Engaging and Disrupting Power: The Public Value of Political Ethnography

M. David Forrest, *Oberlin College*

Debates about the public value of political science have grown more prominent in recent years. Responding to charges of irrelevance and attacks on federal funding for political science research, the American Political Science Association (APSA) and many of its members have intensified efforts to clarify and demonstrate the field's value, especially to elected officials, organized political advocates, and other important decision makers (Lupia 2014; Lupia and Aldrich 2015). This article extends and, to some extent, redirects these efforts by outlining the specific and underappreciated public value of political ethnography.[1] This value, I argue, stems not from political ethnography's capacity to serve important decision makers but rather its ability to foster democratic movements that hold these decision makers accountable to struggles for equality and freedom.[2]

Political ethnographic studies exercise this ability through their engagement with two significant and interrelated forms of power, both of which suppress democratic movements and remain largely overlooked in prevailing accounts of the public role of political science. The first form is the *calcification* of political debates—that is, the tendency of decision makers and other public actors (including social scientists) to reiterate the established terms of these debates, thereby limiting opportunities for democratic movements to voice contentious ideas. For example, in debates about the interests of disadvantaged groups, political advocates and social scientists often reinforce appeals to unity that calcify the presumption of commonality within these groups and, consequently, suppress challenges to intragroup inequalities (Beltrán 2010; Johnson 2007).

The second form of power is the *naturalization* of dominant sociopolitical arrangements or patterns of organization—that is, the tendency of many public actors to take for granted the emergence and perpetuation of dominant arrangements, thereby limiting opportunities for democratic movements to contest them. For example, since the 1970s, several elected officials have advanced neoliberal policies and discourses that naturalize capitalist market arrangements and, in doing so, hinder efforts to challenge the inequalities and domination rooted in these arrangements (Harvey 2005; Schram 2015).

Ethnographic studies of political life illuminate different perspectives and shared practices in ways that, I argue, can work to *disrupt* calcification and naturalization and foster democratic movements. This article situates and elucidates political ethnography's disruptive engagement with power, using examples from across and beyond political science. It concludes by suggesting how political scientists might better promote the disruptive value of political ethnographic research. Doing so, I contend, would productively diversify and enrich existing efforts to clarify and demonstrate the value of the field as a whole.

FROM PRECISION TO DISRUPTION: EXPANDING OUR CONCEPTION OF PUBLIC VALUE

Prevailing accounts of the public value of political science research tend to emphasize the precision this research can offer to important decision makers. Precision, in these accounts, signifies not simply factual accuracy and analytical cogency but also the reduction of uncertainty about sociopolitical arrangements and the resolution of political debates surrounding them. As Arthur Lupia—chair of the APSA Task Force on Improving Perceptions of Political Science's Value—argued, the value of political science lies in its ability to deliver "technically precise analyses of the past" that "significantly clarify the future implications of current actions" and enable "ever-increasing effectiveness and efficiency" (Lupia 2014, 6). Lupia and others rightly claim that research characterized by such precision may help decision makers ground their efforts in more transparently produced and generalizable knowledge.

Yet, by equating the value of political science with its capacity for precision, these accounts overlook researchers' abilities to pursue other valuable modes of public engagement—namely, disrupting calcification, naturalization, and other undemocratic forms of power (Forrest 2016). Rather than resolve political debates, for example, disruptive research questions the established terms around which different actors calcify these debates. And rather than reduce uncertainty about dominant sociopolitical arrangements, it highlights points of contingency in the emergence and perpetuation of these arrangements, undermining actors who perceive and construe them as natural.

Moreover and importantly, when social scientists pursue precision without also exercising their disruptive capacity, they sometimes exacerbate patterns of calcification and naturalization. As Schram (1995) showed, for instance, many studies of US welfare policy precisely analyze *and* calcify stigmas about "welfare dependency." In the process, these studies also unintentionally naturalize the difficult economic and domestic arrangements surrounding welfare participation.

Political ethnography is, I argue, exceptionally capable of disrupting calcification and naturalization. As the coming paragraphs show, this exceptional capability stems from its penchant for illuminating different perspectives and shared

practices in ways that challenge these undemocratic forms of power (Burawoy et al. 1991; Lyon-Callo and Hyatt 2003).[3]

"TROUBLING" THE TERMS OF POLITICAL DEBATE

Political ethnography can disrupt the calcification of political debates by presenting different perspectives in ways that "trouble" rather than reinforce the established terms of these debates (Pachirat 2009). Especially in cases in which the established terms of debate obscure threats to equality and freedom, political ethnography can articulate perspectives

focus they solidified through a series of concepts, models, and acronyms. In doing so, they produced what Cohn termed a "technostrategic" perspective. The defining feature of this now-dominant perspective—as Cohn discovered through her efforts to learn and use it—is its almost total inability to appreciate the relationship between nuclear strategy and human suffering. As Cohn's analysis showed, the technostrategic perspective is the consequence of a discourse that simultaneously sanitizes the destruction wrought by nuclear weapons, playfully sexualizes and domesticates their use, and deifies

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that counter these terms as well as problematize perspectives that buttress them, fostering more opportunities for democratic movements to voice contentious ideas. This "troubling" capacity of political ethnographic research takes at least three distinctive and, at times, overlapping forms.

First, many political ethnographic studies articulate their own dissident theoretical and scholarly perspectives, which draw attention to especially elusive and inconvenient facts that controvert the established terms of political debates. For example, such a dissident perspective emerges from Majic's (2014) ethnographic analysis of how nonprofit service organizations in San Francisco and Oakland have affected the oppositional politics of the sex-worker rights movement. As Majic noted, in debates about advocacy and political strategy, advocates and social scientists alike tend to equate political opposition with public protest, implicitly assuming that service-oriented nonprofits operate only as sites of political passivity. Indeed, even many of the nonprofit volunteers and staff members she studied made statements that reinforced this assumption (Majic 2014, 106–8). However, contrary to this common assumption, Majic's analysis of her participation in two specific sex-worker-run nonprofits revealed that organizational workers do, in fact, often cultivate strategies that allow them to advance an oppositional political project. This elusive and counterintuitive fact troubles the terms of debates about advocacy and political strategy. In other words, it exposes how these terms improperly and contestably limit scholars' and advocates' knowledge about the political opportunities facing the latter.

Second, political ethnography may trouble the established terms of political debates by deconstructing the dominant perspectives that various and often influential actors produce and adopt through these terms. Cohn's (1987) meticulous deconstruction of the perspective of "defense intellectuals"—that is, civilians in think tanks, government agencies, and universities who debate the role of nuclear weapons in US foreign policy—is an enduring example of this type of ethnographic analysis. Through their debates, defense intellectuals in Cohn's study maintained a dogged focus on identifying the strategic and rational utility of nuclear technologies—a

their users. By clearly linking defense intellectuals' debates to such a dehumanizing perspective, Cohn revealed these debates to be highly questionable and contestable rather than so-called rational endeavors.

Third, much ethnographic research troubles the established terms of political debates by listening for and sharing marginalized perspectives that oppose these terms. As they migrate "from margin to center," these perspectives throw such terms into stark relief and disrupt calcification (hooks 2000). Scott (1985), for instance, shared a chorus of such marginalized perspectives through his ethnographic analysis of what he called "everyday forms of peasant resistance." In his analysis, Scott (1985, 340–1) confronted the tendency among political organizers and social scientists to center debates about power on the assumption that "the primary obstacle to radical change is to be found at the level of ideas." Such debates turn almost entirely on questions about how to cultivate a disciplined and revolutionary consciousness among subordinated groups. However, by living and working alongside groups of poor Malaysian villagers, Scott found that such cultivation makes little sense when one considers the marginalized perspectives assembled by the subordinated themselves. Far from drawing on revolutionary ideals to underwrite their everyday and potentially transformational acts of resistance, villagers in his study gained ideological leverage from the "implicit [and broken] promises" embedded in *elite* justifications for the status quo (Scott 1985, 339). Having illuminated the marginalized perspectives of these villagers, Scott's analysis troubled the established and problematic terms of debates about power among many political organizers and social scientists.

DENATURALIZING SOCIOPOLITICAL ARRANGEMENTS

Political ethnography can disrupt the naturalization of dominant sociopolitical arrangements by highlighting shared practices in ways that cast even the most enduring and seemingly natural arrangements as contingent and contestable outcomes (Allina-Pisano 2009; Wedeen 2009). More precisely, it can show how networks of actors actually structure or undermine dominant arrangements through their shared practices,

thereby *de*naturalizing these arrangements and fostering democratic challenges to them. As with its capacity to trouble political debates, the capacity of political ethnographic research to denaturalize dominant sociopolitical arrangements takes at least three forms.

My own ethnographic research among community and antipoverty organizations in Minneapolis, for example, explained how social justice advocates' practices often unintentionally reproduce the political marginalization of the poor and other disadvantaged constituencies (Forrest 2014).

First, political ethnographic studies may highlight the practices through which various actors reproduce dominant sociopolitical arrangements. My own ethnographic research among community and antipoverty organizations in Minneapolis, for example, explained how social justice advocates' practices often unintentionally reproduce the political marginalization of the poor and other disadvantaged constituencies (Forrest 2014). One of these reproductive practices is the concerted effort among many advocates to magnify the appearance of their mobilized and disadvantaged base of constituent support—that is, to maximize this base's visibility at public events and in the media, making it appear larger than it actually is. Drawing on my experiences as a volunteer in three organizations, I traced how advocates successfully use this practice to work around the difficulties of actually mobilizing a large and disadvantaged base and, ultimately, to defend the legitimacy of their social justice efforts. I also found, however, that in focusing on magnifying their base of supportive constituents, advocates tend to withdraw from sustained efforts to expand it. Moreover, by withdrawing, they help to normalize and perpetuate the very *real* demobilization and political marginalization of many disadvantaged individuals. Whereas decision makers and scholars sometimes construe this marginalization as the nearly inevitable outcome of broader social structures, my ethnographic analysis denaturalized it by locating its reproduction partly within social justice advocates' contingent and contestable practices.

Second, many political ethnographic studies denaturalize dominant sociopolitical arrangements by highlighting transformational practices that subvert these arrangements. The Sangtin Writers—a group of nongovernmental organization (NGO) local women workers in Uttar Pradesh—and Richa Nagar (2006) illuminated (and also enacted) such a transformative practice through their ethnographic analysis of women's NGOs. This practice, which they termed "playing with fire," centers on producing knowledge that is "more accountable to people's struggles for self-representation and self-determination" (Sangtin Writers and Nagar 2006, 152). They formulated this practice in response to NGO bureaucracies that grant educated professionals almost total control over the production of pamphlets, reports, and other consequential forms of knowledge about women in Uttar Pradesh. To create more accountable knowledge and subvert this arrangement, the Sangtin Writers and Nagar engaged in autobiographical writing and collective reflection about the intersecting inequalities shaping their experiences. Rather than assume the necessity and normality of the dominant NGO model, their work denaturalized it, demonstrating its contestability and enabling a more participatory struggle for women's empowerment.

Third, political ethnographic research may denaturalize dominant sociopolitical arrangements by uncovering contradictory practices that paradoxically both reproduce *and* potentially subvert these arrangements. One example of a contradictory practice is the effort of US congressional leaders to restrict rank-and-file legislators' access to information, which Curry (2015) illuminated in his ethnographic analysis of power and party strength in the House of Representatives. Through his experiences as a staff member in Congress, Curry discovered that leaders—including majority party leaders and committee chairs—restrict information to secure the cooperation of their party caucus members. Overwhelmed by highly politicized and unreliable information about proposed legislation, members of the majority caucus typically trust these leaders to deliver information that is useful and politically relevant. This trust, Curry showed, empowers leaders to build support for their partisan legislative agenda (or at least decrease the likelihood that rank-and-file members will oppose it) simply by withholding information that these members might find politically unappealing. Yet, through participant observation, he also uncovered a paradox: restricting information also subverts leaders' power by frustrating members and eroding the trust that underlies their informational advantage.[4] Whereas many observers may frame congressional leadership power and party strength as the logical outcomes of shifts in contextual factors, Curry's analysis denaturalized this power and strength by situating it in relationship to leaders' contradictory informational practices.

PROMOTING THE PUBLIC VALUE OF POLITICAL ETHNOGRAPHY

This article has argued that the public value of political ethnography lies in its exceptional ability to advance political science as a disruptive (and not only precise) project—that is, as a project aimed at disrupting forms of power (i.e., calcification and naturalization) that suppress democratic movements. In particular, political ethnographic research analyzes different perspectives and shared practices in ways that can and often do counter these undemocratic forms of power. Consequently, to the extent that political scientists want their field to be a force in favor of democracy, they should ask: How

can we better promote the disruptive value of political ethnographic research?

In 2014, APSA's Task Force on Improving Public Perceptions of Political Science's Value published a report that attempted to show how APSA and its members can better promote the value of political science research to the nonacademic world. Toward this goal, the authors made 12 general

and freedom. While some decision makers in some publics are willing and able to work with scholars on this goal, many more are not.[7] Thus, calls for cooperation with these decision makers, like calls for broad accessibility, tend to obscure the disruptive value of political ethnography.

To more effectively promote this value, political scientists must address the foregoing problems by reconceiving the

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recommendations, including creating a "Speaker's Bureau" that can "match high-quality [academic] speakers to organizations," developing a "communications-training program" that helps scholars to "improve their communicative effectiveness and efficiency," and building an online library of "high-quality videos that relate political science to a wide range of social and pedagogical concerns."[5]

Although the Task Force's recommendations generally make good sense, the authors of the recommendations specified them in two ways that tend to obscure the disruptive value of political ethnographic research, thereby subtly discouraging efforts to promote this value. First, they repeatedly emphasized the importance of making political science research broadly accessible. Probably few readers would disagree that better demonstrating the value of political science will require, to some extent, improving its accessibility to members of various nonacademic publics. *Broad* accessibility, however, rests in partial tension with disruptive political ethnographic research, which aims not to resonate with a broad and general public but rather to foster democratic movements by troubling the terms of political debate and/or denaturalizing the sociopolitical arrangements that members of many different publics take for granted (see also Schram 2002). Consequently, by idealizing broad accessibility, the Task Force's recommendations at least partly obscured the value of political ethnography.

Second, and relatedly, the authors of the Task Force recommendations primarily emphasized reaching out to and cooperating with important decision makers. To be sure, at multiple points, they formally called on political scientists to communicate with, as they said, "diverse audiences." However, the examples they used to fill the audience category mainly included elected officials, members of the news media, and others who—at least in the context of these examples[6]—occupy the role of key decision makers. Again, probably few readers would disagree that better promoting the value of political science will require at least some cooperative engagement with decision makers. Yet, any attempt to maximize this engagement also rests in tension with disruptive political ethnographic research, which—in challenging calcification and naturalization and fostering democratic movement—seeks not necessarily to cooperate with influential decision makers but rather to hold them accountable to struggles for equality

Task Force's helpful efforts in two ways. First, in addition to emphasizing broadly accessible analyses, they should recognize and commend the types of troubling and denaturalizing analyses found in disruptive political ethnographic research. The point in doing so would *not* be to celebrate inaccessibility but rather to acknowledge that the limited accessibility of some ethnographic analyses exists precisely because they disrupt publicly accepted patterns of calcification and naturalization. For example, precisely because Cohn's (1987) analysis disrupts the calcification of debates about nuclear strategy, it may fail to resonate with many defense intellectuals and other individuals exposed to these debates. By acknowledging this tension and emphasizing the importance of troubling, denaturalizing, and otherwise challenging analyses, political scientists may better prepare themselves to promote the disruptive value of political ethnography.

Second, political scientists should reach out to disadvantaged members of the public in addition to important decision makers. Because the former group is disadvantaged, they and others acting in solidarity with them are much more likely to appreciate and support the capacity of political ethnography to disruptively engage power and foster democratic movement. For example, women who are systematically disadvantaged within the NGO sector probably are more likely to embrace the democratic implications of the Sangtin Writers and Nagar's (2006) denaturalizing analysis than the educated professionals who occupy leadership positions. Because these disadvantaged audiences and their allies often are more likely than others to welcome the disruptive value of political ethnography, efforts to promote it almost certainly would benefit from context-specific and cooperative engagement with them.

In recent years, political ethnography has achieved much greater recognition within political science. Moreover, a new generation of political ethnographic studies has made significant contributions to the study of several crucial topics (de Volo and Schatz 2004; Schatz 2009). However, amid efforts to better clarify and demonstrate the public value of political science, the capacity of political ethnography to disruptively engage power has been underappreciated. Acknowledging and promoting this disruptive engagement promises to enrich and diversify these efforts in ways that support democratic politics. ■

NOTES

1. In this article, "political ethnography" denotes research approaches that use *immersion*—typically in the form of participant observation and/or in-depth interviews—to examine the sources, operation, and consequences of political life (Schatz 2009). Although these approaches take on various and sometimes divergent methodological orientations, my observations speak in one way or another to the public value of all of them.

2. By democratic movement, I mean any collective effort—informal as well as organized, "insider" as well as "outsider," less visible as well as highly visible—to expand political inclusion and/or political competition in ways that challenge the perpetuation of inequality and domination.

3. To be clear, in arguing that political ethnography is exceptionally capable of disrupting calcification and naturalization, I do not suggest that it is somehow inherently drawn toward this goal. Ethnographic approaches to the study of politics also are undoubtedly capable of nurturing precision along the lines suggested by Lupia (2014). Neither do I suggest that political ethnography is uniquely capable of disrupting power. For example, political historians' examinations of the distant past also can effectively question and critique patterns of calcification and naturalization (Hattam 2000).

4. Albeit, as Curry (2015, 193) explained, this contradictory effect "should not be seen as an extremely stringent limitation on leaders' abilities to leverage their informational advantages."

5. These recommendations are published in Lupia and Aldrich (2015).

6. The positions of influential decision maker and disadvantaged, of course, can shift across contexts. For instance, in Curry's (2015) analysis, the rank-and-file legislators who are systematically disadvantaged within the US Congress also act as influential decision makers vis-à-vis their congressional districts.

7. See, for example, Nagar's account of the backlash that her and the Sangtin Writers' ethnographic analysis provoked from key decision makers in the NGO sector (Sangtin Writers and Nagar 2006, xliii–xlvi, 132–40).

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