elude, embrace, attenuate, transcend, transform, consume, and construct the local—do we arrive at a praxis for an age that seems . . . post-anthropological?" In chapter 1, Kubik details how once-strong standards among anthropologists for the duration of field research and for the type of immersion conducted have given way to more flexible and more diffuse norms implied by the term *sensibility*.¹² Moreover, the term *sensibility* goes at least partway to transcending artificial distinctions between fieldwork and deskwork, between research site and site of analysis, between researcher and researched, and so on—distinctions that are hard to sustain in a world that defies these binary distinctions. It also avoids reducing ethnography to the *process* of on-site data collection. *Sensibility* implies epistemological commitments that are about more than particular methods; in this sense, an ethnographic study usually employs multiple tools of inquiry.¹³

The notion of an ethnographic sensibility that pays attention to the perspectives of the people being studied nonetheless generates several conundrums. First, it implies a dichotomy between an insider and an outsider, a dichotomy that may mislead. After all, people are "insiders" or "outsiders" by degree in any named group or community; to study them requires varying mixtures of what Geertz (1973) called "experience-near" and

"experience-distant" approaches. Membership in any community or category comes in shades of gray.¹⁴ One is a feminist, a capitalist, a casino waitress, a "kill-line worker" or in the president's "inner circle" by degree and only at particular times in particular places. The invocation of such categories must not imply an unchanging essence or permanent membership; those who invoke them must do so for representational convenience. The same is true for the ethnographer herself, as Lorraine Bayard de Volo demonstrates in chapter 10 based on contrasting immersive studies—one on Nicaraguan mothers and another on cocktail waitresses in Nevada casinos.

Moreover, analytic categories that imply that a community contains an inner essence often overestimate the stability of meaning and identity, and underestimate internal variety and contradictions, as Lisa Wedeen details in chapter 3. When so-called insiders inhabit such a changeable, internally variegated, and layered reality, a different analytic vocabulary is required.

Nonetheless, the category of "insider" may have heuristic value. In any given time and place, there are those who could be provisionally called "insiders" if their status is stable enough to generate durable meanings. The scholar with an ethnographic sensibility tends to rely on these individuals to construct her descriptive account and explanatory framework. This does not mean that she rushes to accept at face value the testimony of her interlocutors. (She might proceed using Ricoeur's [1970, 32–35] "hermeneutic of suspicion.") Rather, it means that she begins with a basic assumption—that immersion generates information. Whatever motivates her interlocutors—a generosity with time, a personal or professional interest in the scholar's activities, pure curiosity, the thrill of contact with an outsider, an intention to deceive, an attempt to insert the outsider into micro-level political dynamics, or something else entirely—the interlocutor presents self and fact to the scholar, and the scholar's task is to make sense of the information contained in this presentation.¹⁵

But, while one can and should be skeptical about aspects of individual testimony, and while one can and should dismiss what some interlocutors offer as simply wrong-headed, ill-conceived, or otherwise a "dead end" from the perspective of a given research project's central objectives, a general sympathy for interlocutors is nonetheless the hallmark of ethnographic research. An ethnographic study—all else being equal—is likely to grant descriptive and/or explanatory priority to the ways in which "insiders" on the whole understand their existence. Imagine a hypothetical researcher who, though intending to conduct an ethnographic study, genuinely does not enjoy spending time with particular individuals (local strongmen, perpetrators of violence, corrupt police officers, and extremist ideologues come

to my mind, though this is at root a normative question). Since an ability to sympathize lies at the core of ethnography, conducting a study that relied on ethnographic contact with such individuals would be practically and sometimes ethically difficult.

A second conundrum regarding this sensibility is its diffuse nature. If identifying a threshold past which a researcher becomes a "participant observer" is difficult, this is even more the case for an ethnographic sensibility. Especially in this second sense, there is in practice no "pure" ethnography. There is only a sliding scale of commitments that necessarily fall short of the ideal type.¹⁶ Indeed, what constitutes an "insider" perspective (or an "outsider," for that matter) depends on the blind spots in a particular research agenda; varying degrees of immersion can generate crucial insights whose importance depends upon the state of existing knowledge on particular topics, as Cédric Jourde demonstrates in chapter 9 with regard to knowledge of "Islamism" and "authoritarianism." Whether a given piece of research is ethnographic in this sense implies a claim about what a given epistemic community does and does not know.

The contributions to this volume are as diverse as are our understandings of political ethnography. First, we span the subfields of political science. Some projects emerge from subfields like comparative politics, where ethnographers for decades remained productive, if underappreciated, contributors to a variety of topics. Others represent subfields such as American politics and public administration, where scholars working in the ethnographic tradition continue to swim against the professional tide.¹⁷ Second, some—though not all—contributors use the term *ethnographic* to describe their own work. Elisabeth Wood (chapter 5), Timothy Pachirat (chapter 6), and Katherine Cramer Walsh (chapter 7) fall into this category. Others, such as Jourde, characterize their own work as "ethnographic" in some qualified sense. Still others avoid invoking the term or otherwise distance their work from the tradition. In chapter 4, Cyrus Ernesto Zirakzadeh, although emphasizing a micro-level perspective, space for human agency, and multiple contingencies, does not use the term *ethnography*. (Nonetheless, his field research was, by most understandings, clearly ethnographic. As if to underscore the point, Zirakzadeh flees a hail of police rubber bullets and, in doing so, forges common cause with the Basque nationalists he sought to study—in ways that recall how Geertz and his wife found themselves fleeing a police raid on a village cockfight [Geertz 1973].) At the Toronto workshop, Michael Schatzberg expressed tongue-in-cheek discomfort about being strongly identified with a particular epistemic community, introducing himself with a mock confession: "My name is Michael, and I am

not a political ethnographer." Corey Shdaimah, Roland Stahl, and Sanford Schram in chapter 12 offer the strongest departure from the ethnographic tradition. Arguing that interpretivist commitments (including an essentially top-down mode of theorizing and conducting research) characterize political ethnography, they prefer to identify with the tradition of "participatory action research," which—they argue—gives greater opportunity for "bottom-up" research than does political ethnography.

While some use the term *ethnography* and its cognates, others modify the term, and still others do not use it, diverse ways of imagining one's research do not negate a core similarity of approach that animates the contributions. Rather, they underscore that political ethnography is practiced in shades of gray.

Given such shades of gray, it is crucial to ponder what ethnographic immersion is *not*. As Dvora Yanow notes in chapter 13, when scholars conduct interviews, they may or may not be proceeding ethnographically. Similarly, although a survey researcher may engage people face to face, their relationship remains razor-thin. Much more revealing information often emerges when, as Walsh puts it, the survey "interview is over and the laptop cover is down." Nor is fieldwork synonymous with immersion. Fieldwork that is ethnographic must occur in the nearest possible locale. Living in a five-star hotel disembedded from the social life of ordinary people is unlikely to produce ethnographic insights (unless, perhaps, if one studies the life-world of the wealthy or those hotel workers who serve them).¹⁸ Long duration in the field is likewise insufficient; if the researcher is not equipped with ethnographic skills and tools of inquiry, he may build knowledge, but not of an ethnographic sort. Finally, in-depth interviews, when conducted as a part of a multiple-method research design that seeks to mine these interviews for particular information rather than insider meanings and perspectives, are unlikely—in and of themselves—to produce ethnographic research. Indeed, whenever ethnographic techniques are subsumed by different, nonethnographic sensibilities or techniques (for example, Laitin 1998; Varshney 2002; Collins 2006), their character changes fundamentally (Schatz 2007). Thus, being "neck-deep" in insider worldviews is an ideal type, and some work simply falls on the nonethnographic side of a broad spectrum of political research.

This book does not pretend to cover "best practices" of ethnographic immersion. In a discipline that is increasingly self-conscious about methods and methodologies, many students and scholars seek to go beyond widely available "how-to" manuals.¹⁹ Nor can they learn to do research from the "just so" stories that often accompany scholars' descriptions

of their research.²⁰ Rather, they want in-depth examination of the philosophical underpinnings, epistemological realities, and practical challenges that particular approaches pose. Thus, the chapters that follow are not idealized versions of political ethnography. They embrace (some of) the messiness that is ethnographic practice and consider ways to harness this messiness to improve leverage on political questions. To reveal ethnography as it is genuinely practiced in the study of politics is this volume's goal.

What Immersion Contributes

With their overlapping (though not coinciding) understandings of political ethnography, the volume's contributors agree that a study of politics with insufficient space for ethnographic approaches is an impoverished, academic affair. So, what does immersion contribute? Part 3 showcases some contributions; other chapters provide additional examples. For present purposes, we might group ethnography's value for political science into four clusters.

First, ethnography produces detailed evidence of the sort that can flesh out, or call into question, generalizations produced or meanings assigned by other research traditions.²¹ To take some of the central concerns of political science, if the study of justice, freedom, democracy, or order is to mean anything, it must take into account individuals' lived experiences and how they perceive these abstractions. Do property rights produce empowerment, as a broad literature claims? Shdaimah, Stahl, and Schram usefully scrutinize this causal story in part using ethnographic data. Do people support social movements because of prior ideological commitments, as is often assumed? Bayard de Volo critically assesses this assumption. If popular understandings of "democracy" vary from society to society, what are the implications for democratic theory (Schaffer 1998)? These and other questions can be productively engaged with micro-level evidence of the sort that ethnography provides.

Empirical soundness contributes to theoretical vibrancy. A theoretically vibrant social inquiry does not rest content with asking the same questions in the same ways. Although one need not abandon a baseline expectation that knowledge can cumulate, a research program that grinds along in the same paradigm risks becoming trivial. Ethnography often expands—indeed, it often explodes—how we understand the boundaries of the "political." Thus, in chapter 8 Schatzberg considers soccer and sorcery to be eminently political topics; Enrique Desmond Arias in chapter 11 describes how everyday violence that occurs outside the analytic vision of those focused on formal democratic institutions nonetheless lies at the

heart of Latin American politics; Pachirat in chapter 6 suggests that keeping uncomfortable political matters from public scrutiny is itself an act of power; and Walsh in chapter 7 calls into question the common notion that public opinion is "that which surveys measure," showing the dynamic and textured process by which opinions are formed and re-formed.

Third, ethnography holds out the promise of epistemological innovation.²² Research conducted at close range invites the researcher to "see" differently; heterogeneity, causal complexity, dynamism, contingency, and informality come to the fore. Presented with these different social facts, the ethnographer may re-envision her path to knowledge construction. Instead of resting content with broad categories, she searches for subtypes and sub-subtypes, and generates "problematizing redescriptions" (Shapiro 2004). Instead of testing elegant causal chains, she views complex configurations of factors that combine and recombine in a striking variety of ways. Rather than seeking covering laws, she prefers concatenated theories. Rather than viewing a context as containing static content, she trains her lens for constitutive processes that capture dynamism. And rather than concentrating on macro-structural factors, she seeks to carve out a space for human agency.

Fieldwork is often humbling, and humility can spur different ways of thinking about knowledge production. Jessica Allina-Pisano, for example, in chapter 2 describes the kaleidoscope of interests, perceptions, actors, and discourses that define most research sites and make descriptive accuracy challenging to achieve.²³ Indeed, most ethnographers could probably recall, presumably with some horror at their own naïveté, having learned that an interlocutor had deliberately misrepresented the truth. This realization is both liberating and troubling. It is liberating, since the scholar feels suddenly free from the clutches of a "lie." It is troubling because it raises fundamental questions about the veracity of other testimony. Other aspects of field research—the timing of one's presence at the research site, one's personal characteristics that facilitate access to certain kinds of information and foreclose access to other kinds, and any number of other contingencies—produce an awareness of "researcher effects" and the impossibility of complete knowledge. If knowledge is viewed as fragmentary and partial, one might redraw the line between expert and nonexpert. How best to redraw this line is a matter of some debate, but ethnographic inquiry recommends attention to this sort of epistemologically fresh thinking.

Finally, ethnography provides normative grounding to the study of politics. Scholars interested in abstract thinking (as we are prone to be) run the risk of losing sight of the normative concerns that originally motivated them; they can get lost in conceptual disputes and methodological

technicalities. By contrast, ethnographic study contains the potential to *care* for people on a continual basis, as is evident in Pachirat's and Bayard de Volo's chapters.²⁴ While not a substitute for training in moral or political philosophy, ethnography has the central virtue of keeping the researcher in touch with the people affected by power relations.

Axes of Contention

Yanow suggests that ethnographers use a "yes, and" approach to their work: that is, they build on what people, texts, or the field site bring up (often unexpectedly), rather than negate or refuse these offers. A similar, additive approach is on display here, but this does not mean that this volume's ethnographers agree on everything. In fact, while we have much in common, at least three axes of disagreement run through this volume.²⁵

Interpretivist vs. Neopositivist Epistemology

Introduced in Part 1 of this volume, the first axis of debate mirrors larger meta-theoretical concerns in the discipline. To what kind of science does ethnography contribute? Is ethnography best understood as part of an interpretivist or a neopositivist research program?²⁶ Kubik details how in cultural and social anthropology, ethnography's "mother" discipline, the approach has made major and admirable intellectual contributions on both sides of this ontological and epistemological divide.²⁷ But, as contrasting chapters by Allina-Pisano and Wedeen show, important philosophical and practical differences characterize the two uses of ethnography.

Both Allina-Pisano and Wedeen imply the existence of a social reality that is complex, multivocal, and multilayered, but their uses of ethnography diverge. Using the language of Günter Grass, Allina-Pisano suggests that ethnography's core added value lies in its ability to "peel the onion skin" of reality—to get closer to its essence with every swipe of the paring knife. Her vivid examples from fieldwork show that facts are often elusive, and her search for small-t truths (rather than Truth) is one that revels in complexity and nuance. She remains committed, however, to a "correspondence" understanding of truth, in which a claim is true based on its correspondence to an objective reality.

Wedeen, by contrast, invokes the language of "performances," suggesting that there is no pristine reality separate from the researcher that is essentially discoverable; what is discoverable is the type of performance that the researched choose to offer the researcher. These performances consti-

tute the quotidian practices that are "intrinsic to, not separate from, daily life." In short, while Allina-Pisano argues for a context-specific, micro-level, nuanced search for truth that looks for causality behind performances, Wedeen cautions that any search for truth must take care not to run aground on problematic ontologies and power-laden epistemologies.

Ethnography, then, is used differently in each case; each scholar answers differently the question, "What value do insider voices offer?" For Allina-Pisano, these voices are useful to the extent that they help bring the scholar into closer proximity to (some reasonable estimate of) a correct answer to whatever question is being asked. From this perspective, testimony is to be mined for its truth-value. For Wedeen, by contrast, voices are less usefully understood as insider or outsider, as accurate or inaccurate; rather, each voice can be interpreted for what perspectives, practices, and assumptions it reveals. Wedeen's interpretivism hesitates to pass judgment on the truth-value of testimony, but rather seeks to link these testimonies to prevailing social discourses.²⁸ Allina-Pisano's ethnography is likewise predicated on sensitivity to the perspectives, practices, and assumptions of her interlocutors, but she is explicit about a preference to use this sensitivity as leverage for adjudicating among truth-claims.

The volume's other chapters also face this core debate. Most contributors prefer an interpretivist epistemology, though a long history of realist ethnography within anthropology reminds us of a need to historicize this preference. Using viscerally effective examples from an "industrialized slaughterhouse," Pachirat underscores a key insight of interpretivist ethnography: one's truth-claims are fundamentally affected by the relationship between researcher and researched. If the former's position changes, so does his understanding of the social world. Likewise, Schatzberg displays a fundamental interpretivism. Showing that sorcery has long been, and remains, a central feature of the political landscape in Congo, he does not pass judgment on those who believe in sorcery any more than upon those who believe in rational-choice theory.

Being an interpretivist does not preclude the possibility of advancing truth-claims. Indeed, for the interpretivist, we can only discern what is "real" by taking people's worldviews seriously; after all, such worldviews lie at the core of the social construction of reality (Berger and Luckmann 1967). Thus, for Schatzberg, sorcery is real if it has discernible effects on politics and society—effects that his chapter documents. For Yanow, echoing a "consensus" understanding of truth, truth-claims are intersubjectively produced within epistemic communities that offer their own standards and evaluative criteria. In this understanding, judgments about research quality

are both possible and necessary. An "anything goes" relativism does not rule the roost.

Some chapters are consistent with, and engage crucial aspects of, what might be considered a qualified neopositivist research agenda. This is not the dogmatic, narrow-minded neopositivism depicted in some polemics.²⁹ Rather, it is a qualified version that uses attention to detail to generate middle-range theories, that considers cumulative knowledge a possibility worth pursuing, and that is optimistic about the scholar's potential to offer contributions. For example, Wood explicitly seeks to use her ethnographic material about El Salvador to produce general knowledge about the "micro-foundations of collective action." She feels motivated to address and capable of speaking to broader debates in comparative politics. Jourde's use of the term *unidentified political objects* reflects an ontological position that lends itself to such a qualified neopositivist approach. Arias, in his forward-looking "research agenda" for the study of Latin America, emphasizes middle-range theorizing and recommends unleashing the activities of ethnographers in a coordinated, multiple-site effort to produce empirically grounded, but general knowledge.³⁰

Like many debates, this one is often argued at the margins. Those ethnographers who assume a qualified neopositivist position produce research that is ultimately much closer to that of interpretivist ethnographers than to that of most rational-choice theorists or advocates of a "quantitative worldview." Likewise, the interpretivist ethnographers here have at least as much in common with their qualified neopositivist ethnographer counterparts as with many postmodernists. Both sides admit that untold complexity inhabits the social world; they agree that ethnography helps make sense of it.

The Role of the Researcher

A related debate concerns the role the researcher plays in the construction of knowledge. Most ethnographers are sensitive to how their presence in the research site alters their appreciation of a research topic; indeed, ethnography is premised on the notion that direct engagement with people being studied produces knowledge. But can knowledge be meaningfully abstracted from the encounters between researcher and researched that produced it? All agree that when the ethnographer immerses himself in a research context and insider viewpoints, the *possibility exists* that he will produce more grounded truth-claims than the scholar who does not engage in immersion. What they disagree about is how to maximize the analytic leverage of ethnographic immersion.

Some contributors take philosophical inspiration from Nietzsche's sardonic commentary on the impossibility of "immaculate perception." In this view, no spectator-like, neutral gaze is possible in a quest for knowledge. Knowledge is coproduced in unique, often fleeting, power-laden, and deeply context-dependent relationships. It is more than subjective; it is intersubjective, coconstituted by a variety of subjects engaged in a thicket of multiple, overlapping forms of communication. Patrick Thaddeus Jackson (2008) calls this position "monism," since an essential separation of the "seer" and the "seen" is impossible.

From this monist perspective, ethnography's role is not so much to produce abstract knowledge as to provide new ways of seeing and thereby challenge existing, often hegemonic, categories of practice and analysis. The ethnographer is necessarily embedded in a variety of relationships (with colleagues, with the people being studied, with a broader society) that exert a profound impact on any claim to truth. To wish that it were otherwise is to cling to a naïve and outdated notion of science. For the monist, any truth-claim is necessarily "partial"; one cannot metaphorically check one's partiality at the door. Recognizing this partiality is the route to powerful insights about social and political life. Among the contributors to this volume, Pachirat, Walsh, and Wedeen most clearly espouse this position.

Jackson's (2008) opposite perspective is "dualism." Dualists argue that knowledge can potentially be separated from the world that produced it; in its neopositivist variant, general, decontextualized knowledge can be created through a careful and incremental search for small-t truths.³¹ Dualist ethnographers remain sensitive to "researcher effects," but such effects may be identified and isolated, and their effect on knowledge production minimized. The job of the ethnographer is to become aware of what these researcher effects are and to estimate their impact. This, in turn, is a signal to the epistemic community that the knowledge generated might need to be corrected by shifting it in one analytic direction or another—the equivalent of a statistician shifting a curve by a standard deviation. Allina-Pisano most directly articulates a dualist position, rejecting epistemologies that rely on faith commitments more than on standards of evidence.

In-depth discussion of the philosophical positions associated with these arguments would take us far afield. For present purposes, these perspectives imply different types of commitment to "first-person research," the title of Part 2 of the volume. In a pure sense, all research is first-person to the extent that it is conducted by individuals (or, more rarely, individuals collaborating in teams). Some scholars, however, foreground their own personal characteristics, predilections, aspirations, and experiences that infuse

the knowledge-generation process.³² Others, operating either from a philosophical dualism or from an awkwardness about revealing personal information, prefer to put the first-person "I" into the background. Arias and Wood, in their respective chapters, take this approach. It is hard to imagine research projects more physically demanding and emotionally trying than ethnographic work on violence and civil war, and yet the first-person voice appears relatively more muted in their respective accounts. By contrast, Pachirat emphasizes that his varied personal experiences in the industrialized slaughterhouse informed the knowledge he produced on the topic.

These considerations about the first-person "I" are not limited to the research design phase, the fieldwork phase, or the writing-up phase; rather, they shape scholars' entire career paths. As Zirakzadeh shows in his chapter, what kind of knowledge is produced on any substantive topic (in his case, about the Basque region of Spain) is crucially linked to a broader array of background factors and choices made in the course of personal and professional development. While Pachirat covers micro-level contingencies that affect what knowledge is produced, Zirakzadeh puts into the foreground an array of key meso- and macro-level contingencies.

Those monist researchers who emphasize that their research is conducted in the first person face an additional set of questions. This type of first-person research is likely to treat "objectivity" as, at best, an elusive goal; to many monists, research can serve political goals as much as scientific ones. The impossibility of "[separating] power and surveillance from the gathering of ethnographic information" (Rosaldo 1986, 92) gives new meaning to the word *political* in "political ethnography." While *political* usually refers to the object of study—politics—for many monists, this adjective modifies the effect that *any kind of research* has on the world of which it is an essential part. Pachirat demonstrates this centrally. Shdaimah, Stahl, and Schram take the point a step further by engaging in advocacy with the people they study.

Ways Forward

Those who conduct ethnographic work about politics do not exist in a professional or intellectual vacuum. While one could always find examples of those who put on intellectual blinders to pursue, single-mindedly, their own vision, as a rule ethnographers are an open-minded lot. Being open-minded means being exposed to, and in some cases conducting on one's own, research that derives from quite varied epistemologies and/or uses equally varied methods.³³

But what place should ethnography have in the study of politics? To argue, as this volume does, that ethnography has been generally underappreciated in academic political science is to make a claim about the sociology of a discipline. The chapters herein offer some of many possible prescriptions to treat what ails political science.

Some contributors suggest that the attention to the micro-level that ethnography brings is compatible with standards of research used across social-scientific inquiry. Arias, for example, emphasizes a need for ethnographers to produce cross-site comparisons and begin to generalize from their data—an argument that King, Keohane, and Verba (1994) would support. Similarly, Wood implies that ethnographic work that attends to a research design emphasizing variation can generate better causal theories. Some authors imply that ethnography's attention to meaning-making can be taken too far and therefore prove self-defeating. Without a way to discern fact from fiction, knowledge claims may drift with the political tides, argues Allina-Pisano. Similarly, Shdaimah, Stahl, and Schram contend that without a way to speak in the language of hard "facts," scholarship cannot call upon those with the power to solve the concrete problems of specific communities. For these scholars, ethnography brings different sensibilities and an atypical level of analysis, but it is essentially conducive to a Popperian attempt at incremental theory building.

If standards are shared, the possibility exists for useful synergies between ethnographic and nonethnographic work. In other work that addresses a largely neopositivist audience, Bayard de Volo and Schatz (2004) suggest that ethnography can assist scholars who seek to trace causal chains, check analytic reasoning, and pinpoint behavioral outcomes. Indeed, many have incorporated elements of ethnographic inquiry into multiple-methods research projects (for example, Stokes 1995; Laitin 1998; Varshney 2002; Shdaimah, Stahl, and Schram, this volume), seeking to combine the epistemological advantages of each. The implication is that if a scholarly approach is akin to a "language" (Feyerabend 1979), every scholar should be multilingual, as each aspect of political life requires a different language to decode it.

Others provide a different way forward. Here, Yanow is most explicit. Addressing those ethnographers who are interpretivists,³⁴ she contends that they constitute a distinct epistemic community with distinctive, shared standards. Speaking to the ethnographer who is writing a research report, she asks, "What do readers need to find in a manuscript to convince them that it meets the criteria of this epistemic community for doing and being good scientific work?" To meet the criteria that a reader accepts as valid is to persuade.

Yanow's perspective implies a degree of incommensurability between

various research traditions and counsels caution against the mixing of approaches, a point I consider in the concluding chapter. For me, ethnography should be part of a methodologically plural body of research about politics, but this pluralism should principally reside at the discipline-wide level. Mixing methods derived from different epistemological traditions within single research projects may relegate ethnography to the status of “summer intern” (Hopf 2006, cited in Pachirat, this volume).³⁵ Put differently, such mixing runs the risk of misaligning ontology and epistemology (Hall 2003). In this sense, a metaphorical “multilingualism” should occur across the discipline.

Finally, while most contributors see a need to devote energy toward the professional development of ethnographers and the promotion of ethnography in the discipline, some demur. Rooted in a pragmatist, problem-solving tradition, Shdaimah, Stahl, and Schram are more interested in addressing the particular, concrete problems of the people they study.³⁶ Indeed, they are skeptical of ethnography’s ability to avoid being “top down” in its treatment of the people being studied and suggest that promoting problem-driven research would obviate the need for any explicit support of nonmainstream epistemologies and ontologies.

Role of the Editor

While I will not dwell on it, a few words are warranted about the choices I have made as editor of this volume. Of the background conditions, environmental factors, and specific choices that affect the final product, two in particular deserve mention.

First, whom does the volume exclude or include? Beyond the usual constraints dictated by colleagues’ workloads and travel schedules, I wanted to speak to political scientists by detailing the contributions that *political scientists* have made via ethnography.³⁷ I also wanted a volume that would represent the major subfields of the discipline. The lack of a contribution from an international relations specialist had much to do with how unfortunately rare ethnography is in that subfield, a crucial fact that I take up in the volume’s conclusion.³⁸

But who is a political ethnographer? I have suggested that “pure” ethnographic work is hard to come by, especially in political science departments. Thus, selection included people who might describe themselves, as has Lee Ann Fujii (personal communication), as conducting “ethnography lite.” But, as Rasing (1994, 2) reminds us, “It is not necessary to be an ethnographer to make valid ethnographical observations. A keen interest in people, an inquisitive mind and a sensitivity to the truth are of relevance.”

Rather than seeing those who deviate from “pure” ethnography as conducting a watered-down version of the real thing, I seek to mine their work to see what they contribute to particular research programs.

Second, am I a political ethnographer? To an extent I am, but my empirical work (for example, Schatz 2004) has incorporated ethnographic methods and sensibilities only partially. Like Zirakzadeh, my hesitancy to embrace a “purer” version of ethnographic inquiry stemmed from my training. While I was schooled in an eclectic study of politics, I calculated that I ought not to go “too far” away from what I perceived to be mainstream political science. I now realize that this choice stemmed from an incomplete understanding of the discipline and its possibilities. Thus, one of the central motivations for this volume is purely selfish—to learn from my colleagues what ethnography can contribute to political research and to imagine different possibilities for my own work.

Organization of the Volume

Part 1 introduces the central ontological and epistemological issues associated with conducting ethnographic work. In chapter 1, Kubik provides a background philosophical discussion that sets the stage for appreciating ethnography’s contribution to both neopositivist and interpretivist research programs. In chapter 2, Allina-Pisano, through a series of vignettes, illustrates the virtues of ethnography for improving the quality of data and gaining better traction on mainstream social science research problems. In chapter 3, Wedeen elegantly and powerfully argues that ethnography’s central virtue lies in its value as an interpretive tool—to enhance our understanding of “performative practices.”

The chapters in Part 2 demonstrate that all research is conducted from the first-person perspective and highlight questions of background predisposition, positionality, and research design. Zirakzadeh in chapter 4 provides an honest accounting (beyond what most scholars ever produce) of how he, in essence, stumbled upon the value of ethnographically informed research techniques. In chapter 5, Wood details the value of ethnographic material in discovering the logic by which people mobilize in advance of, and during, civil war. She shows that to discover this logic requires an ability to listen assiduously and interpret thoughtfully, based on a grounded sense of how memory is constructed during and after wartime. In chapter 6, Pachirat offers a detailed description of his research in an industrialized slaughterhouse in the U.S. Midwest and, in the course of it, makes a powerful argument for the value of a researcher’s partiality.

Part 3 offers a sampling of the many contributions of ethnographic research to our understanding of power. In chapter 7, Walsh shows how a field like public opinion research—long dominated by survey research methods—overlooks the insights from ethnographic research to its own detriment. In chapter 8, Schatzberg challenges readers to broaden their understanding of politics by considering how the supernatural might have an impact on political and social life. In chapter 9, Jourde demonstrates how rudimentary blind spots in the literature on authoritarianism and Islamism can be remedied through an ethnographic sensibility. In chapter 10, Bayard de Volo details how two very different research projects began to remedy fundamental shortcomings in social movement literature and feminist theory, respectively.

Part 4 asks what place ethnography has and should have in the discipline. In chapter 11, Arias proposes a research agenda that would fundamentally transform, and ground, the study of Latin American politics. In chapter 12, Shdaimah, Stahl, and Schram, based on multiple-method research conducted on homeownership in Philadelphia, emphasize the limits of an ethnography that would be content to reveal insider perspectives. In the problem-driven tradition of the pragmatists, they not only advocate the *perspectives* of the people they study; they directly seek to help solve everyday problems. In chapter 13, Yanow provides an insightful and engaging set of instructions to would-be writers, readers, and reviewers about key elements of an ethnographically conducted interpretive study. She emphasizes that research involves not just a “double hermeneutic,” in which researchers interpret the interpretations produced by the researched (Giddens 1984), but a triple one: the writer and reader also create a relationship based on interpretation. Her chapter, in the tradition of Feyerabend, emphasizes how communication between epistemic communities is required for ethnographic studies to enjoy the legitimacy they deserve. Recognizing the various strains of political ethnography, the conclusion asks what kind(s) of ethnography would best suit the study of politics.

Notes

For their insightful comments on a draft of this introduction, thanks to Jessica Allina-Pisano, Lorraine Bayard de Volo, Lee Ann Fujii, Patrick Thaddeus Jackson, Cédric Jourde, Timothy Pachirat, Vincent Pouliot, and Dvora Yanow.

1. This was especially true in the United States, whose political scientists have disproportionately driven trends in the discipline. Rational-choice scholarship also offered a type of mathematically driven reasoning, but since it was relatively unconcerned

- with producing empirical research, I leave it to the side in this discussion. See Green and Shapiro (1996).
2. This embrace of statistical approaches was highly selective and typically based on a large-n, variable-oriented, linear, and probabilistic orientation that precluded other statistical approaches. On a more recent revival and development of Boolean techniques and their potential for studying the social world, see Brady and Collier (2004).
 3. I have in mind King, Keohane, and Verba (1994). George Thomas (2005, 855) raises the opposite possibility—that “if social science has a unified logic, it is found in approaches traditionally associated with qualitative methods rather than statistical inference.” See also Brady and Collier (2004). The phrase “quantitative worldview” comes from McKeown (2004).
 4. For a similar, recent consideration of political ethnography, largely by sociologists, see Qualitative Sociology (2006). Auyero (2006a, 257) begins the special issue of that journal with the sentence: “The revival of ethnographic research within sociology is undisputed.” Political science, by contrast, has not yet experienced such a revival to the same extent, although a variety of intellectual and professional initiatives suggest that such a revival might be expected.
 5. Some of us received training in ethnographic methods via neighboring disciplines, especially anthropology and sociology. Others, such as Zirakzadeh (chapter 4) are essentially autodidacts.
 6. The workshop was held at the University of Toronto in October 2006.
 7. Thanks to Lisa Wedeen for suggesting that *immersion* replace *insider perspectives*, which was used in the Toronto workshop.
 8. Kubik in chapter 1 offers a *tour d’horizon* of the anthropological literature on ethnography that considers these debates.
 9. I borrow *sensibility* from Pader (2006), although her use of the term is different from that offered here.
 10. As Lorraine Bayard de Volo highlights in chapter 10, emotional engagement with the people being studied can be as useful as it is inevitable.
 11. The ethnographic work of political scientists Lloyd and Susanne Rudolph (e.g., 2003) and Myron Aronoff (1974, 1989, 1993) could be characterized similarly.
 12. See also Burawoy et al. (2000).
 13. Participant observation is itself a cluster of closely related techniques. See, for example, Jorgensen (1989).
 14. I have in mind not formal membership, such as when one pays dues to an organization, but rather “belonging” to a group or category. For valuable methodological implications built upon this core insight about shades of gray, see Ragin (2000).
 15. Lee Ann Fujii (2007) calls the information gathered from such presentations “meta-data,” since they are often contained at a level of abstraction higher than that of the factual information informants impart. In a related vein, Pouliot (2008, 5), argues (after Bourdieu) for approaches that help to discern “what agents think *from* (the background of know-how that informs practice in an inarticulate fashion),” rather than simply “what agents think *about* (reflexive and conscious knowledge).”
 16. Garfinkel’s (1984 [1967]) “ethnomethodology” might approach such an ideal type, but few political scientists—indeed, few cultural or social anthropologists—are committed to the deeply inductive enterprise that he offers.
 17. Americanists who use participant observation include Fenno (1990), Glaser (1996), Soss (2000), Walsh (2004, 2007), and Warren (2005).

18. On "wealthology" (the study of the rich), see, for example, <http://www.cultureplanning.com/html/wealth.html> (accessed 1 August 2007).
19. For "how-to" books, see Fetterman (1989) on ethnography and Spradley (1980) on participant observation.
20. In my own "methodological appendix," I did not resist the temptation to neaten up—for the purposes of presentation—what was a very messy research process. See Schatz (2004, appendix).
21. I suggest in this volume's conclusion that ethnographic inquiry is more likely to call into question broad generalizations from other research traditions than to confirm their validity. Thus, ethnography is well positioned to generate what Ian Shapiro (2004) calls "problematizing redescriptions."
22. Thanks to Patrick Thaddeus Jackson for stimulating this line of thinking.
23. That achieving descriptive accuracy is no mean feat calls into question the commonplace among political scientists that description is somehow a lower order endeavor than explanation. For one version of this commonplace notion, see King, Keohane, and Verba (1994).
24. For a cautionary tale that speaks to the potential for ethnographic approaches to serve the interests of the powerful, see Asad (1973). Ironically, Shdaimah, Stahl, and Schram's chapter argues that ethnography's ability to champion the people being studied is laudable but does not go far enough.
25. Thanks to Jessica Allina-Pisano for stressing the need to cover these disagreements as a way to move discussion forward.
26. Thanks to Patrick Thaddeus Jackson for suggesting that *neo-* precede *positivism*, since the philosophical differences from the earlier positivism are notable.
27. Kubik, in fact, adds a third and more recent tradition: postmodern ethnography.
28. For a fuller explication of interpretivist research, see Yanow and Schwartz-Shea (2006).
29. For well-balanced and nonpolemical discussions of the merits and demerits of the neopositivism in King, Keohane, and Verba's *Designing Social Inquiry*, see Johnson (2006) and the contributions to Brady and Collier (2004).
30. For a similar argument concerning the study of "intense, multifocal events," such as protest demonstrations, see Mazie and Woods (2003).
31. Jackson also discusses critical realist and Habermasian "dualism," which generate a research dynamic different from the one I identify here with neopositivist dualism.
32. For this reason, many of the chapter contributors reference themselves. Citing oneself is, of course, a time-honored practice among scholars, but it is particularly appropriate for many ethnographers who believe that the first-person singular should not be excised from the text.
33. Mixing methods that share a family resemblance is not the same as mixing epistemological positions, a point I detail in the book's conclusion.
34. Kubik in chapter 1 reminds us that ethnography may be interpretivist, realist, or postmodernist.
35. This issue is covered by the contributions to *Qualitative Methods* (2006).
36. For a fuller explication of this position, see Flyvbjerg (2001).
37. Much border-crossing blurs the category "political scientist," but all of the contributors except Shdaimah and Stahl either work in political science departments, were trained as political scientists, or both.
38. Prominent exceptions include Barnett (2003), Hopf (2002), and Autesserre (2006).

PART ONE

Two Traditions of Political Ethnography

The chapters in Part 1 trace two broad traditions of political ethnography—a realist and an interpretivist one. Jan Kubik in chapter 1 details some of the principal contributions of each of these two traditions, emphasizing that while political scientists tend to imagine ethnography as necessarily interpretivist, ethnography has been used in a striking variety of ways, even in its "mother discipline" of anthropology. Indeed, Kubik adds a third and more recent tradition—postmodern ethnography—which presents new challenges and opportunities for students of politics.

In chapter 2 Jessica Allina-Pisano provides a series of fieldwork-based vignettes that highlight the value of realist ethnography. Arguing that realist ethnography can provide one way of adjudicating truth-claims and negotiating power-laden situations, she suggests that political ethnographers should not abandon their claims to "small-t" truth; their methods and approaches—among them, their attention to many layers of interpretation that characterize human communities—are in fact uniquely suited to discovering these truths.

In chapter 3 Lisa Wedeen offers an interpretivist understanding of what political ethnography can do, arguing that the ethnographer is well positioned to shed light on "performative practices." She distances the ethnographic project from the language and conceits of behavioralism, emphasizing that individuals do not simply "behave"; rather, they "practice" in ways that are unique to human beings. Moreover, people "perform"—that is, their perspectives are not pristinely isolated and waiting to be discovered by the researcher; rather, they are in motion and emerge in the process of human expression.