At Home with the Global Ethnographer

The Global Ethnography project emerged in the fall of 1996 from a dissertation group working with Michael Burawoy in the Sociology Department at the University of California, Berkeley. This was not, at first sight, a writing group with a clear natural affinity. Our shared relationship with Michael reflected no unity of subject matter. The dissertation research we brought in for discussion ranged across countries, social groups, movements, and theoretical and political agendas. Our very research choices reflected to some extent our scattered origins. Only half of us are native born North Americans, the rest immigrants—Hungarian, Irish, Keralan, English.

What we did have in common in those early days was a broad commitment to "soft," hermeneutic sociology: participant observation, open-ended interviewing, ethnography. The one exception, Joe, was working on a historical study of labor relations in the ship-building industry. Michael persuaded him that his twenty-five odd years as a welder in San Francisco shipyards constituted invaluable sociological data that Joe could work into a side project. As with the rest of us, this supposed side project took on more and more weight.

Our initial dissertation discussion group taught us that most of our cases were in some way caught up by that great mishmash of migrations, capital flows, hostilities, and opportunities jostling within the hot signifier of globalization. Was the extended case method used by Michael Burawoy and the other authors of *Ethnography Unbound* flexible enough to link everyday life to transnational flows of population, discourse, commodities, and power? Michael proposed that this question could generate enough common threads to be the basis of a collective writing project. The rest of us were intrigued by the idea, but felt that our understandings of globalization were

uneven, sometimes contradictory. We therefore needed to develop common conceptual tools by reading and discussing a variety of texts.

Casting around for readings on globalization from different fields and disciplines, we encountered a huge range of interpretations. We started with James Clifford's sketch of the cultural revolution wrought by the arrival of the "exotic on the doorstep" of the Western anthropologist, that is, the great migration of previously colonized people to the lands of their former oppressors. We then moved through concepts such as Giddens's disembedded time and space, Appadurai's fragmented global "scapes," and Grewal and Kaplan's "scattered hegemonies," on to the bewildering new capitalist totalities conjured by Castells, Harvey, and Jameson. "Globalization," it seemed, had become all things to all theorists, a black box of the nineties akin to "structure" in the seventies.

Whether derived from post-colonialism, political economy, cultural studies, or feminist theory, what our sources held in common was not so much their diverse definitions of globalization as their high degree of abstraction. Was it only possible to talk about "the global" in such broad terms, we wondered, or could our ethnographic microscopes enrich these theories from the ground up, perhaps modifying the gloomy globalized totality implied by the political economists? After all, we felt, the local cannot be merely read off as one segment of the global structure. Out of such murky considerations emerged this book, as a collective exploration of the different globalizations thrown up by our projects.

Our first task was to develop a constructive working relationship. Some parts were easier than others. Here was the usual bunch of cranky, individualist academics with varied personal and intellectual histories, trying to form a writing community strong enough to produce a book with a truly common vision. Politically, we have a fair amount in common, most of us having participated in anti-establishment social movements of one kind or another. Yet our investigations sprawled from Steve's critique of regional industrial policy to Maren's breast cancer support groups; from Sheba's politics of carol singing in a Syrian Orthodox church to Zsuzsa's contentions around a proposed waste incinerator in southern Hungary.

Each of us had started the group from different points in our research and writing process. Lynne was close to finishing, Teresa only beginning her dissertation research. As our common project grew into shape, most of our individual studies shifted. Some of the group took on participant observation where they had thought of doing only interviews; others incorporated new concepts into their theories, new questions into their conversations; some extended their dissertations to new countries and new time periods.

We got to know each other, our research, and our chosen problematics in weekly gatherings in Michael's Oakland apartment. Using the Internet,

we sent extensive comments and counter-comments in advance, which greatly helped the level of discussion. Michael worked up extensive summaries of each meeting, so that even those not physically present could keep in touch. Several members of the group excelled in massive and speedy responses to other people's work, leading to many reflections on how easy it is to think and write fluently when it's not your own work at stake. Steve deserves special mention. Even though he moved to Pittsburgh, he remained an indispensable member of the group through his punchy, plain-talking essays.

Our weekly meetings provided constant intellectual stimulation and companionship, wonderful feedback on our individual chapters, plenty of short-term goals, and even good food and drink. The dinner served by a different person each week; the luscious gateaux unveiled by Michael after an intense first half; constant e-mail discussions of readings and chapter drafts; the odd brandy or Hungarian paint-stripper consumed late in the evening; the intense focus mixed with hilarity which characterized many of our discussions—all contributed to making this project a uniquely collective intellectual adventure. In short, *Global Ethnography* seduced us with everything the typical dissertation process lacks.

Once we moved from our initial exploration of the literature, we developed our papers through a grueling set of drafts. First five pages, then ten, then three or four full versions of each paper were produced, analyzed from many angles, and collectively reformulated over the next two years. We submitted the final manuscript to the press three years after we had begun the seminar.

The first line of fault turned out to be, predictably, gendered, or at least that is how it appeared at the time. Our earliest attempts to define globalization were framed in the language of political economy, and soon jokes were flying about "political economy boys" or "PEBs" (some of them female) taking over the group agenda. This prolonged banter helped us to work out very real divisions. While Michael's own work leans toward the PEB side, he is not averse to working with students who insist on "feeding the discourse machine," as he would put it. Correspondingly, unfamiliar terms and analytical habits marked a noticeable distance between those from a political economy background and those enamored of feminist or Foucauldian theory.

However, the rather limiting PEB/discourse divide that seemed overdetermined during the early months was decisively abandoned once we started to form an overall structure for the book. Without ever explicitly recognizing it, we searched the various projects for implications about globalization that would crosscut the obvious epistemological and subdisciplinary fault lines of the group. Our discussions started to turn around the various understandings of globalization that propelled the papers. After much talk

and many schematic adventures on Michael's blackboard, we separated globalization into three "slices": transnational "forces"; flows, or "connections"; and discourse, or "imaginations."

Our papers became ethno-histories as well as ethno-graphies. Our readings in the globalization literature generated a stream of comments along the line of "What's so new about this?"; and we became determined to historicize our own project, both the overall theoretical structure and the individual cases. Once we took on this longitudinal perspective, most of us came to see our cases as evidence of unfinished, ambiguous transitions from one form of globalization to another.

As ethnographers carrying out research into globalization we found ourselves grappling with the huge stretch between the local sites and the global dynamics we were studying. Certainly those of us whose dissertation projects started out from a small-scale, ground-level, strongly hermeneutic approach have found it quite a strain reaching up to the big pictures suggested by theories of globalization. It was hard to relate our work directly to the large institutional and economic shifts delineated by the grand theories of Harvey, Castells, et al. This book represents our collective attempt to overcome this stretch and pursue manifestations of the planetary Zeitgeist within the mundane, the marginal, the everyday.

We wondered whether exploring the global dimensions of the local changes the very experience of doing ethnography. The narrow boundaries of the traditional ethnographic "site" as conceived by the Chicago school were, for us, permeated by broader power flows in the form of local racial and gender orders, free-flowing public discourses, economic structures, and so on. The idea of a contained site with its own autonomous logic seemed even more flimsy and artificial once we extended our gaze to the global. It occurred to us that perhaps our global lens entailed a shift from studying "sites" to studying "fields," that is, the relations *between* sites. The "connections" group decided to explore this idea with transnational, multi-site ethnographies. Yet they ran into great difficulties trying to study transnational connections "from both ends," as the strands linking different sites proved far more complex and cross-cutting than they had imagined. Despite their fieldwork in a range of locations they were each eventually pushed into taking one site as their primary perspective.

Globalization affected the other ethnographies differently. Those studying global forces came to trace the power of those forces precisely through their frustration at the absence of identifiable agents in their studies of marginalization and loss. The "imaginations" group, in contrast, discovered that local actors were themselves re-connecting to the global by re-imagining it or rejecting the concepts of the global that were being presented to them.

For each of us, pursuing globalization generated new understandings of our research. We also discussed the theoretical implications of our own

global locations. Zsuzsa said that she would never have undertaken her project if she had stayed in Hungary and suggested that it is easier to grasp the global from locations of relative privilege, when one has the resources to travel and to study on a less practical, more abstract theoretical level. Others wondered if our concern with globalization was in part an artifact of the priorities and concerns of the situations in which we found ourselves. Indeed, as immigrants and traveling ethnographers most of us were connected to a number of milieux within and across different countries. Perhaps our migrations among friends, families, and fieldwork sites in different places had sharpened our focus on globalization as a way of making sense of what we saw.

Our choice of sites and research questions showed us to be a mostly white group steeped more in Marx, Foucault, and feminism than in postcolonial theory. We did not, therefore, have a sufficient basis for serious theorization of race and globalization, or of the effects of globalization on the most impoverished peoples of the world. On the other hand, we did draw on perspectives from various newly industrialized countries. We decided that globalization looked like a more positive force for the middle classes of Ireland, Brazil, and India than for the previously protected working classes of the United States and other "advanced individualized" countries. At the same time, upwardly mobile immigrants from the newly industrialized countries were subject to the backlash around race and immigration in the richest countries. Such real-world tensions were part of our own personal experiences, reflected in our ambiguous conclusions regarding global connections and their impact.

An alternative way of thinking of ourselves in global terms was posed by Seán when, seeing similarities with the software developers he worked with, he suggested that global ethnographers were essentially "symbolic analysts"—part of the elite of workers who manipulated knowledge and information and who interacted on a global scale with similar elites. This suggestion did not exactly please the rest of us, but we could not deny some of the similarities. Teresa wanted to believe we were not truly part of the monster, arguing that as ethnographers we make a conscious decision to hold on to the specificities of the local in the face of the global, and in doing so we uncover the specificities and power relationships obscured by the bland homogenization of global neoliberalism. Millie took our defense argument further—surely our commitment to analysis of the local was born of a commitment to politics, an activity which symbolic analysts rejected in favor of an untrammeled global market. In other words, the conditions of the global ethnographer are similar to those of the symbolic analyst but our commitments and practices are not.

Globalization described the analytical subject of our collective project, but it also characterized the concrete process of the group. While those of

us studying locally continued to meet with Michael in Oakland, the other members of the group spent various periods in India, Ireland, the eastern United States, Brazil, and Hungary. Technology became crucial to our collective interaction, as the extension of the field in order to study globalization forced more global research and increased use of the Internet. Joe obtained his figures on Korean steel production over the Internet, showing that even for research conducted locally the global dimension of research is somewhat technology-dependent.

The global connections were not evenly distributed however. Seán was easily able to connect electronically to the group from his base in a software team in Ireland; in fact, his team leader helped him set up the Internet connection. Millie's access from Brazil was more patchy, while Sheba had no link to a computer and became an "absent other" for the six months she spent in Kerala. But even those such as Steve and Lynne, who remained within the United States and who were relatively well connected via e-mail and speaker-phone, lost something of the internal workings of the group. The group could send out summaries of its weekly meetings but the collective tensions, agreements, and underlying issues communicated through debate, banter, and the many one-on-one conversations during breaks were largely lost to those relying on the new communication technologies.

Computers, therefore, became essential to our work process. However, the fusing of body and machine into cyborg ethnographer met its physical limits in the increase in repetitive stress injuries (RSI) among members of the group. Autoworkers, cashiers, meatcutters, and others have suffered from such illnesses for years; now RSI is becoming an epidemic among symbolic analysts. The computer intensifies our physical efforts within a shrinking range of activities even as it opens up a wider view to our theory and research. The compressed keyboard of the laptop computer injured our hands, wrists, and elbows even as it allowed us to be globally mobile and connected.

When we began our discussions, one of the questions facing us was whether globalization had rendered ethnography, apparently fixed in the local, impossible or even irrelevant. Our experience working on this project has suggested quite the reverse: rather than becoming redundant, ethnography's concern with concrete, lived experience can sharpen the abstractions of globalization theories into more precise and meaningful conceptual tools.

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When our papers began to see the light of day, when we showed them to our friends, and presented them at conferences, then a whole new set of pressures and influences was brought to bear on the book's evolution. To name

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