Roundtable: Answers by Giulia Scalettaris

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Are these developments, usually condemned as corrupting us as scholars and leading to the death of pure research, introducing some kind of innovation vis-à-vis established academic work?

In my view, there is great potential in the opportunity to study settings that otherwise remain inaccessible and opaque to anthropologists, like international organizations, networks of experts, etc. My PhD work analyses the intervention of the UNHCR in the Afghan crisis and examines how this organization exercises authority in the contemporary world. The research is based on fieldwork carried out within the UNHCR as an intern and then as an employee of the organisation.

Embedded ethnography enabled me to produce an original piece of research.

Most studies on the UNHCR and the international refugee regime can be ascribed either to "critics" or to "experts". "Critics", on the one hand, see the UNHCR as an agent of imperialism and containment of migrations, but pay little attention to the internal functioning of the organization; most "experts", on the other hand, participate in the refugee regime, but without calling its assumptions into question. In my work, I focus on the bureaucratic practices and social relations that underpin the action of the UNHCR. This leads me to identify a conundrum – the agency reaffirms and even enforces the same national order that produces the refugee in the first place – and to generate at the same time knowledge on the internal functioning of a global bureaucracy. In particular, my role as Reporting Officer, which required me to write countless reports and briefing notes, triggered reflection on the UNHCR as a producer of expert knowledge and highlighted expertise as one of the main sources of this UN agency's authority.

A further innovative potential lies in the new forms of dialogue and collaboration that may emerge between academia and the world of practice. The circulation of researchers makes these two worlds closer and more permeable. Since my PhD I have been navigating between academic research and consultancies, teaching students as well as training practitioners. I have not had the time to sit, think and develop innovative initiatives myself. But I have witnessed several original projects bridging the two worlds: for instance, a training course developed by a big NGO that employs tools from qualitative research methodology to make practitioners more reflexive or a scheme whereby master students work on a collective consultancy under the supervision of an experienced professor/consultant.

Do existential and professional uncertainty have epistemological potential?

Several studies highlight two main risks that anthropologists face when they closely study aid institutions, technocratic and expert worlds that is, the risks of being manipulated, and the risk of epistemological subordination (Ferguson 2005, Mosse 2011, Miyazaki and Riles 2005). I agree. However, I believe that this

"uncomfortable intimacy" (Ferguson 2005) and these challenges harbour opportunities to contribute to the methodological and theoretical renewal that the anthropological discipline has been undergoing since the 1990s. I believe that these challenges stem not so much from the distinctive features of these institutional and technocratic domains in themselves, as from the transformation that anthropology is undergoing. It is the closeness of the anthropologist to these worlds that makes these challenges, that exist in all kinds of ethnographic fieldwork, more apparent and pronounced. The point is the "unbounding of the field" (Ferguson and Gupta 2002), or as Mosse puts it, the demise of the separation between the field and the office.

Anthropologists are closer to their "others" than ever before.

It is no longer possible to conceive a total exteriority of the ethnologist in any given field. This requires us to determine and describe more precisely the specific relation of proximity/distance between the anthropologist and his/her field and reflect on how to make it more heuristic.

What are the restrictions and weaknesses of ethnographic multipositionality imposed by neoliberal research conditions?

The main challenge that I faced when writing my PhD dissertation was distancing myself from the institutional thinking of the UNHCR after working in very close proximity with the organisation, from both the cognitive and the social point of view. This closeness was amplified by lack of significant counterweights in the academic environment (I was an apprentice anthropologist without a scholarship) and by the strong hold that the organization exerts on its employees. This is especially present in field locations like Kabul, where the institution is the main professional, social and even affective referent for its staff members. After leaving the field, I entered a long phase of epistemological wandering. In order to construct the organization as an object of research and start to analyse my data, I had to emancipate myself from the institution's analytical categories and

rationality. But these acted like a magnet and paralysed the analysis for a long time. I found myself stuck in a terminological impasse (how could I speak, for instance, about Afghans on the move avoiding the "migrants" and "refugees" policy categories?), and I found it difficult to develop a research question that was clearly distinct from policy reflection. Moreover, during my stay at the UNHCR I had started a professional career, earning a salary and being socialized into a network of colleagues. On my return to academia, my status as a PhD student without a scholarship resulted in a fragile and precarious condition reinforced by the uncertainty of job prospects and the inability of my former colleagues to understand the duration of my PhD and my, by now, sedentary life. Hence my case was peculiar because of my particularly close proximity with the UNHCR (Scalettaris 2017). But I think that these challenges arise to a certain degree for every researcher that joins an institution, works for it for a long time, is paid by it and is socialized into it.

After my PhD I engaged in several consultancies in the field of refugees. I welcomed these opportunities with enthusiasm and self-assurance. I thought that my familiarity with the refugee regime, coupled with my academic reflections on it, was a strong asset, and I believed that I at last had the opportunity to translate my research findings into practice. My enthusiasm and self-assurance soon waned, however, when I realized that my resources did not enable me to navigate the turbulent waters of the politics of expert knowledge production. The main challenge was building trust relations in the field in a situation of dense institutional dynamics difficult to grasp and where the commissioning institution, or office, is an omnipresent third party. Moreover,

> *I realized that consultancy work is an art in itself. It is different from academic research, an activity that requires training and obliges the consultant to make compromises with the academic researcher.*

In particular, the short time available for fieldwork and analysis made it hard for me to accomplish the tasks entrusted to me and to stay focused, while at the same

time being receptive to fieldwork, sensitive to the larger picture, juggling several levels of analysis, and managing my eagerness for data and new ideas.

Are the dilemmas faced by casual researchers distinct from those experienced by their tenured colleagues and, if so, how?

In my view, untenured researchers face greater pressure on how to use their time, because "wrong" choices may endanger both their chances of finding a stable job and the quality of their work. Becoming an attractive candidate in the highly competitive academic job market already requires intense multi-tasking: teaching, publishing, developing new research projects, attending conferences and, of course, preparing job applications, while at the same time earning a living. In this situation, engaging with consultancies entails advantages but also risks. It helps to earn a living, and some academic positions may value involvement in the world of practice. Consultancy work may also offer opportunities and ideas for original research… if one has the time to explore them. At the same time, consultancy work is not always valued by academia, which means that the time invested in practice-oriented jobs, publications and networks is time lost from the academic perspective. Either way, the paradox is that for researchers who navigate in the two worlds, time and energy are the most precious resources: switching is tiring and it takes time to work properly and let new ideas germinate. In the end, the energy and time spent by researchers on navigating the two worlds risks compromising the quality of their research, whether or not they are eventually hired.

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