“Thoughts on ethnography and political science”

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“Political Scientists Gone Astray: Bringing ethography into the picture”
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Last year at this conference I presented a paper on how my training in political science, and more specifically in International Relations, had not prepared me to do the kind of work I needed to do in the former Yugoslavia.[1] Through a series of anecdotes, I detailed the kinds of experiences that formed the background to my book on the wars of the 1990s.[2] These experiences were not “data collection” but, rather, informally “hanging out” with people in kitchens and cafés, as well as my own personal experiences “in the field,” as an American with a family including two small children, living in Zagreb during wartime, and travelling through the region after the war. I concluded:

> “My experience as a US political scientist in the Balkans during and after [war], my experiences of sitting in rooms and cafés, of fear and destruction, led me to reconsider myself and my own position, as well as that of mainstream political science and IR.”

The response to that paper was very positive, and led me to organize this roundtable.

First a couple of words on the name: Political scientists gone astray. It is a bit tongue in cheek, but in fact I and others on this panel, trained in political science, feel that we have had to “go astray,” that is, pursue our research and writing in ways that go beyond “permissible” limits of mainstream political science. We have each used ethnography in some way, and have thus breached the disciplinary boundaries that we learned in grad school. But each of us has found it necessary to “stray” beyond those boundaries in order to answer the questions we found interesting. I want to discuss these boundaries.

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One of the effects of my experiences “in the field” has been a kind of alienation from my

1 “Experiences as a US Political Scientist in the Balkans, or How I Came to Value Anthropology,” presented at the annual conference of the ASN, April 2007.
2 V.P.Gagnon, Jr., *The Myth of Ethnic War: Serbia and Croatia in the 1990s* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004).

training. I was trained to be "objective," to analyze my subjects dispassionately. There was a clear distinction between that which was to be studied and the "scientist" who was doing the studying. In addition, I was trained to think of myself as an expert, someone with specialized knowledge of a particular academic discipline – international relations – as well as of a particular region – the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia. It was this expertise and training that was supposed to position me as outside of and separate from what I was studying.

The disciplinary expertise depended on mastering the IR literature. The field had clearly bounded borders which were policed; violators of those borders were disciplined with such epithets as not really being "IR", "reductionist", or being a person who deals in "real estate." Thus the senior professor who asked why I was wasting my time studying Serbo-Croatian was signalling to me that I wasn't really doing IR., as was his colleague who declared the "IR people don't do field work." Likewise, when I was on the job market, I was told directly and indirectly that I'd never get a good IR job because I wasn't doing "real" IR.   I was trying to understand phenomena in the international arena by looking at what was happening within the borders of states, and in particular by trying to understand the actions of state-level elites on their own terms rather than adhering to – or being limited by – the IR theoretical literature. I did this because IR theoretical explanations put off-limits some of the most interesting and, for me, compelling possible explanations.

The regional area of expertise clashed with the IR one, and had its own problematic. As I was doing my degree in Soviet studies, I saw a constant insecurity and need to "prove" one's expertise in the region. Language abilities (or lack thereof), the degree to which one had "friends" in the target society, especially among the intelligentsia, the amount of "insider information" one had from those friends, the interviews one had with various top level academics and political elites – these were the standards of expertise.   In effect, it was one that ensured insecurity. No American scholar, no matter how well trained, versed and experienced, could or would ever have a "native's" knowledge; yet natives weren't considered experts.   Indeed, there was also a distancing taking place, perhaps as compensation, and as a way to reinforce the

position as expert. Here the scholar reassures onlookers that he/she has not "gone native," that while they had lots of insider information and connections, they were still "objective." Such reassurance takes several forms, including making jocular comments that serve to reinforce US stereotypes of the target society, often taking the form of a patronizing stance toward that society and its people(s).

There is another determinant of expertise that I discovered as the wars in the former Yugoslavia heated up in the early 1990s: respect for the acceptable limits of mainstream media discourse in the US. Going beyond those limits disqualified one from being an expert as much as "going native." As the war in Croatia was raging, I was contacted by a national public television news program. The person I spoke with probed my views of the conflict, which at the time were not in line with what the mainstream media was reporting. After a knowing, and dismissive, "Oh, I see where you are coming from," I was turned down. That evening Robert Kaplan appeared on the panel in the spot they'd talked to me about. Later, as the war raged on, I found that my argument – explaining the ways in which conservative forces in Serbia under the leadership of Slobodan Milosevic instigated violent conflict – was seized upon in the most simplistic ways by media as well as scholarly publications in order to reinforce their point that Milosevic was evil. Yet later, when my piece critiquing US democratization projects in Bosnia was about to be published in an edited volume, the head and former head of a major US source of funding effectively (but unsuccessfully) pressured the editors to remove my essay from the volume. The anonymous reviewer of the essay likewise had a very emotional response to the piece, taking issue with it not in a scholarly way, but rather in a tone that could be described as vitriolic, and openly questioning my expertise.[3]

From these experiences I saw that this disciplinary disciplining was not about "finding truth" or "scholarly integrity." But I wasn't sure what it was about. Little did I know that I was already doing ethnography.

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3 "International NGOs in Bosnia and Herzegovina: Attempting to Build Civil Society," in *The Power and Limits of NGOs: A Critical Look at Building Democracy in Eastern Europe and Eurasia*, Sarah Mendelson and John K. Glenn, eds. (NY: Columbia University Press, 2002).

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As I went into the Yugoslav "field," a field that included people I'd known since long before I became an "expert," I found myself in an uncomfortable position. I was encouraged and even expected to interview top political and academic figures, even though I was only a grad student or recent PhD. It was expected that these figures would make the time in their busy schedules to speak with me. It was clear to me that a Belgrade University PhD candidate or junior scholar working on US politics would have minimal chance of setting up such meetings and interviews with top US officials. I saw that far from being an objective dispassionate analyst, I was in fact a person with a certain kind of "cultural capital," namely, an American. It was this "American privilege" that gave me access to people who, if I were a Kazakh or Ghanaian of similar professional status, would probably not find the time to meet with me. My position as an American was thus a part of the story; my interviews and interactions couldn't be seen as merely "data gathering," because they were intersubjective relationships. The act of interviewing was a kind of performance, that was a very small part of a much bigger story.

Likewise, in my hanging out with people in kitchens and cafés, I heard them telling stories about what had happened to their country. As I explained in my paper last year:

> Far from being a mere "observer," I have a role in this ongoing story. In each of the above situations, my presence, as an American who spoke the language, who had personal relationships with the people present, sometimes pre-dating the war, gave them the opportunity to tell their stories of their experiences, to explain to me — and probably also to themselves — the meanings that these events had for them and their families. These meanings were not simple, straight-forward, or clear-cut. Far from being attempts to "manipulate" me, these friends were themselves trying to make sense of events that had shattered their previously-known worlds and to reconnect to the wider world. My presence as a witness was in some ways a catalyst for them to explain the meanings that they were arriving at.

My presence was part of the story, and to talk about what happened in the former Yugoslavia without including my own experiences as a background to the story that I tell is to leave out an important part.

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In the late 1990s I was asked to research US NGOs that had come to Bosnia and Serbia to

promote democracy. As I interviewed American "democracy promoters" I was struck by their self-assurance, by their ignorance of local society and history, and especially by their belief that they didn't need to know any of those things in order to run what were at times multi-million dollar projects. Indeed, several of my interviewees saw local staff and local knowledge as not just irrelevant, but as obstacles to success. They effectively dismissed locals as the equivalent of children, or as untrustworthy and sneaky, and thus in need of constant supervision and direction.

These experiences led me to turn the focus of my work away from the "other" towards ourselves. Why are we Americans in the Balkans? What is the goal of these interventions? Why are Americans attempting to "spread democracy"? I have concluded that these projects tell us much more about ourselves than about our objects of study. I've been led to explore the literature on the construction of race in the US, in particular the construction of a notion of "whiteness."[4] These experiences have also led me to think about the missionary impulse, and the degree to which a secularized version of that impulse is part of a particular US self-conception or identity, which in turn drives US behavior abroad.[5]

Indeed, all of the factors I touch upon in this paper, from disciplinary expertise and disciplining, to hanging out with friends, to the question of US NGO workers in the Balkans, point to that same question. In short, the "ethnographic experiences" that I described in my previous ASN paper, the research I've done post-war, and the above described factors have led me to see ethnography not as a way to more accurately gather data or describe post-war Yugoslav societies. Rather, they've led me to see ethnograpny as a way to think about the nature of the US mission in these other societies.

To this end, and in conclusion, I'd like to quote a paper given at the recent ISA conference in San Francisco, by political scientist Wanda Vrasti, titled "The Strange Case of Ethnography and International Relations." Citing my IC colleague Naeem Inayatullah and his co-author David

4 "Liberal multiculturalism as part of the problem with post-Dayton Bosnia," paper presented at conference "Accomodating Difference in Bosnia-Herzegovina: Ten Years After Dayton," Christian Michelsen Institute and Center for Human Rights, University of Oslo; Bergen, Norway, May 2005.

5 "Secular Missionaries in Post-Conflict Societies: External attempts at societal transformation in SE Europe," paper presented at the annual meeting of the International Studies Association, San Francisco, March 2008.

Blaney, Vrasti argues that "The task of 'provincializing' IR, and the attention to cultural difference this task requires, *is* ethnography. ... [T]he ethnographic praxis is to make sense of the self and the cultural-political positioning of the self in the world through a detour through the other."[6] What I realize is that the ethography I've been doing hasn't been a means to understand Yugoslav societies. It's been a means to understand my own.

6 Citing Inayatullah and Blaney, *International Relations and the Problem of Difference* (NY: Routledge, 2004).