

PREFACE

This was almost the preface to a cookbook instead of a collection of ethnographies. The volume grew out of a graduate sociology seminar in participant observation. When the seminar ended, we decided to continue meeting informally over dinner to revise and rework our research projects into a book, and the menu became a barometer of our progress. When the writing was going well, we ate take-out. When we were having difficulty, however, the meals were sumptuous, and there were times when some of us wistfully considered abandoning the social sciences in favor of the culinary arts. But we helped each other through those rough spots, and two years (and many meals) after entering the field, we emerged with this collection of essays.

In truth, when we began the seminar in fall 1988, we were probably more qualified to be cooks than ethnographers. Only one of the twelve, all of us graduate students at the University of California at Berkeley, had ever done participant observation before. We had merely two weeks to select our sites and begin research, a time constraint that permitted neither a leisured nor circumspect entry into the field. Moreover, during the course of the seminar, the scope and direction of many of the projects changed. At the end of the semester most of us felt that our projects were far from complete, but by that time we had become committed to our research.

So we agreed to meet weekly at the home of Michael Burawoy. Perhaps it was the informality of the setting, perhaps the conviviality of the gatherings, or perhaps it was a growing interest in and dedication to one another's work. Whatever the reasons, we were fortunate to be graced with a highly collaborative and collegial working relationship. This spirit had been evident during the seminar, but it deepened over

the course of our evening meetings. Rather than the posturing and jockeying for status that commonly characterize seminars, it was the norm for us to present unfinished work, to offer ideas and theories only half-formed, which in turn allowed us to benefit from each other's rigorous and constructive feedback.

Perhaps those inclined toward participant observation as a technique of research are also more inclined to a participatory approach to learning. Certainly there was a congruence between our own interactions and those we had with our subjects. As Burawoy argues in chapter 1, the process of working alongside those we study necessitates a dialogue between observer and observed. While much sociological work may appear seamless—the researcher invisible behind the scenes—there is in fact always a relationship between ourselves as researchers and our subjects. Participant observation brings this conversation to the fore. For that reason, he argues, participant observation is paradigmatic of all social science and not merely a quaint technique at the margins.

Participant observation also generates rich and detailed data about everyday life. These studies, for example, attempt to convey the flavor and texture of life in the San Francisco Bay Area and specifically, as the book's title suggests, how people's daily lives are disrupted, threatened, and impinged upon by forces outside their control. In his discussion of the extended case method in chapters 2 and 13, Burawoy explains how we were able to extrapolate outward from our particular sites to explore the more general themes of power and resistance, and how from there we were able to reconstruct existing explanatory theories.

Thus, the significance of the studies resides in both their particularity and their generality. Chapters 3 through 12 deal with five features of the modern metropolis—social movements, work organization, immigrants, education, and knowledge. Each chapter concludes with methodological reflections that call attention to distinctive aspects of the research process. In chapter 14 Burawoy offers an account of his experience as teacher of the seminar.

Sadly, two members of our seminar, Carol Heller and Ann Robertson, couldn't continue with us. We missed them as our collaboration developed, and we thank them for their many contributions during the first semester. We also thank Nancy Scheper-Hughes for an inspiring talk about her field work in Brazil; Judy Stacey, Rick Fantasia, Nina Eliasoph, Paul Lichterman, Carol Stack, Bob Freeland, Ida Susser, and one anonymous referee for their comments and help on different parts of the manuscript; Amy Einsohn and Andrew Alden for sharpening the essays by their copyediting; and Naomi Schneider, whose enthusiasm for the project gave us the confidence to pursue it to the end.