

For



Ethnography

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Introduction

Part of the inspiration for writing this book – or at least for writing in the way I have – was my reading of a volume on the conduct of ethnography by Marcel Mauss, one of the founders of modern anthropology (Mauss 2007). It was never written as a book by Mauss himself: like a number of classics (George Herbert Mead, de Saussure), it is based on a series of lecture courses. Mauss's lectures were delivered at the Institute of Ethnology at the University of Paris. Shorthand lecture notes were taken by Denise Paulme, apparently over several academic years. Although Mauss apparently claimed to have been 'tidying up' the typescript, he did not in fact edit the materials for publication. The published volume therefore bears all the hallmarks of its origins, and is in no sense a finished work. Indeed, Mauss appears not even to have completed the planned series of lectures, as topics identified as coming later in the course never actually appear.

Mauss's lectures have very little in common with anything we would expect today from a textbook on ethnographic research methods, in anthropology or any other discipline. They were in fact created for a very particular kind of audience: 'The instructions in the present book are intended for administrators or colonists who lack professional training' (p. 11). The chapters (lectures) provide systematic, structured guidance, therefore, for the collection of ethnographic facts and artefacts: there is a strong emphasis on assembling the 'archives' of what are referred to as archaic societies. It is a sign of the book's vintage that Mauss is, of course, quite comfortable with the notion that his focus is on 'archaic' societies that fall within the French colonial ambit. (He thus excludes what he refers to as genuinely 'primitive' peoples, who are presumed to lack much of the cultural inventory that provides his stock-in-trade.) The lectures seem like rather dry lists of categories about which the ethnographer ought to collect evidence.

Mauss would certainly not prove a vade mecum for the discerning ethnographer in today's academic world. But embedded within it,

and informing it, are two of Mauss's abiding preoccupations: systems of classification, and systems of technique. The typologies of artefacts and events reflect more than simply a 'butterfly collecting' mentality. It reflects one of Mauss's most significant contributions to anthropological and sociological thought. His work on classification, co-authored with Emile Durkheim in *Primitive Classification*, is one of the most significant works to emerge from that tradition. It established a style of thought that permeated various forms of French anthropology and sociology, through Claude Lévi-Strauss to Pierre Bourdieu. Amongst Mauss's other works, it is to be found in his discussion of Eskimo culture and its temporal cycles. Likewise, his interest in *techniques* – which is embedded in the *Manual of Ethnography*. Mauss's analysis of technique became well known through the translation of his essay 'Les techniques du corps' and its incorporation into recent work on the sociology of the body. This was not a one-off interest in the body alone, even though in his *Manual*, you will glimpse his fascination with the management of the body. The ethnographic observer is enjoined to record the body at rest, asleep, at work, at play and so on. But the notion of technique is a generic one: it refers to the use of material resources (the body, tools, materials) to accomplish culturally defined tasks: see also Mauss (2006) on the significance of technique. I have tried to take general inspiration from Mauss, while applying it to the proliferation of research methods that have emerged in the years since his Paris lectures.

In essence, my argument is as follows. There has been an explosion of research methods texts. Many of them deal with qualitative research methods. Many of those deal with ethnographic fieldwork. I have contributed to that methodological literature myself. The student or novice researcher cannot want for general advice about how to conduct her or his research project. Texts will take the student reader through all the steps of a normal project, from negotiating access to the field, through the management of social relations in the field, the methods and procedures of data collection, to the methods of data analysis and the conventions of ethnographic reportage. More detailed and specific methods of data collection may also be dealt with, and the latter are also the subject-matter of individual methods books. On the other hand, it is far from clear to me that the standard methods books give the novice (or indeed the more experienced fieldworker) much clue as to what to look at and what to look for.

It is my contention that we can readily identify some general phenomena, some generic social processes, that repay close and systematic attention in the conduct of ethnographic field research, in the same spirit

as Mauss's identification of broad ethnographic themes. Of course, Mauss was not the first or the only anthropologist to suggest what anthropologists ought to look for or look at, what they ought to explore with informants, or to collect by way of materials culture. But he was certainly one of the most imaginative and gifted in his own analyses of culture and social process. In the course of this book – which is by no means comprehensive I freely admit – I want to follow the precepts of Marcel Mauss, suggesting some of the most fruitful ways of looking at and thinking about any given social world.

Before we embark on more technical matters, let us start this book on a thoroughly positive note. Ethnographic fieldwork is not just *a* way to conduct social research. It is a very special way. It is, if not *the* way, a distinctive way of knowing and being as a social scientist (Halstead et al. 2008). It is immensely satisfying personally and intellectually. It provides uniquely privileged opportunities to enter into and to share the everyday lives of other people. It provides us with the challenge of transforming that social world into texts and other forms of representation that analyse and reconstruct those distinctive lives and actions. Methodological and epistemological niceties aside, and quite apart from the principles outlined later in this book, the conduct of ethnographic fieldwork is the most rewarding and most faithful way of understanding the social world. It is an approach to research that deserves to be accorded a special place. It is worth stressing these things, because when we start to get into methodological and other issues, it is all too easy to get bogged down in arcane disputes and to lose sight of the intrinsic curiosity that drives us all to conduct first-hand, field research.

In the current climate, that may sound like a superfluous assertion. Surely, qualitative research methods have never been so popular and widespread. Surely, such research methods are now widely endorsed. But therein lies a problem. While 'qualitative research' is hugely fashionable and popular in many disciplines, that is not to be equated with ethnography. Now I do not want to attach a quasi-religious or mystical value to ethnographic research. But I do want to remind us that there is a world of difference between a commitment to long-term field research – spending time in one or more social settings, with a number of people as they go about their everyday lives – and the conduct of a few interviews or focus groups. The latter are 'qualitative' but they are certainly not ethnographic.

It has become increasingly apparent that the term 'ethnography' is appropriated by and for research that is nothing of the kind. So while I do not want to fetishise such things, I do insist on ethnographic fieldwork that involves some degree of direct participation and observation,

and that it constitutes a radically distinctive way of understanding social activity *in situ*. Hence my repeated use of old-fashioned terms like *fieldwork*. In doing so I do not make the assumption that ‘fields’ are simple things, or that they exist unproblematically as bounded entities. Nor do I suggest that they cannot be distributed across multiple physical sites, nor indeed that they may in today’s world be virtual rather than material. What I do insist on is that we ought always to conduct fieldwork in settings wherever and however they are brought into being by social actors who collectively engage in their production. Equally, I am not so naïve as to overlook the extent to which fields are also produced by our own activities of fieldwork. Indeed, the reasons I like the old-fashioned term are twofold: first, it reminds us that it *is* work, and not a reflection of personal virtue or innate quality; secondly, it also reminds us that the ‘fields’ of fieldwork are themselves worked at, and are produced through such work. In turn, we are also reminded that work in this context involves mental work, but it also calls for physical and emotional work too. We have to work at our engagement and our participation, as well as working with the social actors whose lives we want to share and understand.

Hence, for all the merits of interviews, documentary analysis and the like, and for all the rich variety of qualitative research that is currently being conducted, and all the methodological innovations that are being explored, an old-fashioned approach to ethnographic fieldwork lies at the heart of this book. This is not an old-fogey nostalgia for an invented tradition, or a rejection of current methods and approaches. Indeed I want to stress the many and varied ways in which ethnography can be done, the extraordinary variety of data that can be generated, and to celebrate some of the technologies available to do so. So the book looks back, in asserting some of the abiding virtues of ethnographic research. But it also pays due regard to contemporary issues of data collection, analysis and representation. My approach, however, is predicated on the view that the contemporary appeal of ethnographic research needs to be grounded firmly in its traditional values. We overlook our origins at our peril, and too many contemporary commentators find novelty where there is none, revealing nothing new but a collective ignorance of the past.

Ethnography shares a distinctive way of knowing that aligns it with contemporary cultural sensitivities more widely. The visual arts, cultural studies, sociology and anthropology all share an ethnographic focus on local sites of social relations and cultural forms (Foster 1995). They include: a close attention to the particularities of social life; an equally close attention to the forms of their representation; the reflexive

attention to the productive work of the artist, writer and ethnographer; an awareness of the work of biographical and autobiographical construction. The ethnographic gaze captures and calls into question the tensions between the self and the other, between the near and the distant, between the familiar and the strange. It is not new. It is as old, in general terms, as human curiosity and the encounter between the writer and an 'other'. While having somewhat different connotations, we can detect the ethnographic imagination at work from Antiquity onwards (Evans 2005; Woolf 2011).

There is, therefore, nothing merely fashionable about the conduct of ethnographic research, in the sense of it being of recent origin. It is an approach to professional social research that dates back to the beginning of the last century. Of course, as a distinctively human response to encounters with new peoples, places and situations, it is as old as human society itself. It is too often overlaid with all sorts of epistemological and theoretical 'positions' and disputes. To some degree, of course, academic debate and intellectual justifications are unavoidable, but too much is made of them. In the course of this book I want to stress the positive aspects of ethnographic research, offering the reader a wide array of published sources to draw on, and encouraging the pursuit of many topics.

I hope, therefore, that readers will not lose sight of some of the most fundamental issues in ethnographic research. It is far more than a dry methodological topic, or the battleground for competing definitions of research excellence. It is – in anthropology, sociology and other disciplines – born of a thoroughgoing commitment to understanding other people's social worlds. It is a profoundly ethical form of enterprise, based as it is on a commitment to other people's everyday lives. It does not seek to manipulate others for 'scientific' ends. It is a deeply humane undertaking, precisely because it is predicated on the ethnographer's personal commitment, and on the common humanity shared by the researcher and by the researched. It is also a profoundly *social* form of research, in that the researcher is committed to sharing the everyday life of the people with whom she or he does the fieldwork.

In that sense, too, ethnographic field research is – above all other ways of conducting research – faithful to the social world under investigation and the people who make it. It is coterminous with it. Conducted and analysed adequately, it preserves the essential complexity of that world and those lives. It follows the contours of culture and the lines of social organisation. It captures the patterns of significance that make the world comprehensible and meaningful. It follows the dimensions of the everyday – spatial, temporal, interpersonal. It traces the dimensions of culture – material,

aesthetic, semiotic. It analyses the language and communication of everyday actors – accounts, memories and interactions.

It is not easy. The methodical exploration, analysis and re-construction of a given social world is a demanding task. It calls for an intellectual discipline to complement those personal commitments already alluded to. It is one of the several aims of this book to engender a disciplined approach to ethnographic fieldwork. We all need prompts and reminders of where to look, what to look at and how to do so. (And by ‘looking’ I really mean all the senses and modalities of comprehension.) The goal of ethnographic fieldwork is not to amass an inchoate array of personalised impressions and experiences (however illuminating they might be), but to collect and analyse data in the interests of developing systematic conceptual frameworks.

So this book is devoted to fieldwork – in some ways a pleasingly old-fashioned term that evokes the long history of sociological and anthropological work. In the chapters that follow, therefore, I outline some of the basic commitments of ethnographic research. I try to cut through the many different ‘ologies’ and ‘isms’ that plague our disciplines, in order to identify common themes, and guiding principles that I believe we might all endorse. It needs emphasis here: I am not endorsing a vague array of ‘qualitative’ methods. In doing so I deliberately resist many of the recent claims for novelty – especially associated with the claims for postmodernism – that I believe have undermined much of the great ethnographic tradition (Atkinson and Delamont 2004). In the same vein I outline some issues in the conduct of ethnographic field research. For some readers this may be recapitulation of truisms, but for others this re-statement of ethnographic practice may need reaffirmation. A third chapter then discusses the analytic strategies of ethnography, before I devote four major chapters to some of the key issues that ethnographers ought to pay attention to. In other words, these chapters are about key issues that ethnographers need to concentrate on in the development of a sustained and systematic analysis of any social world. In the first of those chapters I focus on the analysis of social encounters. I suggest that we need to be reminded of the centrality of social interaction and the interaction order. This may seem odd, given that social encounters might seem a central concern – notably in interactionist sociology. But there has been so much emphasis on the presentation of individual informants’ accounts that we need to remind ourselves that participating in and observing social activities, including interactions, ought to be a central preoccupation. Here I locate one of my main reservations about a great deal of contemporary qualitative research – an emphasis on the interview and a failure to observe forms of interaction. The key analytic

point here is that encounters have their own intrinsic order, and that ethnographic analysis must pay full attention to such formal properties. The next three chapters address further formal properties of social life: accounts and narratives; time and space; aesthetics and artefacts. Here the main theme is continued. While by no means a comprehensive listing of analytic issues, together these chapters exemplify the extent to which we need to respect the intrinsic organisation of social phenomena. Hence they carry my fundamental argument: ethnography is not about creating evocative descriptions of personal experience (one's own or others'). It is about the analysis of social action and social organisation.

The book is concluded with two further chapters that deal with contemporary issues of some import for the present and future of ethnography. The first concerns the writing and representation of ethnographic texts. Here I argue that the various over-heated debates concerning the textual representation of ethnography and the identification of successive crises of representation have had a disproportionate effect, while recent excursions into alternative literary forms have displayed a strange paradox. This is a paradox that runs through a great deal of contemporary debate and practice: while there are intellectual appeals to poststructuralism and postmodernism, in effect the proponents of apparently avant-garde literary styles actually reinstate a Romantic subject. Moreover, this subject seems to inhabit a world that is devoid of social and cultural organisation. Finally, I address current debates and vexations concerning the management of research ethics. Here I reaffirm some of the central values of ethnographic fieldwork, while suggesting that a lot of contemporary ethical regulation is sociologically or anthropologically illiterate.

This, then, is not yet another methods book on how to do it. It is, on the other hand, a book on how to think about it. Equally, it is not intended to be a comprehensive introduction to ethnographic methods. It is selective in its themes and their treatment. The introductory chapters outline what might (pompously) be described as a manifesto – hence the title of the book – and they have a polemical aspect to them. They are certainly not intended to be reviews of the literature. Indeed, the reader will find them lightly referenced. The student in search of an elementary guide to the research-methods literature will find such texts elsewhere. I have tried not to hold up the flow of the text with undue numbers of citations. The rest of the chapters draw on a variety of illustrative examples: some come from very recent work, some from more classic studies. The breadth of coverage is deliberate, as I want to emphasise the ethnographic tradition as well as current issues. Also, I have tried to cull illustrative materials from a diverse range of research fields. Too often, it seems to me, authors develop their methodological arguments

exclusively from their own field of specialisation, without regard for disciplinary diversity or variation in subject-matter. But if we do that as authors, how are we ever going to encourage our students to think comparatively and to generate ideas that transcend their own narrow field of specialisation?

This book is not a comprehensive guide to the conduct of field research, and it is certainly not intended to be a comprehensive review of all the potentially relevant literature – methodological and substantive. It is highly selective in its coverage, dealing as it does with topics that seem to me to be of particular importance, and selectively illustrated. The attentive reader will notice that there is a degree of repetition here and there. This is not a reflection of careless drafting. Rather, I recognise that books like this are not necessarily read from cover to cover, from start to finish. Readers are likely to read individual chapters, especially if student readers are prescribed particular sections by their instructors. Consequently, there are a few themes that need occasional reiteration in order to maintain the overall tenor of my arguments.

