

Letter

Political Theory in an Ethnographic Key

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Should political theorists engage in ethnography? In this letter, we assess a recent wave of interest in ethnography among political theorists and explain why it is a good thing. We focus, in particular, on how ethnographic research generates what Ian Shapiro calls “problematizing redescrptions”—accounts of political phenomena that destabilize the lens through which we traditionally study them, engendering novel questions and exposing new avenues of moral concern. We argue that (1) by revealing new levels of variation and contingency within familiar political phenomena, ethnography can uncover topics ripe for normative inquiry; (2) by shedding light on what meanings people associate with political values, it can advance our reflection on concepts; and (3) by capturing the experience of individuals at grips with the social world, it can attune us to forms of harm that would otherwise remain hidden. The purchase for political theory is considerable. By thickening our understanding of institutions, ethnography serves as an antidote to analytic specialization and broadens the range of questions political theorists can ask, reinvigorating debates in the subfield and forging connections with the discipline writ large.

In 2002, Ian Shapiro issued a challenge to political theorists—and the discipline more broadly—to stop “navel-gazing.” The problem, he claims, is specialization and the division between normative and positive thinking, which leaves political theorists increasingly unmoored from the empirical world and thus unable to comment critically on it, and political scientists incentivized to chase questions that are methodologically expedient rather than meaningful on their own. To correct for this he suggests we refocus research around problems, rather than methods and theories, which predetermine the problems we look for (and the solutions we find)—or as he puts it, “if the only tool you have is a hammer, everything around you starts to look like a nail” (Shapiro 2002, 598).

More than 15 years later, while political theorists are embroiled in methodological debates over realism and ideal versus nonideal theory, something appears to be brewing in political science that speaks directly to Shapiro’s challenge. After being out of favor for decades, ethnographic methods are making a comeback in the discipline, with a recent symposium in *PS* even speaking of an “ethnographic turn” (Brodkin 2017). One of the key promises of ethnography, according to its proponents, is to bring researchers “closer to the people, events, processes,

and institutions that the discipline seeks to understand” (Schwartz-Shea and Majic 2017, 97)—closer, that is, to the phenomena and problems of interest.¹ We want to argue that this turn to ethnography is auspicious not just for political science but for political theory as well.

Only a few years ago, blending political theory and ethnography might have seemed like an odd proposition. No longer so. The past few years saw the publication of a number of studies, including our own, that use interpretive ethnography as a means of advancing debates within political theory (Blajer de la Garza 2019; Herzog 2018; Longo 2018; Rubenstein 2015; Zacka 2017). This methodological combination is not altogether new. Theorists working within the feminist and postcolonial traditions have long relied on ethnography as a vehicle for social critique. But interest is now spreading to other areas of the subfield. One indication of this is the number of dissertation projects currently underway that aim to do political theory in an ethnographic key—we are aware of at least a dozen in North American and European universities.

Our aim in this letter is to take stock of this growing interest in ethnography among political theorists and explain why we think it is a good thing. We focus in particular on the capacity of ethnography to generate what Shapiro (2002, 615) calls problematizing redescrptions—accounts of political phenomena that destabilize the lens through which we traditionally study them, engendering novel questions and exposing new avenues of moral concern.² Ethnography is particularly good at this because, through its insistence on thick and detailed description as a starting point for inquiry, it

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¹ For more detailed discussions of ethnography in political science, see Yanow and Schwartz-Shea (2006) and Schatz (2009).

² For a discussion of what normative political theorists might gain from ethnography, see Herzog and Zacka (2019).

exposes us to a wealth of unstructured information that can unsettle our assumptions about what matters (Brodtkin 2017; Schatz 2009, 10–1). In so doing, it serves as an antidote to analytic specialization by alerting us to the remainder—dimensions of social reality that our existing categories fail to capture. If Shapiro is right that to take politics seriously is to focus on problems, ethnography offers a promising avenue for political theorists to do so.

In what follows, we first discuss what ethnography is and how it has been used within the feminist and postcolonial traditions, then identify three qualities of ethnography that might benefit other areas of political theory. We argue that (1) by revealing new levels of variation and contingency within familiar political phenomena, ethnography can uncover new topics ripe for normative inquiry; (2) by shedding light on what meanings people associate with political values, it can advance our reflection on concepts; and (3) by capturing the experience of individuals at grips with the social world, it can attune us to forms of harm that would otherwise remain hidden.

ETHNOGRAPHY AS CRITICAL CONSCIENCE

Ethnography is traditionally associated with participant observation. It is “a disciplined immersion in the social life of a given group of people” (Kubik 2009, 30) aimed at assessing “the ways in which ‘insiders’ on the whole understand their existence” (Schatz 2009, 7). In this letter, we take a somewhat broader definition of the term following recent studies that speak of an “ethnographic sensibility” (Pader 2006; Schatz 2009), which may encompass other interpretive approaches such as “historical ethnography” (Vaughan 2004), “relational interviewing” (Fujii 2018), and the close reading of cultural artifacts. What is essential is that the scholar attain proximity with the subjects of study, paying close attention to details—someone’s posture, the placement of furniture, their choice of words—with the presumption that such details are meaningful, and that their meaning depends on context. To adopt an ethnographic sensibility is to remain open to the idea that our object of study is not just a “case” to examine in relation to theories we hold independently, but something that “tells us more than we knew to ask” (McGranahan 2018, 7).

Although not commonly practiced in political theory, ethnography has for years retained a discreet presence in the subfield.³ Ethnographic approaches have proven especially apt at uncovering implicit biases within the discipline—challenging the universality of normative claims, bringing into view hidden sites of politics, and recovering the perspective of silenced voices. In what follows, we reflect upon our indebtedness to two traditions in particular: feminist and postcolonial studies.

³ For examples of works by political theorists and social scientists who speak across the empirical and normative divide, see Mansbridge (1980), Scott (1990), Wedeen (1999), Hayward (2000), and Pachirat (2013).

Ethnographic research in feminist studies dates back to the women’s movements of the 1960s and 1970s, as scholars realized that understanding institutionalized oppression would have to begin with the perspective of those who are oppressed, rather than with the common sense wisdom of theorists, which could be laden with patriarchal and heteronormative bias. Intimate exchange between researchers and the groups studied came to be seen as a necessary epistemological posture. This strand of research is alive and well; Brooke Ackerly (2008) has described the method as “feminist curb cutting,” by analogy to mobility restrictions that are most visible to wheelchair users, but that impede others too.

A recent example in this vein is Saba Mahmood’s (2005) ethnography of the women’s piety movement in Cairo. Rather than seeing practices like the donning of the veil as a sign of false consciousness or acquiescence to patriarchal norms, Mahmood enjoins us to see them as practitioners do—namely, as voluntary exercises through which one attunes oneself toward an ideal of pious virtue. Mahmood’s signal argument, *pace* progressive liberal feminism, is that agency exists not just in the subversion of established norms but also, as Foucault argued in his later works on ethics, in becoming a subject who inhabits such norms. Although the process of subjectification may serve to reproduce hierarchies, it is also generative of new capacities.

Recent years have also witnessed a turn to ethnographic methods in comparative political thought (CPT). Indeed, while CPT’s principal mandate has been the incorporation of non-Western thought into political theory, its approach is methodologically eclectic, with scholars drawing extensively on ethnographic and interpretive methods, especially in postcolonial settings (Ackerly and Bajpai 2017; Bajpai 2011).

A case in point is Humeira Iqtidar’s (2011) ethnography of two Islamist parties in Pakistan, Jam’at-e-Islami and Jam’at-ud-Da’wa, a study that underscores the distinction between secularism and secularization. Whereas secularism refers to ideologies that advocate the separation of state and religion, secularization stands for the process of rationalization through which religion is made into an object of collective debate. Iqtidar illustrates the distinction by teasing apart the doctrines that Islamists profess from the work that their political engagement performs. She thus uncovers a possibility that might sound puzzling to Western ears: Islamist movements may in fact be agents of secularization, even as they remain staunch critics of secularism.

Whereas feminist and postcolonial studies have embraced ethnographic methods, other areas of political theory have remained more circumspect. This is a fate that often befalls critical interventions, which can be acknowledged yet at the same time confined to a safe distance—a welcome corrective to the discipline’s errors, not a mandate to shape its research agenda. But just as feminist and postcolonial scholars have had to overcome this misperception, so too we believe it is important to show that ethnographic methods have a valuable role to play even in more traditional areas of political theory. We offer three reasons below.

ETHNOGRAPHY AND POLITICAL THEORY

Disclosing Variation and Contingency

To approach a political phenomenon through ethnography is more like using a microscope than a magnifying glass: we encounter not just a scaled up version of what we had seen from afar, but new dimensions of reality. Take for instance political institutions. The way we characterize them depends in large part on what we are interested in. If we have our eyes fixated on nation-states, it is natural to see borders as lines demarcating the boundaries between two sovereign territories. If we are concerned with the dynamics of policy-making, we might be inclined to think of bureaucracies as instruments that execute policy directives. Depending on our aims, these characterizations may be appropriate, yet they remain partial. One of the virtues of ethnography is that it allows us to appreciate what such descriptions leave out, disclosing new patterns of variation and contingency that could lend themselves to normative inquiry.

Consider the border. In one respect, it is simply a jurisdictional line between states. Thinking in this way enables theorists to ask whether borders can be justified or whether they should be abolished. But when you get close to a border, the separation line loses its salience. What you have instead is a buffer zone, with technologies of surveillance and cross-border partnerships stretching miles deep into both neighboring countries (Longo 2018). The border has its own stakeholders, local controversies, and daily indignities that affect not just migrants but residents too. As our understanding of the border shifts from a thin jurisdiction to a thick institution, we find that in many ways the line is the least significant aspect of bordering.

Moreover, as we look more closely at borders, interesting differences start appearing between them and thus new questions of normative interest arise. In addition to asking whether borders should exist, we could also inquire into the distinctions between different regimes of bordering. What *sort* of border would be most desirable? What about the people who live on both sides of the border and *their* interests—should they have a special say in what the border is like, and how might this implicate our understanding of sovereignty? These questions could be productively mined by political theorists; yet to ask them, we first need to conceive of the border differently.

Seeing institutions up close also gives us insight into how they work, uncovering informal processes, as well as zones of ambiguity and contingency. Many aspects of institutional behavior are carefully screened when presented to the outside world. In official discourse, public service bureaucracies often describe themselves as hierarchical entities governed by standard operating procedures. This self-presentation does not flatter bureaucrats, but it shields them from having to take responsibility for their choices. Researchers positioned within such organizations, however, experience an operation shot through with indeterminacy (Zacka 2017). It is not that rules are absent; rather, they are

often so vague or numerous that they conflict, opening spaces for discretionary judgment on questions of value even at the lowest ranks of the administrative apparatus.

If we thought that bureaucratic work consisted mostly of rule application, we might focus on enabling bureaucrats to detect when they ought to dissent—a familiar worry in political theory. If we thought, however, that bureaucratic work was suffused with indeterminacy, we might instead want to inquire into what bureaucrats ought to do when the rules run out. What normative considerations should they be sensitive to? And what would it take for them to remain alert to such considerations despite the pressures of everyday work? These questions are just as pressing as those about dissent; yet for them to gain purchase, we first need to understand how bureaucracies operate from within.

From Conceptions to Concepts

At its core, ethnography enables scholars to come into contact with the people they study. It rests on the notion that as individuals we are meaning-bearing and meaning-generative agents. The decisions we make—how we vote, what parties we join, what rallies we attend—are based in part on what meanings we ascribe to these acts, what significance they have for us.

Political theory too deals in meanings. When we develop a theory of justice, or democracy, we seek to capture what these terms mean to us, while making sure that our thoughts about them are coherent and systematic. One way we do this is by distinguishing between concepts and conceptions. Following Rawls (1971, 5), we take a concept to be an umbrella term that organizes a number of different conceptions. The philosophical understanding of something like freedom may not correspond exactly to how we ordinarily use the term, but a concept of freedom that were completely detached from our ordinary understanding would not be a concept of freedom at all.

By examining particular settings in detail, ethnography can help us understand people's conceptions of abstract concepts and how these vary across cultures, class, occupational realms, and so on. But ethnography can do more than this. By unpacking particular conceptions, it can also raise questions about the very nature of our concepts.

Take, by way of illustration, a recent study of motorcycle taxi drivers in Bangkok (Sopranzetti 2017), mostly migrant men who moved to the city from rural areas in the hopes of securing a stable income. Originally employed in factories, they were forced by the 1997 economic crisis to become full-time taxi drivers—a job that is dangerous, that involves a precarious income and longer working hours. Yet many choose to remain in this line of work even after they could have returned to their old jobs in the factories. Why? The drivers insist that what keeps them in the job is *'itsaraphāp*—the freedom or independence it provides. They cherish working at their own direction, regardless of the risks.

What are we to make of this conception of freedom? It does not neatly correspond to dominant accounts of freedom as non-interference or non-domination. It might be understood instead as a reaction to a particular experience of unfreedom in the factory. But if that is the case, that people's conceptions of freedom depend on past experiences of entrapment even at the cost of future entrapment, this suggests a rethinking on our part at the level of the concept. In particular, it casts doubt on the prospect of defining freedom as an *objective property* of the *present structure* of our relationship to others, which is essential to most philosophical definitions of the term. If freedom is instead conditioned on past experiences, it may resist objective, time- and space-independent characterization.

Is this a philosophically cogent understanding of freedom? Ethnography will not settle this question—that is the province of political theory. What it can do is provide the provocation. In this way, ethnography plays a role similar to genealogy, which, by tracing the evolution of our concepts and the conditions of their possibility, participates in changing our views about them. In many ways, ethnographies are genealogies of the present.

Experience and Harm

Besides understanding the meanings with which people make sense of their reality, ethnography aims to give us a sense of their experiences of the social world, what it is like to be a particular person in a particular situation. This is why ethnographers engage in *participant* observation, which allows them to experience with their own bodies and emotions an approximation—however tenuous—of what their subjects undergo. This focus on experience can help us arrive at a more nuanced understanding of forms of harm, some of which can only be grasped in light of particular experiences.

Take, for instance, the realm of welfare. Political theorists recognize that even policies that are seemingly reasonable can be ethically challenging to implement. In her ethnography of women's shelters in Chicago, Tanya Luhrmann (2010) found that many women with serious psychotic disorders end up on the street even when subsidized housing is available. From the outside, the lack of take-up is puzzling—what could be worse than homelessness?

Political theorists may be tempted to explain this outcome by appealing to what Jonathan Wolff (1998) has called “shameful revelations.” This refers to people being required to publicly disclose something they find shameful about themselves as a condition for getting public assistance. This concern is certainly pertinent: to obtain subsidized housing, one first has to be diagnosed with a serious psychotic disorder. But as an explanation, shameful revelation only takes us so far. After all, practically all public assistance programs involve some conditionality. And people often acquiesce to all sorts of indiscretions to secure the associated benefits. How could the promise of housing not be enough?

To arrive at an answer, Luhrmann had to dig deeper into the *experience* of homelessness. She described

a menacing world where one always had to be on guard, ready to stand up for oneself at a moment's notice, guarding one's possessions at all times while learning to navigate the maze of social services and making do with few or no friends. If you wanted to survive in that kind of environment, you had to be *tough*. The women who succeeded at this despite their own psychotic disorders spoke disparagingly of others in the shelter whom they considered *crazy*—those who had lost control over their own behavior. If you could not control yourself, you would not last long in such an environment. Being crazy was everyone's greatest fear.

It is in light of this experience that we can make sense of women's refusal to be diagnosed. To risk being told by a professional that they had a psychiatric disorder would not just be shameful; it would undermine the very self-conception and character traits that they had worked so hard to develop so as to survive on the streets.

Political theory has become increasingly attuned to the importance of expressive harm and associated forms of disrespect (e.g., Wolff 1998). In the realm of public policy, this means being concerned not just with the intrinsic merits of policies but also with their meaning for those who are affected by them. And yet, if we want to understand why people are attached to certain meanings, we need to look at their experiences too and in so doing, develop a more nuanced and graduated understanding of forms of harm. This is a task for which political theory and ethnography can work hand in hand.

OBJECTIONS

Although the use of ethnographic methods in political theory has its proponents, we anticipate three objections. The first regards a status quo bias. Doesn't ethnography privilege the “here and now” in ways that unnecessarily limit the scope of theoretical inquiry? Perhaps. But we are not suggesting that all political theorists turn to ethnography. For those who do, we consider the timeliness an asset. What we need today are better ways to criticize the operation of borders and bureaucracies, not just better arguments for what a world without borders or bureaucracies would look like.

A second objection regards the disciplinary division of labor. Better for a political theorist to collaborate with an ethnographer than attempt to be a jack of all trades but master of none. This is a natural disciplinary repose. Certainly, political theorists have much to learn from reading ethnographies. Consulting the work of other researchers, as we have done in this letter, can give insight into the meanings people attribute to their social worlds. We believe, nonetheless, that something is gained when political theorists conduct fieldwork themselves. Ethnography is at core immersive. Exposure plays an epistemic role, with emotions alerting us to features of others' experiences—what is biting, taxing, demeaning—that are crucial to capture what constitutes moral harm. Moreover, political theorists approach the field from a particular hermeneutic vantage point

acquired through professional specialization in moral and political philosophy. Although some of this conceptual baggage may have to be jettisoned, this gaze may help unlock new areas of significance that differently trained eyes—those say, of an anthropologist or sociologist—may not register in the same way.

A final objection is that political theorists already do frequently use empirical material in their studies. This is true. But such material is all too often relegated to a subsidiary role: once we have normative solutions, we turn to empirical facts to test their feasibility. For example, David Miller writes: “political philosophers must also be social scientists, or at least be prepared to learn from social scientists. They need to discover what it would mean, empirically, to implement their principles, and they need to discover whether the ensuing consequences are acceptable” (2008, 47–8). This is a fine use of empirical material, but a limited one. The empirical world is there not just to test the results of our inquiries but to broaden our horizons as to which questions are worth asking.

CONCLUSION

The health of a discipline rests not just on its capacity to make progress on well-defined research agendas but also on its ability to generate new, probing questions about the world. It is for this reason, we believe, that political theorists are currently drawn to ethnography, because it lends new life to political phenomena that have been thinned out by our existing analytic frameworks. By showing how political theorists might deploy ethnographic methods, we suggest a way to cut through the familiar division of the discipline into empirical and normative inquiry, thus countering the scourge of overspecialization.

There is no small amount of irony here. Recommending as we do that political theorists embrace ethnography, we find ourselves back in the company of some of our most canonical texts. Didn't Tocqueville say that his decision to visit America was informed by the goal of not succumbing “to the need to adapt facts to ideas instead of submitting ideas to the facts” ([1840] 2000, 12–4)? This logic has guided a number of thinkers in our canon, beginning with Aristotle all the way to the first generation of the Frankfurt School. Perhaps what we are advocating then is less a departure than a return.

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