



And so it ends: Last Day at UN Human Rights Committee

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It is the last day of the UN Human Rights Committee's session and I should be frantically making last-minute notes, to be tying up all loose ends; to catch up on note-taking and to send follow-up emails to the many people that I have encountered and with whom I hope to continue keeping in touch. But I find myself not having the energy any more; every inch of me is feeling the exhaustion of the past weeks that have been so intense. In a way the same lack of energy is starting to overwhelm the entire Palais as in a few short hours people will be leaving for holidays - even the ever-energetic, amazing lady of the cafeteria confessed to looking forward to her vacation, the entire 'quinze jour' (the charming French exaggeration for two weeks). Also the weather outside certainly contributes to this general sense of inertia. Although the past few days have been very pleasant, and just yesterday I was greeted by a gorgeous sunshine upon leaving the Palais on my bike along the shore boulevard, today the scene is sleepy. The Lac Léman is covered in mist and all those daring to face the wild outdoors are drenched by



torrential rain.



I still shiver – although now finding comfort in the warmth of the building – at my earlier bike ride as I proceeded to go up and down the streets of Paquis in my frantic search for a chocolate shop. Upon considering what would form the appropriate type of appreciation for the people who had helped me out in my research I had judged such offerings to be, obviously, fine Swiss chocolates. I was glad to find that my instincts had been right upon presenting my humble offerings to a faithful informant, a hugely efficient conference officer. She was genuinely delighted, and I got a feeling that this might have been a rare moment when an ‘outsider’ recognised the importance of the work that she did. I could not help but think once more how many scholars pass by her and the other seemingly ‘insignificant’ support staff in their incessant search for the ‘important people’, namely those in top positions – and how I by now felt almost like shouting at them: YOU ARE MISSING THE POINT ENTIRELY! For my fieldwork has convinced me that the real ‘knowledge’ of what transpires in this scene is not deposited in the smooth jargon of those in ‘high places’ who make the occasional 30 minute appearances to mark the ceremonial beginnings and endings of distinct events, but rather deposited silently with the people who participate in the work every day; day after day; year after year.

With these thoughts I realize that finally, after an intense session on Working Methods, the session comes to a close. With a few final words of conclusion and the customary bang of the gavel the chairperson declares the session of the Human Rights Committee to be closed, and just like that it all ends. No applause follows, but was that the case, I would not be surprised, for this statement releases an almost unforeseen surge of energy into the conference room, transforming it momentarily into a vivacious exchange of handshakes, words of good-byes, and the unexpected mixing of ‘global’ and ‘local’ social practices. From the back of the room I observe how more than one pair of Committee members demonstrate hesitation over whether, in fact, the Geneva way is two or three kisses on both



cheeks, with this consideration seeming particularly awkward in between a somewhat robust elderly lady and a petit South Asian gentlemen, both members of this transnational elite of experts, but still in their bodies strangers to these 'cosmopolitan' gestures.



And so it is also time for me to leave. With slight reluctance I pay my last good-byes to the many people I have met – I had over the past weeks not even realized how many first names of people I had grown to forgot – engaging equally in the slightly awkward guessing into the appropriate number of kisses. In the corridor of the Palais I find myself in yet another awkward moment, namely the photo that someone insists of taking and I thank once again my UN-expression which offers me to pass this moment with ease. I continue to smile, nod and bow to the people whose number has already grown continually slimmer, I make my way first toward the door, then for the very last time through the security gate. I thank the security guards with a slight sense of melancholia – is it possible to experience nostalgia over something that has barely even ended?

In the still drizzling rain I head toward my bike, and unchain it for the last time. I hop on, and so, just like in the tale of Cindarella leaving the ball, the magic disappears; the 'international' ceases to exist. Left is only a beautiful old building and an exhausted scholar trying to make her way to her home-away-from home in the continually intensifying Friday afternoon traffic. As I circulate in between the tourists basking the weather while trying to make the best of their stay in the beautiful city, I find myself wondering: was it all real? Then, with an invisible smile that warms my bones cold from the breeze, I remember all of my notes carefully deposited in the hard-drive of my darling laptop, and reply to myself with a reassuring and powerful YES! My mind started buzzing with all of my experiences, realizing how much data I had succeeded in gathering. And then I remember the best thing of all: I will be returning very soon.



Post Script

For every story that is told, there are likely as many of not more stories that remain unshared, forming an invisible, yet inseparable part of fieldwork. Just how does one get to one's fieldsite, how does one find access not to mention funding - elements that every anthropologist know take as much if not more time and effort than doing the actual fieldwork. In this sense doing fieldwork resembles painting a house: it is at the end not really the painting itself that is time consuming, but all the preparations before and cleaning afterwards. I think that the same very much applies here. All the experiences of before and after these concrete moments of fieldwork have been accompanied by massive arranging emanating from the fact that the fieldworker in question happens to have a life situation of living in country A, having a research stay in country B, and her fieldsite in country C - and a family with two small children who have to somehow fit into the equation.



Thus I wish to end my set of fieldnotes by recognizing the investment on every level that has been required by my very patient and tolerant entourage - thousands of kilometers spent on European motorways, numerous nights stayed in 'homes away from home' including temporary flats, and tolerance for long and hard days of the intensity of daily life without any of the comforts of the familiar. If the fieldworker is really lucky, she will also enjoy the generosity of childcare who agrees to travel along, as well as the support of courageous relatives who chip in when the 'going gets tough'. This fieldwork is dedicated to all this madness as well as the entourage without whom this research genuinely would not have been possible!

THIS ENDS MIIA HALME-TUOMISAARI'S SERIES OF FIELDNOTES. SEE PREVIOUS INSTALLMENTS [HERE](#)

