



Digital Engagements

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For many social anthropologists working on different forms of political expression, online settings have become an inextricable part of their research sites, a trend further entrenched by the Covid-19 pandemic. In this reflection we explore what the digital means for our interlocutors, our research methods, and our participation “in the field”. Ethnographic fieldwork has been a core component of our research practice and, as engaged ethnographers, we are accustomed to documenting as well as participating in political conversations and actions. It is often in our long-term and intimate interactions that collaborative activism and research have flourished. So how does this change when fieldwork is



carried out online? What can we gain from using the digital in researching political activism and struggle?

Drawing on vignettes from our own field experiences, we open up a discussion on some of the implications of doing politically-engaged anthropology across online and offline spaces in moments of heightened political unrest. We focus on collective and (in)visible organizing by looking at a range of ways in which the digital is used by activists and researchers. Specifically, we address how online spaces can be political forums, research tools, and a continuation of “in person” ethnography. We propose that both being present in social movements and engaging in protests online are two facets of doing politically-engaged research, each with different constraints and possibilities. We conclude that this is also (increasingly) reflected in the (sometimes aligned) concerns, strategies and actions of social movements and researchers.

What can we gain from using the digital in researching political activism and struggle?

Engaging the digital: a political forum

In southern Israel, Palestinian Bedouins^[1] live in towns and villages popularly referred to as “unrecognized villages”, a descriptive term attesting to the fact that these settlements have been built without prior planning permission from the Israeli government. Many of these villages have existed in their present locations since well before the founding of Israel in 1948. Other villages were established by the Israeli state during, or in the years immediately after, the Palestine War (1947-1949), when many Bedouin communities were displaced from their ancestral lands and relocated to new settlements^[2]. Today, building permits are almost impossible for Palestinians to obtain, both within Israel and in the occupied West Bank. This leaves them with no choice other than to construct “unrecognized” houses, which are then demolished by Israeli state forces. Bedouins now harness social media platforms, such as Facebook, Instagram and



WhatsApp, to alert each other about the approach of state demolition forces. Yet social media does not only serve as an “early warning system”.

The demolitions, as well as the resulting anger and grief, are also often shared online. These digital interventions are a way to witness the destruction collectively as well as (possibly also) a way to hold the state accountable for its violent actions through the circulation of images, videos, and texts that document these violent evictions. In the struggle to withstand the physical and symbolic destruction taking place, digital spaces have become a forum for insisting upon the Bedouin and Palestinian past, present and future. Individuals’ private profiles, as well as more anonymous pages, share content related to the region in a range of languages including Arabic, Hebrew and English. A low-profile example is an Instagram page called [“Al Naqab Archive”](#) which regularly publishes historical images of Bedouin life in the region. In this context, “sharing”, like building, are attempts to resist erasure and showcase the region’s Bedouin past and present.

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<https://allegralaboratory.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/5.-Digital-Engagements-Al-Araqib-demolition-189.mp4>

A video of the 189th demolition of the Bedouin village of Al Araqib taken by one of the residents on 27 June, 2021.

Ethnography at a distance: a research tool

In February 2019, in the days following Abdelaziz Bouteflika’s^[3] announcement that he would stand as a candidate for a fifth consecutive presidential term in Algeria, a call to oppose the 81-year-old president’s candidacy was shared widely on various social media channels. Protests spontaneously erupted in several cities



in the northeast of the country, yet the bulk of the demonstrations were scheduled to take place on February 22, following the popular Friday prayer.

Farida, a political scientist and activist living in Marseille, followed the events closely. She was born in the Algerian city of Oran, where her father still lives. She felt disturbed by Bouteflika's bid for a fifth term in office and supported the protest movement. As the mother of a 10-month-old girl, however, she could not follow her impulse to travel to Algeria to participate in the demonstrations. On the morning of February 22, Farida therefore woke up early and rushed to sit in front of her computer, opening way too many tabs. Some pages displayed national and international media outlets, while others were social media feeds. She was switching hastily from one site to the next. She followed popular hashtags such as #Notothefifthmandate and clicked on the profiles of people she knew to be politically engaged. By the time the Friday prayer ended, Farida was both excited and scared at the possibility of a mass uprising and its violent repression (though contrary to previous experiences during political gatherings, the police and armed forces did not attempt to stop the protests from taking place).

being in the “wrong place” allowed her to see and witness the protests unfolding in real time in several cities simultaneously.

Unable to attend the rallies in their actual settings in Algeria, Farida watched live videos posted on Facebook and Twitter. In the current digital moment, where activists simultaneously document and broadcast their political engagement, being in the “wrong place” allowed her to see and witness the protests unfolding in real time in several cities simultaneously. Via her computer, she “went” to Oran and Mostaganem, as well as to the capital, Algiers, where the largest demonstrations were taking place despite the fact that street protests were considered illegal (or maybe precisely for that reason). Farida followed the demonstrations in these cities through the mobile phone cameras of people she knew. She was able to contextualize political actions because of her previous fieldwork and the personal and political relationships she had developed over the



years. She kept a small notebook to account for the profiles she visited and the videos and news feeds she saw. By doing so she sought to disrupt algorithmic browsing while also attempting a more systematic method of data collection. Knowing that data which is circulated online can disappear as quickly as it appears, she downloaded some of the content in order to save and later attempt to make sense of the overwhelming amount of information available.



A woman in Oran on a Facebook Messenger video call with her son who lives abroad so he can also “experience the demonstrations”. Photo by Farida Souiah, March 2019.

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The distance between Marseille and cities in Algeria might arguably be less relevant in contexts of protest movements than those boundaries that exist between online and offline spaces. On February 22, many Algerian emigrants could be “there” online and later echo the chants and slogans they had heard in Arabic and Tamazight at demonstrations they organized in Paris, Lyon, Marseille, London and Montreal. Farida’s intention to follow and document the Algerian protests spontaneously moved online when she was not able, *in the moment*, to go to North Africa. Most researchers and activists have shared similar experiences during the past year as travel restrictions tightened with the developing global pandemic. Unable to continue their ethnographic research as planned, many



began to seek alternative ways to connect with their field sites from a distance, which coincided with more “local” activities and events becoming available online. Digital spaces became research tools for an increasing number of researchers, who also followed hashtags and individuals on social media and at the mushrooming number of online conferences and seminars, as Farida had done with the uprising against President Bouteflika in 2019.

The move online has made all of us question what being present means and how we build and sustain our relationships with our field sites and the political movements we support.

Navigating (in)visibility: a contextual online/offline continuum

Many embodied research methods rely on the physical experience of “being there”, and this may well account for a sense of loss when carrying out online ethnographic research. In this section we attend in more detail to the fact that these two spaces - online and offline - are intertwined. We propose that beyond constituting a forum and a research tool, the digital is part of (most) contemporary political struggles. However, this does not mean that online and offline realities are one and the same; one cannot be studied in place of the other. This becomes evident in another story from the Naqab region of southern Israel, where a regular vigil takes place near the Bedouin village of Al Araqib. Every week a group of activists gather beside one of the main roads leading to the city of Beersheba to protest the continuous demolition of the village^[4]. A man called Sheikh Sayah is an important figure in the demonstrations. Everyone knows who he is. He does not have a social media profile, but this does not affect his central standing in the local political landscape. Quite the contrary: stylish and charismatic, his presence signals the beginning and end of each vigil, and he often features prominently in the texts, videos, and images that others share online. The offline world is no longer immune from digital footprints. There are



many other activists in struggles around the world whose contextual importance is not marked by a curated digital self, although they appear in the livestreams and posts of people for whom broadcasting is an important part of protest. The capacity to contextualize what happens online ought to therefore remain an important part of engaged ethnographic work.

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When thinking about digital (in)visibility, the question of who we see is not the only important thing to consider. The issue of why and to whom certain things are visible is also central. Online contexts raise sensitivities regarding the safety of both researchers and activists, alongside broader questions about impact and exposure. This is why some movements resort to more secretive mediums to circulate information and build a community. These less visible digital spaces, such as private and semi-private group chats, might be harder for researchers to access. Being engaged in movements is often the only way researchers gain access to such spaces. Moreover, because activists often use these more confidential conversations to try and avoid online censorship and digital surveillance, this raises yet more questions about how engaged researchers should make use of what they see online. As researchers continue experimenting with online ethnographic practices, many of the foundational anthropological questions around access and disclosure will need to be revisited.

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Conclusion

The emergence of more (online) interconnection between our “homes” and our “field sites”^[5] (as explored also in this [forum](#)) allows us to critically engage with different levels of presence and remoteness in the pursuit of shared political



goals, and to think collaboratively about the different parts of doing research. The move online has made all of us question what being present means and how we build and sustain our relationships with our field sites and the political movements we support. As we considered our experiences with combining online and offline ethnographic methods, our own collective reflections led us to understand online presence, engagement, and connection as complex phenomena which each allow for different tactics, resources, and strategies. We were brought back to reckoning (again) with some of the key questions regarding ethnography as a form of labour: Who engages in it? When and where is research conducted? And what and who are overlooked?

^[1] Based on Maya Avis's ethnography on Palestinian Bedouin land claims in the Naqab region of Israel.

^[2] This includes villages such as Umm al Hiran.

^[3] Based on Farida Souiah's ethnographic research on Algeria's Hirak.

^[4] At the time of writing the village of Araqib has been rebuilt and demolished 189 times since 2010. The last demolition was carried out on June 27, 2021.

^[5] For many ethnographers this is far from a binary relationship.

[Featured Image](#) by [Latrach Med Jamil](#) on [Unsplash](#)

Facts and Evidence

Sergen Bahceci
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This short essay is an invitation to question how different forms of political engagement destabilize institutional processes of evidence making. In the workshop that motivated this collective reflection, we discussed the struggles that ethnographers undergo in finding a language to speak about “facts” and “evidence” in fieldwork sites from Palestine to Kashmir, from Scotland to Cyprus, from Lebanon to Ecuador, from Italy to Chile, and many more. What emerged from these conversations was a focus on how ethnographic and historical understandings of “truth” challenge legal and scientific claims, and why these competing truths are paramount for any politically engaged anthropology of evidence. Our focus here, then, is on evidentiary regimes illuminated through ethnographic collaborations around disappearance, dispossession, and massacre. We offer a conversation about how “facts” and “evidence” are deployed and contested on the ground. This approach, we hope, can help illuminate the



relationship between justice, power, and knowledge that goes beyond instrumental theorizations of violence. To do so we present a reflection each on: ways of speaking truth to power in courts; everyday forms of evidence contestation; and counter-evidence production with statistics and data visualizations. In doing so, our aim is to break open the categories of fact and evidence by paying attention to stories often overlooked from processes of evidentiary production.

Speaking truth to power

In Indian Administered Kashmir, which has long endured violent Indian military occupation and witnessed a decades-long armed resistance movement, it was common in daily conversation to talk about extrajudicial killings, torture, forced disappearances, illegal detention, random interrogation and raids. In such conversations, the families of victims of human rights violations on the part of the state often narrated the dilemma of seeking redress from the legal machinery of the very same state that had perpetrated violence against their kin. If desire for “justice” won out, then families would encounter a dizzyingly obtuse legal infrastructure that required the assistance of lawyers, activists and journalists to navigate in the struggle to speak truth to power. As such, the practice of excavating the “truth” about the event of the violence and injustice against the victim becomes an important part of the process to be presented as evidence legible in a court of law.

In a geography of relentless cycles of violence, this practice of establishing claims to “truth” and evidence making is not limited to singular legal cases of human rights violations. This process becomes an important part of the Kashmiri political movement and its strategies of resistance to assert the “true” history and the “true” consequences of historical events for their articulation and demand for justice. In other words, the task of asserting the “truth” or act of speaking “truth” to power becomes part of the archive building process of *evidence* against the



oppressor, usually with complete acknowledgement of the fact that “truth” is hardly singular to any one social or political movement and history.

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For instance, activists collaborating with local human rights documentation groups working in Kashmir on cases of enforced disappearances, mass graves and other human rights violations, often cite how they constantly navigate through the “facts” available from victim and kin testimonies as well as the process of presenting these testimonies as “evidence.” Whether the human rights groups document and prepare dossiers for legal battles seeking justice in courts run by the same state that oppresses them, or whether the human rights violation cases are documented for advocacy and awareness-raising at international platforms like the United Nations Human Rights Commission, the presentation of evidence follows a legal framework to validate its authenticity and credibility. The process of presenting evidence that would help the families of the victims testify against the perpetrators of violence and stand the scrutiny of factuality and verifiability in the court of law also becomes a method to claim urgency, authenticity and ethicality of seeking justice for the victims. In a way, the process of seeking justice through the translation of “truths” into a legally legible vocabulary becomes the repertoire of the larger political movement for justice and dignity.

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The evidence building process, then, is neither self-evident nor a linear trajectory of accumulating facts to be transformed into evidence for legal battles seeking justice. Many contemporary political movements strive towards documenting and archiving facts for articulations of their protests and struggles, thereby



presenting “facts” as “truths.” This makes the process of working with “facts” and “evidence” a discursive process: one that constantly debates, imagines, and carves out evidence within the political and social context in which it is embedded.

Ruins as evidence: when facts fail to speak for themselves

When activists speak in terms of facts and evidence to make claims on political elites, they evoke a discursive regime that is conventionally state-centric, evoking relations of power that often work against them. This was the case for the villagers of Lurucina in Cyprus, for whom the ruins in their village denote both longstanding predicament and an impending catastrophe.

The Turkish Cypriot village of Lurucina, the southernmost point of the de facto Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC), appears on the map as an outgrowth into the Greek Cypriot-controlled territories. The “border” that surrounds Lurucina came into being after the 1974 war, cutting the villagers off from the surrounding Greek Cypriot towns with which they traded, and occasionally also fought. This separation defines the everyday life of Lurucina’s remaining inhabitants, and they blame it for the village’s contemporary troubles: a population drain and spatial decay caused by Lurucina’s “remoteness” (*uzaklık*) from the rest of the TRNC to the north and by its “severance” (*koparılması*) from the south.

According to the remaining villagers, this border “encamped them in a corner” (*köşeye sıkıştırdı*) and made everyday life in Lurucina exceedingly difficult after 1974, causing most people to leave. Only about 300 people permanently reside in Lurucina now, and most of them are above 40. Before 1974, the village was home to about 3,000 people. The remaining villagers are quick to index their sense of loss by pointing at the abandoned and decaying houses that used to be occupied by “those who escaped” (*kaçanlar*). The abandoned open-air cinema of the village is often referred to as particularly poignant evidence for how Lurucina had been



but was no more; a place of daily sociality, it now resembles a scrapyard (see photo). Besides acting as evidence of a community lost, these ruins are signs of things to come: the remaining villagers all agree that Lurucina is “dying” and will cease to exist once they grow old and pass away.

The villagers decided to act against this in 2020 with a campaign, directed towards political leaders to their north and south, for a border checkpoint that they hoped would revitalize trade and help attract youth back to Lurucina. They organized a [protest](#) at the border and called on Greek and Turkish Cypriots from other places to join them. Although the protest attracted several hundred people from outside, the villagers eventually considered their campaign unsuccessful because it failed to pressure the political elites to act. This was not necessarily because wider society was unaware of what the villagers wanted: on the contrary, they received a good amount of [media publicity](#).

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Their failure rested in having been unable to convince others that the village’s ruins were evidence of a community that was being “strangled” by the border. Aware of the protest but not having attended, one Turkish Cypriot man from the capital told me: “the villagers were never made to leave, they chose to leave for the cities in search of better houses and jobs.” This reinsertion of personal responsibility was a challenge to the villager-activists’ attempt to make the border the “cause” of their predicament and the ruins as its “evidence.” Instead, others pointed at some of the villagers’ ability to continue living in Lurucina as evidence that it was the “people,” and more specifically those who chose to leave, and not the border, that was the cause of decay. Instead of their argument, the villagers’ activism made their presence in the village evidence of the opposite: that it was still possible to live in Lurucina, but that most people simply chose not to.



Evidentiary contestations and political engagement

In 2019, [Kaleidos](#) built a collaborative STS-inspired digital platform, called [EthnoData](#), for the study of violent deaths, hate crimes, femicides, missing people, and prisons in Ecuador. Kaleidos is a centre for interdisciplinary ethnography producing grounded theory midway between anthropology and science and technology studies. Its goal is to connect local and global concerns by leveraging international research networks to produce politically-engaged and responsive scholarship from the global South. EthnoData is a multimodal and multimedia website that combines large datasets with ethnographic material that allows users to create their own theorizations and stories with numerical evidence and qualitative data - including official statistics, legal archives, curated images, essays, videos, podcast, and other forms of ethnographic material. EthnoData's research logic and ethnographic capacities has allowed Kaleidos to produce empirical counter-evidence that complicates official narratives and mass media spectacles. For instance, the platform helped uncover the complexities and politics of a prison massacre that government officials and the national press characterized as the result of bloody clashes between transnational prison gangs.

On February 23, 2021, 79 inmates were killed during a coordinated two-day prison riot staged in three cities. Prison killings are not unprecedented in the Ecuadorian context, and have been on the rise since 2018 (see [EthnoData video](#)). In response, the government declared a crisis in the prison system in 2019, deploying military troops to maximum-security penitentiaries across the country, and replacing public servants with police personnel. That same year, Kaleidos began an interdisciplinary ethnography on prison data and infrastructure, privatization and corruption, and life after confinement. This study works collaboratively with prisoners and former prisoners, their families, civil society organizations, and different government agencies.



The day after the massacre, Kaleidos met with human rights defenders and abolition activists to develop a collective response to recent events. The rather humble initial meeting evolved into the creation of a critical thinking and activist space called Alliance against Prisons. The prison data generated through EthnoData and analyzed by Kaleidos' team led by Jorge Núñez was put at the



service of various members of the Alliance. This is meaningful because, in Kaleidos' view, it was crucial to join a plurality of critical voices to challenge the government's take on the riots. According to the chief of National Police, Mexican narco-organizations have taken control over Ecuadorian penitentiaries and are managing their drug trafficking networks from behind bars. This explanation of the massacre puts the blame on prisoners and characterizes narco-violence as exterior to Ecuador. The evidence presented by the government was mostly based on police intelligence and security experts.

These ethnographies of evidence call our attention to the political labor behind justice seeking practices, struggles against decaying environments, and critical stories of data.

In Kaleidos' view, the official narrative overlooks (or plainly hides) how the demobilisation of inmates' syndicates, the dismantling of entrepreneurial prison economies, the creation of prison intelligence infrastructures, and the construction of supermax prisons away from urban centers, changed life behind bars, and particularly how these bureaucratic decisions and investments affected the dynamics of prisoners' self-governance that kept penitentiaries in peace. Kaleidos, and EthnoData by implication, could not have made this intervention into the evidentiary regime of securitisation without working collaboratively with prisoners, former prisoners, and their families on the one hand, and the members of the Alliance against Prisons on the other. The Alliance's interactions are not free of conflict. On the contrary, intellectual friction is constant and most times productive. For instance, Kaleidos had an STS-inspired ethnographic approach to carceral infrastructures, while other activist-scholars came from long-term participatory action research experiences. These methodological differences had important implications in generating heated debates about what political engagement was and whether or not we had a common language to destabilize the evidentiary discourse informing official narratives about the prison massacre. In the end, the dialogue among members of the Alliance opened possibilities for contestations of the carceral state in Ecuador. We still think of prisons quite



differently, yet we somehow found a space for cross-pollination and mutual support.

Conclusion

In thinking collaboratively about the experiences of evidence making in these three settings we have learned how evidence is produced and circulated in each local context. More importantly, we have brought together different ethnographic sites in which evidence becomes more than a legal claim. The Kashmir context complicates the idea that “truth” must navigate courtrooms in order to become, in fact, evidence. Activists must work against the legal system and its intrinsic ways for determining what counts as evidence in order to demonstrate that violence actually took place. In the case of Lurucina, in Cyprus, the efforts of mobilized citizens to bring attention to their need for a border checkpoint by foregrounding the degradation of their town ultimately countered their protest’s political agenda. What they viewed as evidence of their predicament - a visibly ruined and abandoned village - turned against them during their protest, being read instead by outsiders as evidence of the villagers’ own responsibilities and choices. Finally, in the case of Ecuador, counter-evidence to state narratives on brutal carceral violence was only possible through a complex (and never free of frictions) set of collaborations between numerous social organizations. Together, these ethnographies of evidence call our attention to the political labor behind justice seeking practices, struggles against decaying environments, and critical stories of data.

Featured image by [Monica Silvestre](#) courtesy of [Pexels.com](#)



Artefacts and Repertoires

Maya Avis

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After the 2011 Tunisian revolution, some of the fishermen of Zarzis - a coastal town close to the Libyan border, facing the southernmost Italian island of Lampedusa - came together to create an organisation. The walls and windows of the headquarters of *Zarzis Le Pecheur* (Zarzis The Fisherman) are covered in posters in Arabic and French presenting the titles, data, and photographs of all of the organisation's activities. These portray moments as varied as young women mending nets, fishermen helping migrants disembark from their boats after a rescue operation, adults sitting behind school-like desks listening to a training session, and the wooden skeletons of boats under construction. A large table



occupies much of the main meeting room, and is topped with a thick glass sheet holding in place a colorful mosaic of business-cards. These belong to the many journalists, video-makers, activists, international organisations, NGOs, cooperation and development agencies, and more who visited or worked with the fishermen over the years. Both the long meeting-room table and the walls of the headquarters speak of the fishermen's history of engagement in attempting to salvage the fishing sector in their region, and in providing assistance to border crossers in need in the Mediterranean.

What is made and retained? What is remade and transformed? What is destroyed or lost? And what seems to be lost but remains?

Much like the fishermen's impulse to document and display traces of their political engagements and of the networks these established, the reflections below testify to the many ways in which collective action leads to material and immaterial production, and to what participants decide to do with it in its aftermath. In the writing that follows, we attend to the materiality of objects, texts and digitally-stored artefacts, but we also draw awareness to the mnemonic "repertoire" that is held in the body. As Diana Taylor [reminds us](#), debates about the ephemerality of performed behaviour and action are profoundly political: "Whose memories, traditions, and claims to history disappear if performance practices lack the staying power to transmit vital knowledge?" (2003: 5). Through a juxtaposition of scenes linked by activist struggle, we catalogue (without attempting to fully represent) the plethora of ways in which artefacts and embodied knowledge are entangled, and explore their potential afterlives beyond a particular moment of action. We explore the political potential of artefacts and repertoires by asking four questions: What is made and retained? What is remade and transformed? What is destroyed or lost? And what seems to be lost but remains?



What is made and retained

In the context of Syrian exile in Lebanon, characterized by brutal expulsion from home (in Syria) and illegality and political inexistence (in Lebanon), what is the relationship between memories and mundane artefacts? The older generation engaged in nightly recollections of the revolutionary momentum, tying it with episodes of ordinary life and painful losses suffered during the war. These memories were unspeakable during the day, as adults enforced a certain degree of oblivion in the children about the recent past. However, this past was also inscribed in the artefacts produced and archived by the community's informal school. Traces or "left overs" of a revolutionary engagement resided in lived individual and collective experiences; mundane papers such as a register of the families of the camp, the school's administrative papers, and students' drawings constituted the archive of the life of the community. These traces indexed the loss of the (ordinary and legally-valued) past as well as the losses produced by the community's embracing of revolution, and the affecting outcomes of the war.

But these artefacts were not only a testament to the past. For instance, the creation of school certificates for children who did not have access to formal education became a collective effort to restore a sense of normalcy in the present and to build new hopes for the future. These documents mimicked official school certificates: they were printed in colour and laminated to resist the erosion of time and the precarious conditions of the present. The certificates were conferred to students during a formal ceremony organised with care at the end of the academic year. The school courtyard was transformed into a theatre for students to perform a play, their drawings were exhibited, and school administrators offered a series of speeches to create anticipation and excitement for the final act, captured by cameras and phones from the audience: the school director inviting each student to collect their certificate.



What is remade and transformed

Although artefacts can be used synecdochally to preserve social continuity, they can also work to connect separate temporalities without arresting liveness – that is, to acknowledge that in making such a connection, the artefact can be transformed. In such cases, artefacts are reinvented with each moment, and are malleable and performative. Home Makers is a collection of soundwalks recorded and co-edited with migrant domestic workers in the UK and Lebanon. Consisting of an .mp3 file, and an instruction for listening, the soundwalks remain intact as digital artefacts. However, the soundwalks are also devices or scores for performance, which hinge the moment of creation with those occupied by listeners.

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In the soundwalk [not nothing](#), a Filipina migrant domestic worker called Ann returns to Holland Park in central London, where she decided to escape from abusive employers. In returning to the park, she is audibly reminded of violence that took place on her last visit there, as well as routine exploitation. However, in choosing Holland Park to record her soundwalk, she was also attempting to remake or transform the space. She wanted to bump into her former employers, to show them that she had survived, and prove to them that she was “not nothing.” If space is always “caught in the ambiguity of an actualization,” the successive moments of Ann’s visits to the park with her employers, her making of the soundwalk, and the journeys of her listeners all transform Holland Park into a “*practiced place*” (de Certeau, 1984: 117). The digital artefact – the recording of Ann’s voice in the soundwalk itself – joins these actualisations together, but does not fully capture them. The artefact remains, but through its performance is continually remade and transformed.



What is destroyed or lost

Often, artefacts are not intended to last beyond their initial purpose - say, the communicative purpose of placards, flyers, and chant sheets on a march. Other artefacts might have a more or less indefinite life, like the artwork depicted on cardboard barricades during the [Red Shirt](#) movement in Thailand (only partially durable material, they were nevertheless lovingly dismantled and recreated in a new site when the protest moved), or the artwork painted onto newly erected [concrete barriers](#) during protests in Lebanon in 2015 (highly durable material, protestors themselves tore down the barriers mere days later, and the artwork with it). At other times the intention is to not leave a trace, or to be destroyable at a moment's notice - like organising chains for direct actions on Signal or Telegram. More frequently, perhaps, artefacts are destroyed by one's opponents. This might be in-built, as with the cardboard barricades, but far more often the destruction is intended to wipe the material slate clean, and so too the lives and memories of those involved, the possibility to imagine resistance with them.

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And then sometimes an artefact might be lost in some material sense, but that tells only part of the story. Take an example placard from the migrant worker contingent of the 2019 International Women's Day march in Lebanon, which read *I'm not your bitch, bitch!*. Despite attempts to retain such material for a migrant worker community archive, this poster was lost. When one of the authors of this text lamented this fact with the woman who had held it aloft during the march, she was unperturbed: "I gave it to someone. You know, I was like everywhere on social media!". Her photo holding that sign and shouting had, in fact, circulated widely online. "I have the picture, I can print it out", she added. Here, the circulation of the object was widespread. The "artefact" itself is lost, but exists far more widely than in the bit of paper itself. Does its loss matter all that much? After all, it would not be too hard to make more *I'm not your bitch, bitch!* posters



if the sentiment and the desire to communicate it are maintained, and there is enough pen and paper around.

What seems to be lost but remains

Archives are often collections of things, but what of the intangible practices and repertoires that are “collected” over time by activist(s and) ethnographers? What of the protest practices learnt through exposure? These make up particular kinds of knowledge: the right clothing for temperature, tear gas, comfort or modesty; the necessity for water, food and a backup battery pack and charger; how to dodge and duck; when and how to run; how to stay calm(er); how to chant in unison - call and response; how to shout; the rhythms of slogans and songs; the fact that mobile networks often disappear during protest (through fault or design) and planning for these eventualities.

What of the intangible practices and repertoires that are “collected” over time by activist(s and) ethnographers? What of the protest practices learnt through exposure?

There are specific ways to be and move. An awareness that develops. It is a bodily knowledge which ethnographers and activists learn through doing. The important role of onions and milk or diluted vinegar (not water!) for treating tear gas; which police stations people are taken to if there are arrests; which lawyers or activists to contact in an emergency. The related responses - fear, rage, tears, shock, apathy - before, after or during moments of political engagement. The feelings themselves may be fleeting but the memory of having made their acquaintance remains. These are the feelings that either drive action or prevent it, now and/or in the future. What to do with and about this range of responses. Should you be sure to seek out community and friendship? Do you need to be alone? Will food, cigarettes, or nature help?



This combination of pragmatic know-how and familiarity with a range of sensory facts may leave no physical trace but remain as an embodied “repertoire” for activists and ethnographers long after banners are lost, flyers abandoned, and memorials begin to fade into landscape. The repertoire remembers gestures, movements, choreographies or relationships between places and people. These aspects of both everyday commitments and of heightened moments of political engagement are non-artefactual or unarchiveable, but lie at the heart of the knowledge that is produced and passed on through both personal and collective action.

Conclusion

Networks of solidarity also remain as material and immaterial resources, as both archive and repertoire. Some of the contacts from the Zarzis fishermen’s business-card mosaic - those who had worked with them the most over the years - were called upon immediately when in August 2018 the organisation’s president and his crew were [arrested](#) near Lampedusa and accused of people smuggling. This arrest came after several summers during which the Italian government worked to dissuade and criminalise rescue at sea on the part of NGOs, merchant ships, fishing fleets, and even its own coast guard. Activist networks in Sicily mobilised to pay for lawyers - the same ones who had represented the crew of an NGO vessel who had been similarly accused in the recent past. Others liaised with people in Zarzis to gather all of the material evidence possible proving that the fishermen were known for coming to the rescue of people in danger at sea, and that this was precisely what they had been doing the day they had been arrested. The cascade of artefacts assembled was vast: training course certificates from the likes of Doctors Without Borders and the International Committee of the Red Cross, photos of life-vest and first-aid kit donations, articles, documentaries and photographs about their involvement in rescue at sea, words of praise from development agencies who had worked with them on traditional fishing projects.



Documents and relationships - an archive and a repertoire of solidarity - are visible and have material, political effect.

The fishermen and those in solidarity with them also organised a fishing strike and several protests - in Zarzis, in the capital Tunis, in Sicily, and in Paris, where the Zarzis diaspora was also quick to react - demanding the release of their arrested colleagues. After spending a month in prison, the fishermen were released and allowed to return to Tunisia, and to eventually retrieve their boat. The vast range of documentation that turned out to be crucial, for the court case could neither have been brought together nor could it have been successfully fought without embodied collective knowledge and the coming together of social relations into tangible networks that mobilised to bring the message “free the fishermen” to national and international attention.

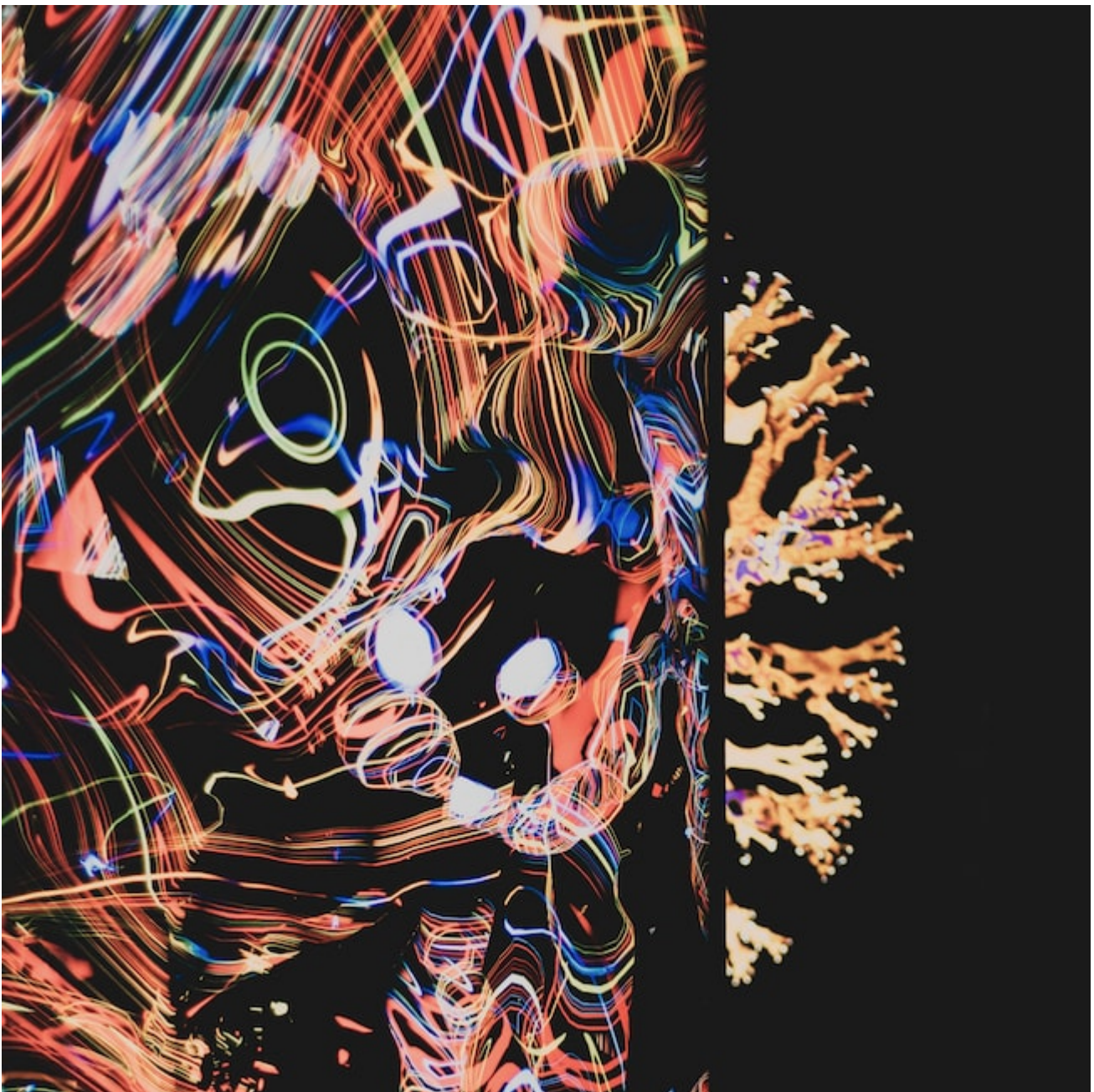
In this mobilisation, documents and relationships - an archive and a repertoire of solidarity - are visible and have material, political effect. When the Zarzis fishermen’s lawyers presented their array of material at the hearing in Sicily, the judges were “*pieni di meraviglia*” (full of wonder). The fishermen’s release underscores the proposition we have made in this text that artefacts are performative and subject to various forms of action. They are made and retained, they are remade and transformed, they can be destroyed and lost, and when they seem to be lost, their power can remain. And even when invisible to a gaze focused on text and object, repertoires of action are learnt, shared and accumulated in singular and collective bodies, and can resurface despite changing temporalities and contexts of protest.

Featured image by [David Julien](#) courtesy of [Pixabay.com](#)



Punctuation and Flow

Gabriela Manley
September, 2021



The past two years have been marked by an ever-accelerating cascade of global



“events”: once in a lifetime events, generational events, unexpected events, catastrophic events. From climate change to politics and the Covid-19 pandemic, each has been represented as a moment of radical rupture between past and present, often portrayed as having brought about a radically different “new normal”. It is upon this backdrop that we were spurred on to explore the political nature of “eventedness” at the *Reflections on Political Engagement* workshop and, later, as part of this collective writing process. Across our ethnographies, we witnessed a tension between what we term “punctuation”, on the one hand, and “flow”, on the other. Within the *longue durée* of socio-historical transformations, certain events that are part of the ever-developing timeline of political engagement acquire elevated status: they punctuate the flow of movements. As anthropologists, we are used to placing the focus on our interlocutors’ ordinary lives, their everyday forms of resistance, and their long-term struggles. We share with some political movements a drive to understand how a certain moment of “crisis” came to be, and yet we question the ways that times charged with heightened “eventedness” are seen (often retrospectively) to mark a “rupture”. Considering the socio-political implications of these labels, we asked ourselves: for whom is an event eventful? What are the temporal practices at play in making, sustaining, or claiming moments of heightened political engagement? Why do these become framed as “events”, while other circumstances do not? How to locate the beginnings and ends of political mobilisations through time? Here we illustrate some possible approaches to these questions through two sustained ethnographic cases: the struggle over the opening of a new mine in a mountain village in Northern Greece, and political violence and martyrdom in the Kashmir Valley.

What are the temporal practices at play in making, sustaining, or claiming moments of heightened political engagement?

Pasts and futures

Megali Panagia, a village in Northern Greece, was divided by the opening of a



new mine in Skouries forest. After a decade of mobilisation against the Canadian mining company *Eldorado Gold*, the members of the Struggle Committee, who constituted the core of the organised resistance, were frustrated. The Struggle Committee was formed gradually after a small group of locals reacted to the announcement of the company's plans for the new mine in 2009. Around this time, the Committee attempted to consolidate its presence in the mountain by building a wooden lookout (*Filakio*). From this spot, they managed to observe - and sabotage - the construction process for a while. As the tension around the mine project started escalating, protests in the mountain became regular, while violent confrontations with the police and the local miners caught the national media's attention. Locals from neighbouring villages and outsiders joined the anti-mining movement in solidarity. Memories of meetings in the mountain before the protests, of clashes with the riot police, and of efforts to communicate the issues at hand to a broader public dominate activists' current narratives, indicating a present overshadowed by the past. With the mine's opening in 2019, therefore, the present of the anti-mining movement was confronted with and described as the negative outcome of a glorious past of resistance. Yet, despite the activists' despair in the present, their past experiences of violent confrontation and direct resistance still constitute for the members of the Struggle Committee the only possible way that they could have acted. As they often state: "we could not have done otherwise".

Despite the activists' despair in the present, their past experiences of violent confrontation and direct resistance still constitute the only possible way that they could have acted.

As the Struggle Committee's current lack of hope suggests, temporality is a crucial issue when it comes to understanding socio-political events, determining the ways in which history is experienced in the present by triggering asymmetrical historical resonances that render certain "pasts" more present than others. "History" itself becomes a culturally contingent way of thinking where an event is to be explained by placing it within a socio-historical context that built up



to it. Further, we can know the past through its concrete temporalisations, directly implicating past, present, and future relations into historical knowing. Eric Hirsch and Charles Stewart (2005) broke apart linear temporal understandings of history to suggest that historicity is entirely socially constructed, with past, present, and future temporalities in constant conversation with each other. Social movements, then, do not just produce knowledge about the past in relation to the present, but also in anticipation of the future. In moments of radical political engagement, both past and future are re-configured, made fluid through the opening of the horizon of socio-political possibilities; they open up the immediate and far future, creating a space for the imagination (and hope) of socio-political alternatives. It is within this space that change appears possible and political actions seem necessary. Possible futures come into focus, while others fade into the background of “yesterday’s world”, yet all remain non-predetermined, in continuous durational flow with concurrent past, present, future temporalities that remain in conversation with each other.

In moments of radical political engagement both past and future are re-configured, made fluid through the opening of the horizon of socio-political possibilities.

After many years of exhausting struggle against both the mining company and state repression, the election of the right-wing party of New Democracy in July 2019 left no hope of preventing the mine’s opening. At this point, for politically engaged villagers, the anti-mining movement seemed pointless; questions regarding the future were articulated in terms of entrapment and characterized by shared feelings of frustration which blurred attempts to envision what could happen next. Futurity, then, is not always an interesting question for our interlocutors. Sometimes our decision to sketch the present as subject to change might reveal an optimistic belief in overcoming current difficulties as a kind of politically-engaged ethnography. In such cases the anthropologist’s commitment to politically- engaged research can translate into contextualization strategies that do not mirror how our interlocutors really frame their past or future. In the



process of temporalizing social struggles, emic concepts of “event” become central for understanding the punctuation and flow of any political movement. As we have anticipated, however, this centring of events comes with its own challenges.

Punctuation and flow

In Indian Administered Kashmir valley, political violence and the Indian state’s military oppression have framed the fabric of everyday life for over three decades. In 2016, the killing of Burhan Wani - a young local militant who was popular for his outreach amongst the local population and for his engagement with the frustrations of prolonged state oppression - became an “event” in the political movement of Kashmir. Wani’s killing meant an emotional, intimate, and existential loss for many Kashmiris. Due to his extensive social media presence and outreach after joining the armed resistance movement, several in Kashmir felt the experience of Kashmiri struggle against the Indian state through their social media feeds. The heightened “eventness” of Wani’s killing hence marked a departure from the traditional *modus operandi* of the movement for Kashmiri self-determination. In the chronology of the Kashmiri political movement, armed encounters have killed innumerable militants and civilians and caused immeasurable damage to life and property in Kashmir. Wani’s killing was preceded and succeeded by several other killings of many young men by the same state forces. Media discourse and the narrative constructed by the activists and political commentators argued for reading the killing as “the event” that destabilized the established knowledge forms and temporality of the Kashmiri movement. Wani’s killing triggered the re-conceptualisation of the past and the future of the resistance movement because of the outrage and discontent it elicited.

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As much as [Wani’s killing](#) opened new vectors of thought to understand the



[Kashmiri political movement](#), the innumerable everyday street-corner violent episodes of young men and women being harassed and assaulted by armed forces, or the systemic incapacitation of school children through endless cycles of curfews and lockdowns to induce fear and trauma, have been equally significant in the making of the political movement. For example, the regular non-lethal law and order measure of conducting internet, telephone, mobile telecommunication blackouts for prolonged periods that disqualifies thousands of school and college students from appearing for examinations and other educational needs are rarely if at all considered heightened “events” of human rights violation that destabilise the rhythm of the political movement. Meanwhile, the “event” of Burhan Wani’s death did mandate historicization, contextualisation and a re-interpretation of the past and the future of the political movement.

As ethnographers, we are used to focusing our attention on ordinary lives and everyday forms of resistance and political engagement. We approach things in terms of processes. A big part of our job lies in contextualizing and historicizing socio-political phenomena, and so we are often cautious of conceptualizations of “rupture”, “crisis” and extraordinary “events”. Nonetheless, all of us have encountered activists and mediated discourses on political movements that do attempt to produce events that exist out of the ordinary and have a limited timeframe (by definition, an event cannot last forever, otherwise it becomes the new ordinary) and result in structural transformations. These instances are usually the ones that draw the most media attention and the ones included in historical accounts. However, any movement’s politics of punctuation and flow cannot be ascertained only by (or through) those events that receive amplification. In political movements with a prolonged time-scape of resistance, non-amplified or non-mediated events are equally significant in contributing to the flow of movements.

How do we think about the innumerable moments of violence and loss that leave an imprint to reorganise the flow of the movement away from the mediated gaze of a heightened event?



This all made us ponder about those events whose singularities fade away in the “banality” of everyday violence. How do we think about the innumerable moments of violence and loss that leave an imprint to reorganise the flow of the movement away from the mediated gaze of a heightened event? How do we conceptualise punctuation when the moments that constitute a turning-point and the banal co-exist in the flow of the movement? We tend to think of events as occurrences that generate a rupture “in the moment” and as temporal landmarks that punctuate history and reassemble the relation between past and future. Events are trapped in this tension - terminological, conceptual, and strategic - between the occurrence and the outcome. They are bounded by the histories that provide the conditions of possibility for them, the potential futures that they suggest, envision and prefigure, and the actual future against which they lose or acquire significance and ultimately their status as events.

Conclusion

In this piece, we sought to problematize the concept of the rupturing political event by highlighting the complex temporal rhythms of political movements. What emerges are the distinctions between how our interlocutors, global narratives, and we as ethnographers recognise what constitutes an event of political significance and a historical break. Activists often frame their own political engagements as “event-like” and highlight specific moments of heightened participation as particularly important for their struggles. They bring up the past as a way of framing these moments within a specific historical narrative, punctuating certain events whose singularity, texture and affective powers build up the momentum of the political movement. Signs referencing the past and re-readings of historical events are used strategically to gain support and expose the shortcomings of the present. In this way, in moments of radical political engagement, the past is rendered fluid, open to reconfiguration, and reinterpretation as certain historical events grow in intensity and importance.

We are subjected to the temporalities of the social movements we engage in and document.



Our reflections have explored not only the tension between the sense of rupture that comes with moments of heightened political engagement but also the interpretations of its significance that can only come in the aftermath. As researchers, we must determine how far back we are willing and able to go and which moments to focus on in order to contextualize present-day struggles; we are also bound to establish a temporal endpoint for our inquiry and fieldwork. When writing to be read, we have to choose the moments we decide to retell and those we keep to our fieldwork journals. More crucially, we are subjected to the temporalities of the social movements we engage in and document. It is the process of travelling through the paradoxes of our ethnographic engagement with a social movement and in the making of our writings that our identities as ethnographers are shaped, underlining the politics of such engagements.

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Image: Photo by [Glen Ardi](#) on [Unsplash](#).

Defiant Engagements

Valentina Zagaria
September, 2021



Working in political environments that run counter to our personal values and commitments, and with people who are challenging these contexts in different ways, led us to think about “defiance” as both a common aspect of our ethnographic encounters and as a research ethos. We are four ethnographers who live in, work from, and move between Germany, Greece, Italy, Lebanon, Tunisia, Turkey, and the United Kingdom. Here, we draw from our experiences and fieldwork around the Mediterranean, in conversation with training and thinking developed in universities based in northern Europe, to explore the significance of



defiance for ethnographic endeavours.

By this, we do not mean to imply that “defiant engagements” within and against political mainstreams are region-specific, nor that defiance is an exclusively left-wing tool. Indeed, at the *Reflections on Political Engagement* workshop where we met, “defiance” permeated life from Kashmir to Algeria, from Thailand to Ecuador. So did rising authoritarianism, xenophobia, nationalistic and identitarian politics, and counterrevolutionary turns. In our field sites and in places from which we write, teach, and reflect, these contexts have shaped the political and ethnographic possibilities available to us. While recognising that populist and far-right groups also often position themselves as defiant and anti-establishment, this post focuses on some of the different ways in which the people we work with (and so too ethnographers) defy oppressive conditions and try to challenge injustice. What follows is the result of our discussions on what defiance means, when, where, and how we encounter it, and how it can be mobilised methodologically and ethically.

Encountering defiance in the field

We approach “defiance” as part of both ordinary, quotidian politics and heightened moments of personal and collective political engagement. We ask, who defines a single act or a long-term commitment as defiant? And how can we engage ethnographically with (extra-)ordinary stances that run counter to prevailing legal and societal conditions?

Who defines a single act or a long-term commitment as defiant?

Valentina’s research participants’ defiance of the European Union’s border and its co-enforcement by Tunisian authorities was both manifest in everyday life and in specific events. Mothers who advised sons about whether to do the *harga* – the “burning” of the border by crossing the Mediterranean Sea without documents – did so knowing that they were defying laws imposing unjust restrictions on their social and physical mobility. Moments of concentrated activity, meanwhile,



included local fishermen organising to prevent the docking in Tunisia of an [anti-immigrant boat](#) run by European far-right groups. Many of the people she came to know in south-eastern Tunisia, however, did not necessarily view this spectrum of actions as part of a broader politics of border “resistance” or “struggle”, and analysed their situation with regards to borders and mobility in a variety of (at times contrasting) ways.

Some, such as the fishermen, did think of their protest efforts as politically driven, leading them to collaborate on occasion with members of wider trans-Mediterranean networks of activists. Yet most young men and their families regarded the “burning” of the border as a necessity, and their defiance of EU travel regulations as a self-evident fact. Approaching the range of ways in which people live with the EU border as “defiant” helped Valentina identify commonalities between different people’s understandings of the border and of their actions and commitments without assigning a particular political colour, agenda, or uniformity to them. It also allowed her to inscribe herself within this array of defiant engagements as someone politically and ethically opposed to the EU border while acknowledging and staying true to the diversity of critiques that differently positioned interlocutors held regarding borders in her analysis.

Defiance can therefore be claimed by many different actors within the same field and at different political and social scales.

In contrast to Valentina’s context, Birgan’s research participants in Istanbul defined themselves overtly as defiant, political, and oppositional during a two-year-long state of emergency that blurred the boundaries between the everyday and the exceptional. The period of Birgan’s fieldwork as an activist-ethnographer, between the summer of 2016 and 2018, was a time of generalised defiance in Turkey that saw both sides of the political spectrum engaging in actions running “counter”, albeit for different political ends and at different scales. Right-wing followers of Erdogan defied the factions within the military who partook in the coup attempt; purged teachers and academics defied the laws by decree that led



to the purges; the democratic public defied changes in the constitution that bolstered Erdogan's powers; Kurds defied the curfews in Kurdistan, the state of emergency, and the state-appointed mayors that removed elected officials in Kurdish cities; hunger strikers defied death to live in a just society; women, workers, and minorities defied the deepening of patriarchal, exploitative, racist, and authoritarian politics; and Erdogan himself defied national resistance against his government's increasing repression, defying international pressures and the constitution. Defiance can therefore be claimed by many different actors within the same field and at different political and social scales. As an act of opposing, resisting, rejecting - of saying "no" - we can see that the left does not have a monopoly over defiance: quite the contrary.

While keeping this plurality of defiant positions in mind as the context within which Turkish left-wing activists operated, the "no" campaign that Birgan became part of was constructed through the terms of defying injustice, disobedience, resistance, and solidarity, emerging from spontaneous individual gestures in the everyday to collectively organised acts of resistance, and everything in between. Local "no" assemblies were established to campaign against the amendments proposed by the 2017 constitutional referendum that aimed, and eventually (undemocratically) succeeded, to institutionalise an increasingly authoritarian regime in Turkey. Under these circumstances, the existence, name, and activities of the assemblies encapsulated the nature of their defiant engagement with authoritarian politics. Their commitment to democratic, egalitarian, inclusive politics defied their political setting. Simple activities like organising and attending protests, in this context, became acts of defiance-as-refusal.



But defiance can also manifest in paralysing inaction. Veronica's experience of defiance-as-refusal arose from her encounter with the discourse of the "European Refugee Crisis" on returning to London in September 2015 from her fieldwork with a Syrian revolutionary community exiled in Lebanon. She was not an outsider to this "crisis". In Lebanon, many of her friends had decided to risk their lives to leave. In the school in rural Lebanon where she worked, images of those who left circulated through social media - such as the death of the toddler Alan Kurdi - reminding everyone of present hardships. European media narratives about the "crisis", depicting the spectacle of refugees as victims fleeing war, constituted a distortion of what Veronica had learnt - the dissonance between these parallel realities causing her anger and confusion. When a documentary filmmaker asked her to put him in touch with someone who went through the so-called "Balkan route" to get to Europe she said no, refusing to participate in the production of yet another portrait of the suffering refugee. Her refusal was an act of defiance vis-à-vis a European narrative obsessed with victimhood that erases the lived experiences of political struggles and their contradictions. And yet, how



can this case of inaction be reconciled with her own work of representing (for a European academic audience) the life of the community she lived with, whilst doing justice to their viewpoints and predicaments? The challenge of integrating these two aspects became an intrinsic part of the writing of the ethnography itself.

The ethnographer and defiance

Veronica felt further discomfort with the concept of “victimhood, and a political economy of suffering tied to humanitarian discourses. Its paradigms clashed with the Syrian community’s articulation of life in exile in Lebanon. Remaining faithful to the community resulted in Veronica’s writing moving away from the figure of the victim as the ultimate political subject. Yet, certain fears and doubts remained. Is the possibility of writing a different story, and the political value of writing such a story starting in Syria rather than in Lebanon – and so starting with revolution rather than displacement – an act of defiance per-se? While rejecting the reification of the humanitarian subject, finding new words and narrative styles to represent a revolutionary exiled community encountering humanitarianism became also an exercise in defying a position of neutrality for the ethnographer and the temporal and geographical distance between “the field” and “the desk”. Defiance here involves accepting the ambivalent nature of political struggles while also taking sides, even in the act of writing.

Defiance can also be directed at dominant understandings of ethnographic fieldwork. Birgan’s fieldwork was marked by the classic dilemma of the participant-observer: the difficulty of balancing one’s participant self and observer self, the roles of activist/friend and researcher/academic. Birgan oscillated between listening as a fellow activist and listening as a researcher for whom the conversations, emotions, interactions, and silences were data to be gathered. In these instances, she set boundaries between her different roles and refused to record some gatherings which were in effect the extensions of her field site – like when the assembly moved to grab a few drinks after a long meeting. Although Birgan learned from, and therefore indirectly used, these



interactions, they never found their way into her field notes as data. This establishing of boundaries was an ethical choice for her: in this way, her role as an activist/friend was not mixed with the more instrumental approach that the researcher might have while collecting data. This was her way of more honestly and openly being a part of the assemblies.

In contrast to Birgan's and Veronica's stances, Evdokia, reflecting back on her time as a Master's student, did not feel able to take a defiant stance with regards to ethnographic fieldwork and knowledge production. In 2019, Evdokia set out for fieldwork in Megali Panagia, a village in Northern Greece which was divided over the opening of an open-pit gold mine close by. Before her arrival, she was warned about the civil war-like situation in the aftermath of the mining conflict. Yet she persisted in pursuing her initial research question of examining the future visions of locals from both sides of the clash, as she aspired to develop a well-grounded, holistic, and "objective" understanding of the mining conflict. Her intentions crashed, however, due to the time constraints and the precarity that invariably burdens student research.

Even though her "hang-outs" with the members of the anti-mining movement could have given away her political opposition to the mine to other locals, she hesitated to take an open position. This also resulted in her making a choice for a more "balanced" analysis by neutralizing the conflict in the act of writing. Her brief fieldwork proved insufficient for engaging equally with both sides and finding a way to manoeuvre between the tensions regarding her research objectives and her political beliefs - although, as a home ethnographer, she was already familiar with the conflict's context. This example suggests that sometimes compliance can be the only way to meet research objectives, and hints at the fact that the temporality of the researcher's career imposes a hierarchy on the extent to which one can act in defiance vis-à-vis one's fieldwork context. The plethora of positionalities we inhabit in the field ultimately impact on the possibilities (and limits) of politically engaged research, and thus blur the lines between defiance and compliance.



The temporality of the researcher's career imposes a hierarchy on the extent to which one can act in defiance vis-à-vis one's fieldwork context.

Conclusion

In our experiences of doing ethnography in politically-charged field sites, and through our different positionalities - ethnographer, friend, local, foreigner, writer, activist, and more - we all encountered defiance, although its forms, goals, agents, and content differed widely. Defiance - collective or individual; articulated as politically-motivated or as a necessity; carried out to challenge mainstreams in the field or within academic circles - is a puncturing of small holes in canvasses of power. In our current times, marked by the multiplication of populist leaders and authoritarian tendencies, the allure and uses of defiant postures, and who claims them for what purposes, become important questions not only for politicians and activists, but also for researchers.

Defiance - collective or individual; articulated as politically-motivated or as a necessity; carried out to challenge mainstreams in the field or within academic circles - is a puncturing of small holes in canvasses of power.

In this post we have shown how each of us thought with and engaged in defiance as we went about ethnographic research and writing. Across our different roles in the field and beyond we tested the edges of ethnographic and academic expectations. We are working within ethnography, but sometimes it is not a comfortable skin; it becomes constraining, so we try to stretch it. Ultimately, our ethnographic practices are entangled with the political contexts that make defiance an intrinsic part of our interlocutors' lives, circularly and organically moulding our understanding of everyday and heightened forms of political engagement.

Image: Photo by [Renee Fisher](#) on [Unsplash](#) (Cropped)



Political Introduction

Engagements:

Fuad Musallam
September, 2021



Ethnography and Political Engagement

This *Thematic Thread* emerged from a workshop organised (online) at the LSE in February 2021, entitled “In the moment and after the fact: Ethnographic



reflections on political engagement”. The aim of the workshop was to investigate how moments of collective action and rupture are experienced and understood, and what is made of them in their aftermath. We wished to reflect on the ways in which popular movements and collective organising continue to be generative of political experiments and imaginaries, and how these moments reverberate in more long-term projects. It brought together ethnographers from across anthropology, sociology, performance studies, and political science, working in South America, Europe, the Middle East, North Africa, and South and South-East Asia. We were struck by the urgency with which certain themes constantly reappeared in our different field-sites, collaborative practices, and in our discussions across the workshop. What became evident by the time of our last roundtable was a desire to explore these exchanges further through collectively written pieces, which we are now sharing as this week-long series of posts. This introduction will draw out some of the main topics that emerged both during the workshop and as part of our collective writing endeavour, which we hope will open up further conversations with others wrestling with similar questions.

Defiance and Opposition

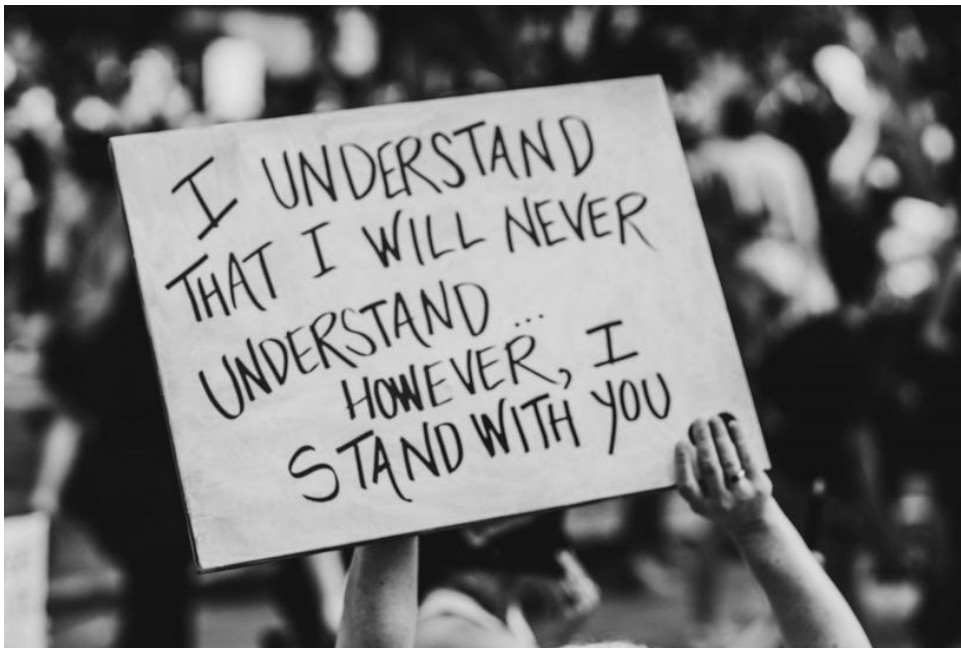
Across the various regions in which we work, we found ourselves discussing how rising authoritarianism, identity politics, and counterrevolutionary times shape political and ethnographic possibility, particularly when there is a commitment, on the part of researchers and their interlocutors (here, activists), to defy the broader political context. From Erdogan’s constitutional power-grab in Turkey, to rising neo-fascism in Greece, with revolution turning into civil war in Syria, and repressive tendencies on the rise from the UK to Ecuador - often exposed and exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic - what do ethnographic and political engagements look like when the political tide flows against them? On such topics activist and academic thinking alike can lapse into melancholy or determinism, or perhaps fall back onto the view that carving out a living in the margins is the best that can be attained. What was notable from our conversations was that working in close proximity with political movements and with individuals crafting corners



of liveability in oppressive contexts provides ethnographers, whatever their discipline, with a particular access to the hopes, aspirations, and creative capacity alive in collective social and political action. Our long-term engagements mean that the story does not begin and end with a certain political event or movement cycle; rather, we try to understand what might continue - thus disrupting binary understandings of movements as resulting in either success or failure. As we explore in the first post in this series, *Defiant Engagements*, defiance can rather be understood as puncturing small holes into a wide canvas, through both quotidian acts and more explicitly political gatherings around specific endeavours.

Chronological time does not constitute the backdrop upon which we tell the story, then, but rather becomes the medium through which political meaning, capacity, and possibility are enacted.

The temporalisations of political events and their flow are not taken for granted by movement participants. The creation of (or combatting against) the production of a moment in time as particularly “momentous”, or as understood as being part of a longer trajectory of struggle, are political projects in and of themselves, ones that often clash with how commentators of various sorts would mark them. As this series’ second post *Punctuation and Flow* shows, things can look very different indeed when we focus on temporalising as a political problem (for our interlocutors) and an ethnographic problem (for us). In the post we focus on how certain moments of heightened political engagement amplify the flow of any movement, and how interpretations of their significance emerge and become contested in their aftermath. Questions surrounding “punctuation” and “rupture” enable the defining of political events, but also have implications for our ethnographic engagements and analysis. Chronological time does not constitute the backdrop upon which we tell the story, then, but rather becomes the medium through which political meaning, capacity, and possibility are enacted.



[Photo](#) by [Zoe VandeWater](#) on [Unsplash](#)

Sometimes there *is* a great sense of finality to an action or movement cycle, as identified by activists and participants themselves. From our examples, we might point to the 2017 constitutional referendum in Turkey, which ended (in that particular form) for activists with the “yes” vote winning, or the election in Greece of the right-wing party New Democracy in June 2019, whose support for investment in a mine in Northern Greece ultimately foreclosed local residents’ hopes to sabotage it. Then again, with reference to some other of our collective research settings, how else to account for the return to the streets in Thailand or Kashmir, or the forms of solidarity organising we have seen in the aftermath of the ongoing ethnic cleansing of Sheikh Jarrah (East Jerusalem), or the electoral successes in Chile, where against all predictions the people elected a constitutional assembly composed largely of leftist independent candidates? Bleakness can always be found, but so too can things working out - all successful mobilisations are built on the back of defeats, setbacks, seemingly-mortal wounds. Put slightly differently: activism fails, until it succeeds. Determining the beginnings and endings of movements, and their successes and failures, is never straightforward, nor can this temporal bracketing and merit-evaluation ever avoid



political motivations and effects. As engaged ethnographers, we need an ability to account for this as part of reflecting on political engagement. Both ethically and politically, we feel compelled to adopt an [affirmative ethnographic stance](#) that takes seriously the myriad ways in which violence, difficulties and failures make up political struggles while also highlighting the potentialities and political imaginaries that these enact and give rise to. This sentiment permeates our ethnographic engagements and our collective writing.

Bleakness can always be found, but so too can things working out - all successful mobilisations are built on the back of defeats, setbacks, seemingly-mortal wounds.

What remains, in one form or another

Our two following posts explore critical affirmation as an activist and research approach in tandem with what those engaged in political movements do with the past in the present for the future. We found ourselves reflecting on the resources made use of in political engagements and, leading on from this, to the material and immaterial production that routinely takes shape in such spaces. Here are just a few examples of both, taken directly from the broader pool of ethnographic cases that animated our workshop discussions. Material production: a cage built in effort to make visitors sympathise with the predicament of the inhabitants of a marginalised Turkish Cypriot village; Scottish National Party activists prefiguring an independent Scotland by creating new banknotes; Tunisian fishermen crafting multi-lingual banners to hang on their boats in protest against the docking of an anti-migrant European fascist boat. Immaterial production: solidarity networks mobilising against evictions and Bedouin village destruction in the Naqab (Palestine/Israel); the [Kaleidos](#) research team's production of a collaborative digital platform to track violent deaths in Ecuador; the co-creation of [soundwalks](#) with Filipino migrant workers making their presences, personal trajectories, and collective organising visible in London and Beirut; collective archiving projects aimed at tracing and salvaging a history of mobilising among a migrant



population plagued by incarceration and deportation in Lebanon.

To make sense of what remains, we turned to the modalities and conditions of possibility for what has come before to relate to what comes next. As the discussion in our third post *Artefacts and Repertoires* shows, material traces are sometimes tended to - curated, even - by political movements for future action, while at other times they are destroyed during an action, either by creators themselves or by their opponents. But materiality is not the only thing that (can) remain, with a performative, embodied "repertoire" being a key avenue of knowledge transmission and network building. This immaterial production has transnational repercussions as tactics, discourses and practices travel across space and borders to nurture new ideas and practices, not only in our ethnographic way of thinking about political struggles, but also in other movements. The transnational nature of anti-establishment movements is acknowledged by activists. To give just one current example, witness the sharing of tactics, with attendant material production, in placards from Colombia urging "*Resiste como Palestina, lucha como Colombia, vota como Chile*" (Resist like Palestine, fight like Colombia, vote like Chile). What remains is always unstable and never predetermined, and can give birth to new modes of acting, seeing and engaging with the political in all its forms, including, for instance, the writing of ethnography.



Photo by authors

Staying with material and immaterial production, we were struck in our collective conversations by the manifold things that actors do with what remains to construct compelling narratives: it is about the story that is told, how different elements can be brought together, how people can feel part of a longer history of struggle and a wide network of like-minded people. How, then, are those involved in collective political action crafting, using, and relating to “facts” and “evidence” in order to pursue their political aims, often in the midst of competing “truths” and evidence-making projects (driven by governments, the police, parties)? In our fourth post, *Facts and Evidence*, we complicate the politics of evidence making by offering examples of relatively successful and unsuccessful attempts to constitute evidence for particular political ends and demands. Together, they offer an entry point for understanding the ethnographic entanglements behind “truth making” in our various contexts, and how these processes are deeply intertwined with the social, political, and economic instabilities that our interlocutors face. By tracking the contingent relations behind the production of evidence, we illustrate the complexities of building “truths” or “facts” in our various settings.

It is about the story that is told, how different elements can be brought



together, how people can feel part of a longer history of struggle and a wide network of like-minded people.

Collaboration(s)

With a view to methodological considerations, we spent some time as a collective trying to think about how to deal with non-presence in the field, particularly in heightened moments of political action. As we discuss in our fifth post, *Digital Engagements*, there are particular frustrations and anxieties associated with “not being there” when flash points occur — protests, evictions, revolutions and uprisings — especially if one has been a long-term participant observer. Like many [others](#) since the Covid-19 pandemic began we reflected on the possibilities and shortcomings of digital ethnography, but with particular reference to political engagement: what is made visible or invisible, exaggerated or understated online. There are lessons to be learned here from activists, particularly bearing in mind the hierarchies and inequalities involved in the division of labour and diversity of roles between those on the ground and those who are not. Media, communication and press can (and often can only) be done away from the “frontline” and the immediacy of having to tend to other more urgent tasks, and coordinating actions are often better done far away from rapid censorship, surveillance and network cuts. These are necessary collaborations between actors with different positions in relation to the engagement, each with roles to play. The ethnographer’s role in these contexts can and should be negotiated as part of these broader considerations.

Questions surrounding collaborative endeavours become all the more salient in times of restricted international mobility. What is more, even when there is not a pandemic occurring, being *there* can be impossible. In Algeria, for instance, foreign academics were not allowed a visa to enter the country during the 2019-20 Hirak protest movement, while more generally it is challenging for scholars from the Global South to obtain visa access to carry out fieldwork in the Global North. Political engagements therefore have a way of practically engaging



the different levels of “presence” and “remoteness” involved in working collaboratively and politically towards shared goals. Rather than solely reckoning with the new post-Covid moment, these can force us to learn from grassroots mobilising to think collaboratively about the different possible parts of “research” and “engagement” and the problematic aspects of these endeavours that need to be refuted and opposed.

Thinking about ethnographic engagements and the material conditions and division of labour involved in collective political action is also another way of considering an age-old problem for anthropologists: that of “giving back”. Here we simply suggest that political involvement with one’s interlocutors offers a particular valence to these reflections, a direction and directedness to what can be done, through examples of providing advocacy avenues and specific technical capacities, or being co-involved at different stages of movements and amplifying messages. Explicitly collaborative projects with our interlocutors were also part and parcel of many of our research practices. Developing more responsive forms of scholarship that directly relate local realities to global struggles ranged from the creation of soundwalks, archives, online databases, theatre performances, and visual stimuli for collective experiments and imaginations. In keeping with our affirmative but critical approach, the discussion of such projects in the closing section on *Collaboration and Creativity* does not shy away from their pitfalls and difficulties, but does gesture towards what possibilities they open up, nevertheless.

Thinking about ethnographic engagements and the material conditions and division of labour involved in collective political action is also another way of considering an age-old problem for anthropologists: that of “giving back”.

What also arose from our collective thinking and writing is the open-ended and questioning tonality of this week’s six posts. Our pieces draw on specific ethnographic examples, but are themselves a collective processing of this material, thereby forcing us to do justice to particular situations while drawing



out their broader significance. As the reader will hopefully intuit, the ethnographic material brims with collaboration among those involved in long-term political commitments and more punctuated actions to create openings. Indeed, political engagements are almost always wilful, collaborative projects of one sort or another - they require people to come together in pursuit of something. Sometimes this is explicit in the form of collective actions and endeavours, with different groups coming together in solidarity, and producing something new from there. Sometimes it is less explicit, but is there regardless through slow, daily acts of care. In conveying our thoughts in a collective voice, we strove to preserve the uniqueness of particular struggles whilst highlighting the importance of thinking and writing together as a political endeavour in and of itself, one that perhaps defies those institutional and academic limitations imposing and valuing more individualistic modes of knowledge production. In the current political moment, then, take this collective writing project as an attempt to think our intellectual aspirations through the prism of our political engagements.

In conveying our thoughts in a collective voice, we strove to preserve the uniqueness of particular struggles whilst highlighting the importance of thinking and writing together as a political endeavour in and of itself.

[Featured Image](#) by [Dan Meyers](#) on [Unsplash](#)

AWAY FROM KEYBOARD

Allegra

September, 2021



Dear Allies - readers, authors, reviewers, all,

Allegra is away from her keyboard right now and cannot *possibly* be made to return before late August. Maybe September. Who knows these things. She is how she is.

...

While we are away, please feel free to continue sending us [submissions](#), comments, and questions, but do not expect any quick responses.

Also, you might enjoy catching up with some stuff from our massive pile of recent



offerings, be they the innovative #resonancecasts, the many contributions to “[Today’s Totalitarianism](#)“, the helpful book reviews or the various one-shots - but if you find the time to instead slow down, read a novel, skip some stones, that sort of stuff, that might even be better.

Oh, and *if* we came back from our break and would happen to have gained about 9 followers on [Twitter](#), why, that sure would be nice.

Take care, you all, and see you on the flip-side.

Featured image: personal archive Felix Girke.

War between good citizens and bad citizens: tools for today’s totalitarianism in Brazil and the Philippines

Cecilia Lero
September, 2021



On May 6, 2021, on the heels of Brazil's deadliest month since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, special police forces in Rio de Janeiro killed 28 people in the urban community of Jacarezinho. It was the deadliest single police operation in the city's history - quite a feat considering the long history of militarized policing and violent encounters between state security forces and criminal groups. The political implications of the operation are difficult to ignore. The day before the operation, President Jair Bolsonaro met with the newly-installed Rio governor and ally, Cláudio Castro. The month of April had been devastating for Bolsonaro. A wave of high approval ratings had fizzled out amidst a combination of dwindling Covid social assistance payments and increasing inflation. Record Covid deaths, hospital overcrowding, the emergence of a new Covid variant in the state of Manaus, and overall federal government denialism and mismanagement of the crisis led critics to label Bolsonaro a perpetrator of genocide. The label



appeared to be sticking. Like other authoritarian populist presidents, and the Philippines' Rodrigo Duterte in particular, Bolsonaro has defined himself as the security president. He strives to personify the “strict father” that protects the people from a pervasive national threat, even if this means extreme action and violating democratic norms. Yet, he was an utter failure at protecting people from Covid.

We do not know if Bolsonaro and Castro discussed, or if Bolsonaro incentivized, the operation. Nevertheless, the operation played, at least in the short term, to Bolsonaro's favor. The indignation over Covid took a temporary backseat in public debate while one of the starkest ideological schisms in Brazil grabbed attention: the schism between those who see the police as soldiers in a war protecting “good citizens” against the incredibly dangerous and ever-present threat of the “bandido”, and those who see the police as a largely corrupt institution that is overly excited to kill poor, overwhelmingly black, male slum-residents, with little regard for whether those residents are actually involved in crime.

Bolsonaro and Duterte have focused especially on the poor, male urban slum resident, building on a class, and in Brazil, racial narrative that equates him with immorality, indolence, and crime.

The narrative power of this contrived “war” between good and bad citizens helped propel Bolsonaro to power. His image as the ultra-macho commander of security forces “cleansing” a Brazil in a crisis of “immorality” and “threats” is exactly what he would want to replace the headlines dominated by Covid. Similarly, the bedrock of Filipino President Rodrigo Duterte's political image has been a violent “war” on suspected drug users and sellers. This so-called war has also been his most consistent policy measure, in terms of both rhetoric and implementation. Those suspected of using or selling drugs are calculatingly depicted as immoral threats who will inevitably destroy the country if they are not eliminated. According to Duterte, the drug problem is the immediate existential crisis faced by the Philippines. Since he took office in 2016, an estimated 30,000



overwhelmingly poor, male urban slum residents have been killed in police and police-supported operations. Despite the majority of the population conceding that they do not believe the police only kill in self-defense (as the government claims), the so-called war against drugs remains highly popular.

A defining characteristic of the populist style is to identify and otherize a group in society, constructing a distinction between “the legitimate people” and “the enemy.” While the literature on populism has focused on defining the “elite” as the enemy, Bolsonaro and Duterte (as well as others in their authoritarian-leaning clan such as Trump, Modi, and Erdogan) have also conspicuously targeted and dehumanized groups that have been historically marginalized and abused by the state, thus taking advantage of already-existing stigmatization and hate. Bolsonaro and Duterte have focused especially on the poor, male urban slum resident, building on a class, and in Brazil, racial narrative that equates him with immorality, indolence, and crime. Urban slum residents are central to the economic lifeblood of Philippine and Brazilian cities. The middle and upper classes need their labor but must keep their humanity at a distance lest they socially ascend and displace the middle and upper classes’ from their exclusive privilege. (Or, perhaps, the middle and upper classes begin to feel guilty about their exploitation and the squalid conditions in which they live.) State security forces are already experts at targeting these residents, especially the male residents who are more easily portrayed as dangerous predators that must be subdued by force. Specialized militarized police units were deployed to urban slum areas during both countries’ dictatorships. Later, the international “War on Drugs” provided ready-made packages of funding, security training, and media talking points to convince the population that urban slums are synonymous with drug traffic and criminality.

By no means do I intend to brush aside the existence of criminal organizations, especially in Brazil. They do exist, they do battle police, sometimes they terrorize the communities in which they operate, and sometimes they provide positive services that the state does not. There are ways the state could demonstrate that it is serious about dealing with organized drug crime. It could distinguish



between high-ranking criminal organization members and a residents who just happen to live among them. It could study effective policy approaches to sustainably deal with organized crime instead of a shoot first and ask questions later approach. It could raid upscale events and clubs where the drugs flow freely but are frequented by affluent and whiter audiences. Yet, these are options that neither interest nor are politically useful for Bolsonaro's and Duterte's style of rule.

When a nation is at war, everything else becomes secondary. Respecting human rights and democratic principles are not a priority.

What is useful for Bolsonaro and Duterte is stoking fear to justify their rule by crisis government. The middle and upper classes must not be allowed to believe that the threats to their interests can be solved by well-thought-out policy choices and targeted security interventions. Rather, they must feel that threat is constantly lurking around the corner, and that anyone from the majority poor and, in Brazil, black population could potentially be an existential threat. This fear and uncertainty justify steps by the Bolsonaro and Duterte regimes to not only disregard human rights, but also to weaken democratic institutions and to perform poorly in terms of basic management and governance.

When a nation is at war, everything else becomes secondary. Respecting human rights and democratic principles are not a priority. Beyond that, however, both Bolsonaro and Duterte have effectively portrayed democratic institutions as part of the problem that makes government ineffective at dealing with the existential threat of the "bandido". In this way, they both benefit from and exacerbate general feelings that the Brazilian and Philippines political systems are hopelessly corrupt and inept. The Jacarezinho massacre was not just another violent police operation, it was also a direct challenge to the Supreme Court, which has repeatedly pushed back against Bolsonaro's desired policy measures. The operation in Jacarezinho occurred despite a Supreme Court order banning police interventions in Rio's poor neighborhoods during the pandemic except in



exceptional circumstances. The day before the operation, Bolsonaro declared that he could issue an order nullifying governors' Covid restrictions and that the Supreme Court could not question him. Following the massacre, Bolsonaro congratulated the Rio police, blatantly celebrating their defiance of the court order. Similarly, when Philippine Supreme Court Chief Justice Maria Lourdes Sereno questioned the validity of a presidential "watch list" of supposedly drug-involved judges (that included judges that had long been deceased) and challenged the imposition of martial law in the Mindanao region, Duterte instructed the Solicitor General and his congressional allies to pursue impeachment, ultimately leading to her removal. When Philippine Senator Leila DeLima opened an official inquiry into human rights violations related to the drug war, Duterte instructed the Solicitor General to arrest her on trumped-up charges of being a drug lord herself. In all cases, weakening or eliminating the institutions that supposedly stand in the way of the president's righteous war against crime is a thin veil for increasing power in the executive and rejecting democratic checks and balances.

In both Bolsonaro's Brazil and Duterte's Philippines, ostentatious violence against poor urban residents is a political tool much more than a security policy. The police special forces that enter Brazil's poor communities with tanks and automatic rifles as well as the bodies wrapped in packing tape that Philippine police leave on city streets are performances that send a message. To the poor communities, the message is to know your place and not question authority. To the middle and upper classes, the message is that these threats are everywhere and we are fighting a war to eliminate them on your behalf. This pervasive fear is the key to their political styles, as well as the most effective distraction from governing inconsistencies and failures. Breaking the spell requires seeing beyond oversimplified and romanticized narratives between absolute good and absolute evil. It requires confronting these countries complicated problems of class, race and crime. It also requires governments and policies that value solutions, not the fight.

Featured image by [laura adai](#) on [Unsplash](#).



ResonanceCast #2: Incitement and Coups

Jastinder Kaur
September, 2021



Podcast with Jastinder Kaur and Daniel



White, moderated by Ian M. Cook

Allegra Lab · ResonanceCast 2: Incitement And Coups

Referenced articles:

[Towards an Anthropology of Coups](#), by Jastinder Kaur

[Incitement! Incremental Theory for an Imminent Fascism](#), by Daniel White

About the ResonanceCast

ResonanceCast is a new multimodal series that seeks to tease out timely shared concerns. After their articles have been published on Allegra Lab, we invite two authors to come together to discuss each other's texts and the wider-ranging issues both speak to. Their conversation is moderated by someone from the Allegra Lab editorial collective. We hope to continue this emergent, generative and dialectic format into the future!

Ethnographic Film at the Crossroads

Christos Varvantakis
September, 2021



1. **Ethnographic film is blooming**

Ethnographic film, however loosely defined, is blooming. While to track and map the entire production of ethnographic film appears next-to impossible, I want to offer a quick survey of this beautiful and plural thing we call 'ethnographic film'. With my wonderful colleagues at the Nordic Anthropological Film Association, we recently attempted to map the current relevant educational programmes and film festivals worldwide for the newly launched [NAFA website](#). Our chart is by no means definite; indeed, it is a work-in-progress, but as it stands, we tracked down 27 educational programmes and laboratories in visual anthropology and ethnographic film. This is an impressive number. As the vast majority of such study programmes involve the production of an ethnographic film as part of the



assessment requirements (for instance as part of an MA thesis), this offers a sense of the sheer volume of production worldwide, stemming just from institutional/educational contexts.

At the same time, we need to remain conscious and critical of the geographical distribution of such study programmes. As one would imagine, most of these *are* in Europe and North America.

Another way to approach the growth in ethnographic film production is to look at ethnographic film festivals. With my colleagues at NAFA, we have also charted ethnographic film festivals around the world, and we have found 24 active festivals - again, we don't think that this number is exhaustive.

It's even more interesting to look at the appeal such film festivals have. The festival I work at, the [Athens Ethnographic Film Festival](#), last year received about 350 submissions. The [Jean Rouch Film Festival](#), a major European event, has received the stunning number of 900 films for its last edition^[1]. The growth in submissions for the Ethnocineca film festival alone demonstrates how the field is blooming: Ethnocineca, which had 650 submissions for its [2021 edition](#), received 550 for its previous edition in 2020, and 500 in 2019; this change is an indication of both the festival's growth and outreach, as much as of how many film makers hope to have their films screened. Importantly, too, ethnographic film festivals have also seen their audiences grow significantly in the last few years. I will return to this point and the implications of festivals having gone online in 2020 and 2021 later.

Beyond a numerical appreciation of the ethnographic film bloom in recent years, I want to address the qualities of contemporary ethnographic films.

We have seen amazing films, as members of audiences, as educators, as curators.

Intimate, sincere, insightful films, which carefully and sensibly attempt to communicate the details of the human condition.



Films that amplify the voices of people that would have otherwise been lost in the noise of mainstream film and/or print and broadcast media.

Films rigorously analysing contemporary and pressing social and environmental issues, putting such issues into anthropological perspective and enriching our understanding of such phenomena.

We have seen films that matter, and films that made a difference.

These films have a great appeal to audiences that would not be thought of as typical audiences of ethnographic film.

These films, when presented with care, have a great appeal to audiences that would not be thought of as typical audiences of ethnographic film. Ethnocineca is perhaps a good example of such outreach, having managed to become the major Austrian documentary film festival over the course of 15 years. Similarly, the Athens Ethnographic Film Festival has eventually become the largest documentary film festival in Athens - an *ethnographic* film festival. These are powerful examples to illustrate the impact that ethnographic film has - or can have. Many of us have been advocating this for years: To better use the potential of film, the potential of audiovisual compositions

... to communicate anthropological knowledge far and wide,

... to put issues into perspective, local or global,

... to nourish critical thinking,

... to shed light on the unseen, and to converse with those whose voices, gestures, and practices would typically not find their way to wider audiences in ways that preserve their full humanity. And this potential is real.

2. But what happens with all these ethnographic films?

But the state of ethnographic film circulation today is not that bright - but rather



grim, even. As mentioned earlier, the vast majority of study programmes in visual anthropology as well as the main dissemination platforms are in Europe and in North America. This raises the issue of the dynamics of representation - *who is telling whose story?* - and more and more festival curators are engaging and confronting these issues in meaningful ways, as in the [example of the curation of the recent RAI film festival](#), or the work that is being done in Ethnocineca. But there remains a lot to be done.

So what are the actual possibilities for the distribution, the circulation, the screenings of ethnographic films? How does this blooming production that I have outlined find its audiences beyond the occasional festival? Alternatively: How does an ethnographic film find a space in which audiences can find it? Where does this unique body of knowledge end up?

Ethnographic film festivals are central platforms for the promotion and circulation of ethnographic films. The great rise in film submissions over the last years also (necessarily) translates to a corresponding alarmingly rising number of rejections, too. I mentioned earlier that, for instance, Ethnocineca received 650 films this year. Of these, 52 films were included in this year's programme. This translates to an approximate acceptance rate of 1 in 12 films. For the [German International Ethnographic Film Festival](#), the acceptance rates between 2016 and today range from 1 in 9 to 1 in 6. Ethnofest has a similar acceptance rate of about 1 in 7 in the last few editions, while the Jean Rouch Film Festival last year accepted one in 18 films[2].

How does this blooming production that I have outlined find its audiences beyond the occasional festival?

While it is disheartening to see how many films are being left out, it's also clear that these platforms - the ethnographic film festivals - are working hard to be inclusive.

Festivals are often running at their maximum capacity, and their organisation and



production involves an immense effort that can rarely be appropriately remunerated, if at all, and are better understood as a 'labour of love'. They, we, are putting great care to do the best we can for the accommodation of as many films, views and voices in our festivals; but given the actual finances and capacities, we can only do *that* much.

...it is disheartening to see how many films are being left out...

Other avenues to distribute films, such as the main ethnographic film distributors, reveal other inherent limitations. For instance, the [available ethnographic film collection of the Royal Anthropological Institute](#), a major distributor, includes a total of 560 films. The catalogue of another major distributor in the field, the [Documentary Educational Resources](#), includes around 850 films. To this collection, the DER added just about 12 films each year over the last few years, and these include both new as well as remastered older films.

Such data are probably good to think with about the state of the ethnographic film circulation. While we cannot draw any definite conclusions yet, they do indicate that the available platforms for the circulation of ethnographic film are not proportional to the growing body of ethnographic film production. *Many more* ethnographic films are being produced than we have outlets for, both in terms of festival audiences and distribution. The ensuing necessary practices of inclusion and exclusion, bound as they are to the available means and resources, contribute to creating a 'canon' - what's in, what's out, what counts and what doesn't. Like much of the neoliberal academy, this set-up has become rather competitive.

This is not the fault of festivals nor existing distributors, who put immense efforts in the screening, promotion, housing and circulation of ethnographic films. There are structural issues that make these processes competitive, but indeed: the odds are not in the film-makers' favour. Caring for the circulation of one's ethnographic film has become an individualist endeavour in an increasingly competitive landscape.



In a world largely driven by neo-liberal market logics, which values antagonism and individualism, highly competitive practices may make sense. But as anthropologists, as co-producers of knowledge, as activists, as teachers and as ethnographic filmmakers, who are given the invaluable gift of insights into people's everyday lives, as well as in possession of methodologies that foreground people's own voices and logics, their hopes and fears: how do we respond to that? Could we perhaps think of more, of other ways for sharing and distributing our films? Could we think of ways to nurture collegiality? Could we collaborate to help ethnographic films reach beyond the audiences that they usually do, or that they can afford to, *today*?

Caring for the circulation of one's ethnographic film has become an individualist endeavour in an increasingly competitive landscape.

The proposition that I put forward in this essay is that to encourage and to support the production of ethnographic films (or other audiovisual works) doesn't suffice if we cannot also find meaningful ways of making sure that these works find an audience and an afterlife - for the public, for the research communities as well as, significantly, for the represented people and *their* communities.

If we, the people who are already convinced of and have been advocating for the use of audio-visual means in ethnographic research and its dissemination, don't do that, then nobody will. Ethnographic films are carriers of valuable knowledge; they involve immense efforts of several people; they involve hope and trust; they involve people who have agreed to be filmed, who may have opened their homes and their hearts, who have had their stories told - for one reason or another. Each of these films, each of these stories is invaluable in its own right.

So what happens to these films? What should happen to that majority of ethnographic films that never end up in the institutional repositories mentioned above? How could they be made accessible instead of gathering dust in departmental shelves and external drives?



3. Beyond antagonism: Some thoughts on what could be (collectively) done.

We should continue to support the existing venues (festivals, networks, distributors) and attempt to imagine and to establish new ones, to reach new audiences. And my strong sense is that we must engage in such endeavours collectively, in facing this issue and in imaging new platforms.

Existing networks, such as the [Visual Anthropology network](#) of the European Association of Social Anthropology, or the [CAFFEE](#) (coordinating ethnographic film festivals in Europe), can play a crucial role in connecting, organising and perhaps re-thinking the ways in which ethnographic films are circulated and shared, or the ways they *could be archived*. But such networks largely rely on goodwill and the passionate work of the people who are involved, and so would require a vast amount of support - and our collective recognition of our responsibility to do what we can.

To preserve this wonderful and immensely growing body of ethnographic films in some kind of archive might be achievable, one that would include meaningful meta-data, and perhaps even the films themselves. How could we use of online platforms and new technologies towards that purpose?

Digital publishing technologies are available, and now well-tested in the light of the events of the last year, when several film festivals have had to go online. Once we get a clear look at the attendance data of ethnographic film festivals that have taken this step to become fully virtual events, we will likely discover an amazing rise in attendance and views.

For instance, the Athens ethnographic film festival, which had an average of about 2.500 views in the years 2018 and 2019, had 7.500 views when it moved online in 2020. The GIEFF between the last physical edition in 2018 and the online edition in 2020 jumped from 3.500 views to almost 13.000. This translates to an average of 226 views per film in the online edition, compared to 66 views per film in the last physical edition in 2018. Similarly, Ethnocineca, which had an



average of about 50 views per film in 2019, when it had to switch to an online programme in 2020, it achieved an impressive average of 125 views per film.

Such data indicate that there is a good potential for films that are offered and contextualised online, as for instance in a film festival environment or in an online journal that publishes films (such as the [Journal of Ethnographic Films](#)), to be actually viewed. So now may be a very appropriate moment to open up a discussion on the potential of an archive of ethnographic films - and on how this could be created across countries, across institutions and structured in ways that would make it inclusive and anti-hierarchical.

This is a complex matter, and we are bound to encounter serious subsequent issues and questions which we'll also need to face; for instance, with regards to access (open-access?), geographical and regional restrictions, attribution, costs etc. These questions come with serious implications not just regarding logistics, but also ethics.

...now may be a very appropriate moment to open up a discussion on the potential of an archive of ethnographic films

Infrastructures that would help document, organise, promote, and perhaps even include parts of the (growing) body of ethnographic film production into a comprehensive archive can only be collectively undertaken, if we care about how ethnographic films might find their audiences, how we will make sure that audiences could find ethnographic films, and how we could create new audiences for ethnographic films.

It is my conviction that a big part of the future of the ethnographic film depends on the collective care we will be putting into such efforts.

Acknowledgements

A previous version of this essay was delivered as the keynote lecture in the



opening of the 15th Ethnocineca International Film Festival, and I am thankful to the festival directors, Marie-Christine Hartig, Martin Lintner and Katja Seidel, for inviting me to open the festival and for providing the space for these ideas to develop. I'm also thankful to Melissa Nolas, Constantinos Diamantis, Kostas Aivaliotis, Alexandra D'Onofrio, Mattijs van de Port, Beate Engelbrecht, Felix Girke and Olena Fedjuk for providing feedback on various versions of this text (including its delivery as a lecture). The theme of this talk has been being inspired by many discussions with ethnographic filmmakers, teachers, researchers and curators. Some of the thoughts in this essay have been brewing since a roundtable organised by Sanderien Verstapen [on ethnographic film distribution](#) that took place last year (Ethnocineca/Distribute 2020 online conference), as well as another [roundtable](#) that I co-conveyed with Sanderien Verstapen more recently in the context of the RAI film festival and conference. I am also thankful to the festival directors of the RAI film festival, Jean Rouch film festival, the Distribute online film festival, the German International Ethnographic film festival, the Documentary Educational Resources and the Journal of Anthropological Films, for sharing their attendance and outreach data, which allowed me to develop the arguments I am making in this essay.

[1] I do not want to claim that all of the films submitted to ethnographic film festivals *are* necessarily ethnographic films. Yet, many (or most) of them do, or could, fit in a broad definition of ethnographic film.

[2] Please note that these data are approximations, and we should be careful before drawing any definite conclusions from these.

[Featured Image](#) by [Kushagra Kevat](#) on [Unsplash](#)



Incitement! Incremental Theory for an Imminent Fascism

Daniel White
September, 2021



The breaching of the US Capitol Building on 6 January 2021 and broadly publicised reactions to it make it clearer than ever: within the newly mediated spheres of American political extremism, we need an incremental more than imminent theory of incitement.

One reason for this is not only because an incremental approach to incitement can illustrate how the conditions for 6 January were set in motion long before the



events of the day, but also because analysing incitement’s incrementalism, as well as its public disavowals, can teach us something about a particular vulnerability to fascism in America. In fact, I think that embedded in both recent and historical deliberations on incitement in American public culture is a key to understanding how fascism is likely to grow in America and why it may be difficult to see until it reaches a tipping point.

Deliberations on incitement in American public culture is a key to understanding how fascism is likely to grow in America and why it may be difficult to see until it reaches a tipping point.

As Sarah Churchwell reminds us, “[all fascism is indigenous](#).” It is less imported than homegrown. This is what makes it hard to discern, as the localness of American fascism—its racism, its libertarianism, its [entertainment value](#)—can render it categorically fuzzy, resistant to “taxonomies” that seek to identify a “fascist minimum” through comparison elsewhere. While scholars may wonder how to measure if we are truly *in it*, the moment of incitement’s realisation seems to sound an alarm. Thus, investigating the incremental nature of incitement may also make visible the slow growth of American fascism by helping us identify its particular themes, its forms of mediation, and the mechanisms of its acceleration. Looking at recent disavowals and historical discussions of incitement is a useful way to do this.

Individualising collective threats

One key theme that dominated disavowals of Trump’s incitement on 6 January was that of individual responsibility. This is represented in certain congressmembers’ analyses of the incursion on the Capitol that argue that “[we are responsible for our own actions, period](#),” and that downplay the “[linkage](#)” between one person’s words and another’s action. These radically individualizing interpretations of a collective problem renders an imminent fascism nearly impossible to identify given its grounding in a resolutely homegrown national narrative. This hypernormalisation of individuality, independence, and personal



autonomy ironically makes for a powerful American nationalism. As a consequence, those stories most often celebrated about individual freedom and fetishised in a sacred First Amendment also obscure the processes of fascism's incremental socialisation.

Radically individualizing interpretations of a collective problem renders an imminent fascism nearly impossible to identify.

Consequently, in response to these conditions of ideological irreverence toward socialisation, incitement can become overcharged with individual agency at precisely the time it is called to serve as a legal litmus test for key concerns regarding the social production of American fascism, demonstrated in the powerful but also temporally narrow attribution of blame in the attack on the Capitol and the legitimacy of the single article of Trump's second impeachment: "[incitement of insurrection](#)."

Demonstrated in both conservatives' denial of and liberals' appeal to incitement's immediacy is the impoverishment of social theory in our public discourses. And this has troubling consequences for clarifying how incitement slowly activates through extreme nativist rhetoric, as well as for leveraging incitement to legally address it. For, if proclamations of imminent incitement compress insurrection to a moment, they also obscure the cumulative conditions that empower it—that make incitement incrementally *event-ful*. As anthropology operates within this terrain of incremental consequence, it can illustrate how incitement is primed with potential over time.

If proclamations of imminent incitement compress insurrection to a moment, they also obscure the cumulative conditions that empower it.

As Heywood and Spanu advise us, a nationalism turned fascist is not "[the spontaneous results of a sudden transformation in specific people, but steps in an open-ended process](#)." One way anthropologists can trace this process, then, is by



mapping the affective potential of incitement through a heterogeneous network of its incendiary elements—historical, linguistic, material, mediated, ideological, racial, reiterative, economic, and local. We might describe this as “affect-focused thick description.” Or, in a word, *context*.

At a time when “incitement” speaks for the social in the legal assessment of dangerous speech, context is crucial; and thus, so is the anthropological perspective. But perhaps like American anthropology itself since Margaret Mead, context’s importance in public discourse has been undermined by its idiosyncratic applications. Consider the history of context’s relation to incitement.

Context’s importance in public discourse has been undermined by its idiosyncratic applications.

Historicising American incitement

A key legal precedent for centring context in incitement cases was established in 1969 when the US Supreme Court deliberated in *Brandenburg vs Ohio* on whether Ku Klux Klan leader Clarence Brandenburg had publicly advocated violence. In a televised appeal to take revenge against the suppression of whites, Brandenburg stood by a burning cross and armed Klan members while publicising their march to Congress. Although he was convicted for advocating violence in a jury trial and the Ohio Supreme Court affirmed the decision, The US Supreme Court overturned the verdict. As Wilson and Kiper (2020, 70–71) explain in a momentous work of scholarship, the Court’s ruling set a new test for exemption to First Amendment protections by limiting it to cases where “advocacy is directed to inciting or producing imminent lawless action and is likely to incite or produce such action.” By this argument, “Brandenburg’s innovation was to add two contextual conditions—imminence and likelihood—to the long-established element of criminal advocacy.” However, by providing “no guidance on any of the three elements of the text,” the Court had effectively established the importance of a contextual approach without offering any means to evaluate context beyond an idiosyncratic interpretation. Consequently, one can see how the personal



responsibility-approach to incitement outlined in congressmembers' statements above represents a poor theory that, evacuated of sociality, history, and mediation, makes incitement nearly impossible to convict.

That said, there may be good reasons for setting an extremely high bar for convicting cases of incitement. While too narrow a definition of incitement renders it inept, too broad a definition weaponises it in the hands of authoritarian states, as seen recently in [Uganda](#), [Russia](#), and [Myanmar](#). Applied to the US, there is reason to fear that the new administration's legitimisation of an imminent theory of incitement will come to harm those in the future it aims to protect in the present.

The strong approach

If states are willing to take such a hard but mercurial approach to operationalising incitement, should social scientists from all its allied subfields be willing to offer an equally hard set of criteria for delimiting it? Richard Wilson and Jordan Kiper argue yes. They integrate studies on the relationship between the advocacy and execution of violence from psychology, sociology, political science, and anthropology to "determine whether lawless action is imminent and likely to result from inciting speech" (2020, 120). They produce from this what they call "The Incitement Matrix" (Figure 1).

In the Incitement Matrix, the more criteria the offense meets, the higher the risk for violence. Although Wilson and Kiper developed it well before the incursion of the US Capitol, it reads as if it were custom ordered for it: it's hard to deny Trump a ten-for-ten here. The reason for this highlights the feedback loops connecting fascism to incitement. Fascism's increasingly exclusionary and vitriolic rhetoric correlates with and naturalises violence against those perceived as threats to a victimised in-group; in turn, incitement's potency increases the likelihood that calls for action will be, in fact, acted upon. Crucially, as Wilson and Kiper explain (2020, 95), when certain patterns of call-and-response are left unidentified, as was the case in the wake of Brandenburg, then judges and juries



rely on “models of speech that are metaphorical and inaccurate.” People essentially trust a gut that is socialised in America to feel that individual action cannot be easily enacted by anything other than individuals, ignoring a great deal of anthropological evidence to the contrary. (Much of William Mazzarella’s important work, for example, is explicitly dedicated to illustrating this fundamental social fact of affect.)

People feel that individual action cannot be easily enacted by anything other than individuals, ignoring a great deal of anthropological evidence to the contrary.

A weaker complement

This Matrix approach to incitement meets the action of strong states with strong theory. However, given incitement’s affective dimensions, and affect’s slippery nature, adding to the strong approach a “weaker” compliment can help draw out both incitement’s and fascism’s incremental nature. Affect theorist Kathleen Stewart has long advocated for this, arguing with reference to Eve Sedgwick (1997) that while strong theory acts in a rather paranoid mode, always seeking to catch the world in an obvious lie in less-than obvious circumstances, weak theory is productively slower, broader, and more curious. Exercised ethnographically, this approach widens attention to things like the “media in which things take place, the subtle or brutal in what’s happening, the idiosyncratic or rigidly fundamentalist proclivities of this and that” (Stewart 2018, 17).

Strong theory acts in a rather paranoid mode.

Anthropologists that add weak observations to strong theories might look not only at hard patterns of fascism but rather at the incremental actions that—in a subtle but important distinction—*pattern* behaviour through repetition and accommodation: the repeated receiving and reciprocating of alarmist Tweets; the effects of bouncing between extremist virtual chat rooms and real-life rallies



where those chats reify in bodies (as Dominic Boyer [2021] notes, “Fascism is always virtual until it isn’t); and all the ways that habituated actions increase a body’s potential to act—even in the face of contrary “knowledge,” which, as Lisa Fazio’s (2015) brilliant title to a work of experimental psychology explains, “Does Not Protect Against Illusory Truth.”

The purpose of adding ethnographic context to incitement is not only to catalogue criteria for but also to document the intensification of its imminence. By doing so, anthropology is better equipped to speak for the social in public discourse in several ways: by identifying the recurrent nativist symbols that incrementally prime incitement through increasingly fascist rhetoric; by demonstrating how those symbols intensify affect through social media posts and platforms; and most of all by expanding incitement temporally, documenting its activation, and packing incitement with social context in order to better unpack America’s distinctive vulnerabilities to fascism.

Podcast

Here is the [ResonanceCast podcast](#) where Daniel White discusses further on the topic of ‘Incitement and Coups’ with Jastinder Kaur, moderated by Ian M. Cook. You can also listen to our other podcasts at the [Allegra Lab soundcloud](#).

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Towards an Anthropology of Coups

Jastinder Kaur
September, 2021



When is a coup a coup? Reflections on the anthropological study of ‘coups’

There have been more than 200 coups in 95 countries over the last 75 years, suggesting that they are a significant way of doing politics. Indeed, in relation to the so-called ‘culture of coups’ in the South Pacific archipelago of Fiji, Stewart Firth and Jon Fraenkel (2007: xx) observe that coups have become one of two ways of changing government there, a point reiterated by a Fiji MP on the very floor of Parliament in February 2021.

By this reckoning, coups embody and entail an imagined difference but are not content to indulge (or indulge in) the rituals and rhythms of the election cycle: as



Caroline Humphrey (2019) might argue, they are not always a break from something, but often a break *towards* something instead. They are impatient forms of political behaviour, refusing to play by the rules of electoral and parliamentary democracy. Yet, even given the predominance of coups globally, we lack a meaningful way of comparing them, beyond identifying common traits and characteristics borrowed from political science – namely, that coups are illegal military takeovers of elected civilian government which interrupt democratic principles, processes, and practices.

When we delve into the typology of coups initiated by Huntington (1968) and added to extensively by subsequent coup scholars, it seems as if there are as many types of coups in the world as there are coups. Beyond a notional sense of their being anti-democratic, unconstitutional, and illegal, and involving an elite struggle to define the *telos* of the state, there is nothing substantively comparable about coups in, say, Fiji, Turkey, Myanmar, Burkina Faso or elsewhere.

In Fiji, coups in 1987 and 2000 expressly sought to overturn election results that had seemed to de-prioritise the leadership and voice of indigenous Fijians in the country. In a historically fraught multi-ethnic context, the descendants of indentured Indian labourers had long lobbied to participate as full and inclusive members of the legislature, executive, and overall socio-political life of the state; and immediately prior to coups, they had taken over the reins of politics in the opinion of many. These coups can be said to echo Smooha's (1997) concept of ethnic democracy, which he originally articulated in relation to Israel. By contrast with Fiji's earlier coups, the country's 2006 coup subverted this logic in powerful ways, as the indigenous Fijian-dominated army overthrew an indigenous Fijian government (e.g., Naidu 1988, Lal 2001, Rakuita 2002, and Lawson 2012).

Coups in Myanmar, most recently in February 2021, are of a different nature to those in Fiji in that they do not cohere around or symbolise ethnic or populist ideals. They conform more readily to political science theories of coups as a struggle between military and civilian elites and can cause a levelling of internal ethnic rivalries in the process. In the attempted coup in Turkey in 2016, we bear



witness to yet another set of complex coup dynamics, in which its supporters cited the erosion of secularism and democracy in the country as a causal factor while the aftermath brought to the fore Islamist elite power struggles.

When we delve into the typology of coups it seems as if there are as many types of coups in the world as there are coups.

This whistle-stop tour of just some coups that have taken place or were attempted in recent years illustrates how they are more than just abrupt seizures of democratic power. Each coup is historically, socially, culturally entangled. Each emerges from within a specific set of contexts, meanings, experiences, and practices. Each produces and is produced by powerful affects; and resonates as well as being resisted. Each reorients the lives of the state and of the people in it, in ways that are euphoric for some and enervating for others. And each reverberates into the future. Typologies of coups and coup databases do not capture this messiness and complexity, nor do they seem to be able to marshal the diversity of coups into any meaningful kind of comparative analysis, as noted by Powell and Thyne (2011). So, might there be a role for anthropology and ethnography in contributing to the endeavour? Yes.

I propose an ethnographic approach to coups that acknowledges and examines (1) their emergence, and the difference that they imagine making to the life and leadership and trajectory of the state, and the moral discourses that are used to frame them; (2) the ways in which they resonate with some people, and are resisted by others, whether through a clash of ideas, values, or people's grounded everyday realities - which opens coups up to examination not merely in terms of what they do to/in the world but the agency of those who experience them and engage with them; and (3) their reverberations in time and space, after democratic processes and practices resume.

Ethnography enables us to tear our gaze away from the evenemential to understand how coups draw on the past and the future in the present and circulate along powerful political ideals, identities, and emotions; and how they



are readily acted upon (and reacted to) by people whose grounded realities and relationships corroborate or question coup rhetoric, even as their lives and futures are radically transformed by coups years and decades later.

Studying coups along these vectors emerged through my engagement with Fiji and its people. This approach was - ironically - facilitated by some of the very quirks and limitations of ethnographic practice. For example, whereas political science colleagues may study 'critical events' (Das 1995) from afar, the centrality of long-term, immersive, and embedded ethnographic fieldwork renders it a matter of some serendipity for a fieldworker to be in situ as a coup occurs. Mostly, we enter the pre- or post-coup field, such that what comes into view is not the event of the coup itself but its antecedents and/or its impacts, i.e., we may see the intensities of political tensions beforehand and/or how a coup has folded itself into the political and social life of the state and into people's relationships, hopes, fears, behaviours, and memories afterwards.



Hibiscus Festival in Fiji, 1960s. [Photo](#) by [Brett Jordan](#) on [Unsplash](#)

I originally set out to study multi-ethnic relations in an urban lifeworld in Fiji, noting that the literature on this was scant to non-existent. It turned out that I



could not do this meaningfully without attending to Fiji's coups, which continued to frame political and public discourse, and it turned out relationships and lived experiences. Ethnographic realities rather than preconceived notions of what a coup is and does opened up profound methodological, epistemological, and conceptual implications.

And yet, I have long remained wedded to political science theories of coups. Not so much in terms of framing them as an aspect of military-civilian struggle for power - especially given that the 1987 and 2000 coups in Fiji pivoted quite clearly on issues of ontological indigenous security - but certainly in believing that for a coup to be a coup required military involvement. Yet when events unfolded in and at the US Capitol on 6th January 2021, exchanges with colleagues revealed to me that I held specific and closed ideas of what is a coup, and had retreated to a kind of essentialist attitude to these phenomena that was in fact of a typological nature rather than reflective of ethnographic realities.

Ethnography enables us to tear our gaze away from the evenemential to understand how coups draw on the past and the future in the present and circulate along powerful political ideals, identities, and emotions.

On 6th January 2021, the US Congress convened to certify the electoral college votes cast some weeks earlier naming Joe Biden and Kamala Harris as the incoming President and Vice-President respectively. The certification process is part of the rituals associated with U.S. elections, which runs from early November through to mid-January and follows a stepwise process that moves from citizen voting, through to electoral college voting, certification, and finally inauguration. Each step in the process represents a gradual narrowing of the number of people empowered to elect the President. At the certification stage, power rests in the hands of members of Congress. And Republicans had long been stating that they would vote to reject the electoral college votes that had been cast in the states where these were won by the Biden-Harris campaign. This of course is their prerogative, and to do so would not appear to constitute illegal or



unconstitutional behaviour. But in the sense that certifying the electoral college votes is regarded as largely symbolic, the threat to reject them went against the spirit of U.S. electoral democracy rituals. Suddenly, a rubber-stamp non-event turned into an event of epic proportions, televised and streamed live by US news channels with commentaries falling in favour of either the Republicans or the Democrats and expounding the narrative of the stolen election by the former, and incredulity at the attack on democracy by the latter.



[Photo](#) by [Colin Lloyd](#) on [Unsplash](#)

When the extent of Republican refusal to concede the election became clear, commentators - politicians, analysts, media, and the public alike - began referring to it as an attempted coup. Such sentiments and analyses were powerfully reinforced by the shocking scenes of Trump supporters storming the US Capitol; I watched in real-time along with colleagues in Brazil, Ethiopia, and the UK, sharing thoughts and questions over WhatsApp. Intrigued and appalled, we wondered what sense to make of what we were seeing and hearing in our remit as ethnographers of parliaments and political relationships. Given my background studying coups, my colleagues were keen to know at what point I would



acknowledge what was happening as a coup.

Ethnographic realities rather than preconceived notions of what a coup is and does opened up profound methodological, epistemological, and conceptual implications.

The U.S. military did not play a part in the events of that day. Indeed, top military leaders publicly denounced the storming of the Capitol via joint statements as well as messages to the troops. The primary locus of the so-called coup activity comprised the American citizens who climbed the ramparts of the building, smashed windows, left urine and faecal matter in hallways, sat in the seats of elected power, took and posted photographs of themselves across social media, and proclaimed to reporters that they were taking back “their” House. And they were preceded and followed in their efforts to interrupt democracy by Republican congresspeople and senators who waged war within the Capitol building against the ritual of certifying the electoral college votes.

In the WhatsApp conversations with my colleagues, I long maintained that the lack of military intervention or involvement signalled clearly that what was happening in no way constituted a coup. My reference points for this view were my own research on Fiji’s 1987 and 2000 coups and established scholarship (e.g. Finer 1962, Huntington 1956 and 1968, Janowitz 1977, Luttwak 1969, and Nordlinger 1977). As noted earlier, scholars of coups locate these critical political events in an elite struggle between military and civilian leaders to define and shape the telos of the state based on notions of group identities and rights to the state as a kind of resource. Fiji proved the cliché that power comes from the barrel of a gun: (twice) in 1987, then again in 2000, and most recently in 2006 (e.g. Robertson/Sutherland 2001, Ratuva 2007 and 2011, Fraenkel et al. 2009, and Fraenkel 2013). The USA in my estimation did not.

I long maintained that the lack of military intervention or involvement signalled clearly that what was happening in no way constituted a coup.



My colleagues on WhatsApp were determined to call what was unfolding a coup, as did various media outlets, even as the language of domestic terrorism and insurrection were applied interchangeably - indicating that what was at stake after all was democracy, and the methods of achieving its downfall were epiphenomenal. I was reminded that a purist definition of a coup as military overthrow is no longer consistently used. In Brazil, former President Dilma Roussef referred to her impeachment as a coup. Following his election as the U.K.'s Prime Minister, Boris Johnson mounted an attack against the impartiality of the judiciary, leading to whispers of a coup. In the same vein, attempts by the Leader of the House of Representatives, Nancy Pelosi, and of House Democrats on 13 January 2021 to remove the sitting U.S. President via impeachment were interpreted as a coup by many a Republican. These examples all depart quite comprehensively from traditional typologies of coups. So where does this leave and lead the anthropologist and ethnographer of coups - when the ostensible object of our research refuses to be pinned down as it were?

...what was at stake after all was democracy, and the methods of achieving its downfall were epiphenomenal.

If, on the one hand, coups pivot on military-civilian struggle for power, then I can reasonably claim that the object of my research is coups in the classic political science sense. If, on the other hand, I approach coups in terms of their emergence, resonance/resistance, and reverberations, and hence their historical, social, cultural entanglements, then this not only places coups in broader flows and contexts, but it also asks to take seriously those eventful phenomena that may not be coups in the strict sense but are perceived and experienced as such. As Julia Paley observes, in her introduction to *Democracy: Anthropological Approaches* (2008): while definitions of democracy tend to be a preferred starting point for many, she and her fellow contributors to the book 'take a different approach, one that engages in a continuing process of exploring a wide variety of lived meanings and practices.' Which is to say that '[t]he precise phenomenon we are studying is not predetermined but rather emerges within the various field



sites in which we do our research' and is explored through dialogic engagement and analytical openness (2008: 5). For us as anthropologists to engage ethnographically with coups means to attend to our interlocutors' meanings, experiences, and practices vis-à-vis what they imagine and interpret as coups; and to bring this diversity together through collaborative anthropological exchange and debate.

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Podcast

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