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Ethnography of Politics and Political Communication: Studies in Sociology and Political Science

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[–] Abstract and Keywords

The ethnographic approach has particular potential for studying political communication through enlarging understandings of political institutions and expanding definitions of "politics." First, widening *institutional understanding* takes advantage of ethnography's capacity to open windows that traditional analysis of political institutions leaves shut. Second, ethnography is uniquely able to examine *new forms of engagement* that people have not *yet* defined as "politics." Third, studying political communication ethnographically means expanding the *modes of communication* and activity examined to include nonverbal and virtual communication. Politics is one of the principal arenas in which "culture" unfolds and becomes observable, yet in ways that are not limited to political institutions or decision-making practices. Common to political ethnographies is the capability to show how "how" and "why" are linked: how a political process or practice takes place enables finding out why it does.

Keywords: politicization, depoliticization, participation, ethnography, everyday practices, organizational style, empowerment project, conflict, sedimentation, level of generality

Why Ethnography and Politics Are a Necessary Match

An essay on ethnography of political communication must begin with two questions: What do we mean by "political," and what do we mean by "ethnography"? Depending on these definitions, there are either very few ethnographies of political communication or a substantial number, spanning the disciplines of communication, sociology, political science, history, business, and policy. As for the definition of "political ethnography" and its salience, recent debates, especially in the field of political science, have argued about different definitions of the concept and its position in the academic field with such zeal that we consider it unnecessary to enter this fray (see Tilly, 2006; Auyero 2006; Auyero and Joseph, 2007; Yanow, 2009; Kubik, 2009; Pachirat, 2009; Warren, 2009; Schatz, 2009a, 2009b; Wedeen, 2010). Instead, we focus on discussing the findings and consequences of the ethnographic approach to political phenomena, by means of a few particularly illustrative examples.

In the widest possible sense, the ancestors of today's political ethnographers wrote travel descriptions first, and anthropological accounts a little later, about distant cultures in which societies were organized and the polis was constituted and acted on in ways unfamiliar to Western traditions. These historical accounts continue to remind us that understanding politics requires multiple strategies of analysis.

A similar challenge to our taken-for-granted definitions of "politics" confronts Western-educated investigators who conduct cross-cultural ethnography. These temporal and spatial leaps force the researcher to confront something that other researchers can more easily avoid: the puzzle of defining some interactions and activities as "politics" and others as "not politics" a priori, without deeply understanding the context and situation. As Clifford Geertz (1973, 311–312) noted, politics is one of the principal arenas in which the structures of meaning we habitually call

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"culture" unfold and become observable. What unfolds, then, is not limited to political institutions or decision-making practices, but both reflects and constitutes a vast array of activities and meanings with widely different scopes of political consequences, ranging from the obstacles of politicization experienced in a poor French suburb to the motivations of keeping up with exhausting political work in US Senate-level campaigning (cf. Hamidi, 2009; Mahler, 2006).

In this chapter we argue that the ethnographic approach has particular potential for studying political communication through enlarging common understandings of political institutions and expanding common definitions of "politics." First, widening *institutional understanding* takes advantage of ethnography's capacity to open windows that traditional analysis of political institutions leaves shut. By prying these windows open, ethnography, when done well, forces us to see what meanings-in-context constitute these institutions. Peering inside the "big," institutional structures of politics shows how they are intricately and precisely composed of elements that typical research does not theorize as part of "politics"; by the same token, ethnography also forces us to notice atypical political processes and arenas, outside of the institutionalized forums. Thus, second, ethnography is uniquely able to examine *new forms of engagement* that people have not *yet* defined as "politics." Third, studying political communication ethnographically also means expanding the *modes of communication* and activity examined to include, for example, nonverbal and virtual communication. In addition to their impact on empirical outcomes, such as patterns of voting and activism, varied media that include nonverbal and virtual communication can have implications that challenge standard definitions of politics.

Current political ethnographies are undeniably indebted to streams of writing and research going back to the early modern Europeans' travelogues describing exotic cultures, and from there on to the tradition of linguistic anthropology. Nonetheless, in this text we concentrate principally on the work of ethnographers from the past couple of decades to stress the crucial role of ethnography in understanding what is most proper to current political communication: mediated flows in globalized, complex, and transnational settings. The need to understand these transformations brings us to the particular and increasing importance of political ethnography today. In the current plurality of contexts for political communication, multiple levels, styles, and means of communication are simultaneously influential, and the lack of tools to grasp this multiplicity hampers political analysis. In a world of global and "glocal" (Brenner 2004) crisscrossing meanings, weak signs grow in importance. Political ethnography is at best a form of inquiry that specializes in weak, barely visible signs, habits and practices hidden from news headlines, and the counter trends that may be bubbling underneath them, sometimes taking the headlines as well as macro-level political analysis by surprise.

How Different Organizations Close Down, Open Up, and Shape Political Communication

So how surprising have the news headlines from the political ethnography channel been, in recent years? What have we learned, really, and what is specifically ethnographic about these findings? In this section we explore political ethnography from three overlapping perspectives: the ethnographic accounts of studying "established" political institutions or action; the grasp of political processes and capacity to recognize politics in fragile, new, and/or unexpected contexts of an ethnographic approach; and the ethnographers' tools to analyze and understand obstacles, hindrances, and the lack of politics that largely escape other research approaches. We look at these perspectives by sketching bodies of studies that share certain features and through illustrative examples highlighting those features.

Ethnographic research on politics sensitizes analysis of the ways that different organizations invoke different kinds of political engagement. It does so by taking into account the "nitty-gritty details and effects of different forms of political action, networks and tactics," as Auyero and Joseph (2007, 3) describe the benefits of political ethnography in introducing their edited volume on the theme. In other words, ethnographic studies show how political practices reflect, construct, and occasionally transform organizations, expanding, contracting, or reshaping the possible places for political expression.

This feature makes ethnography a useful approach for studying various kinds of political organizations and processes, with the promise of results that reach beyond not just surveys and policy analysis, but also interview-based studies. Be it "business as usual" or change and crisis moments of more or less institutional politics, NGOs, collective action, and social movements, ethnographic studies show that political communication takes shape and

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has various consequences as it unfolds in different types of organizations, contexts, and situations, and that general talk about political cultures should always be evaluated with precaution, with a careful inspection of the everyday practices through which the "cultures" materialize (e.g., Abèles, 1991; Lichterman, 1996; Sampson, 1996; Eliasoph, 1998; Mische, 2009; Moore, 2001; Elyachar, 2002; Baiocchi, 2005; Mahler, 2006; Steinhoff, 2006; Yon, 2009; Eliasoph, 2011; Luhtakallio, 2012).

Learning Participation, Displacing Politics?

One example is the worldwide "participation industry," which has been given the task of renewing and saving democracy from a crisis (e.g., Moore, 2001; Baiocchi, 2005; Talpin, 2006; Polletta and Lee, 2006; Lee, 2010). But what does participation actually produce, and can it save democracy by simply being implemented? In a comparative ethnography of organs of participatory democracy in France and Italy, Talpin (2006) describes the "effects" of deliberation among the participating citizens. He notes that over time, something indeed changes in the participants' actions; they learn how to participate—appropriately. This means that they, in his words, learn to "play good citizens," which includes asking the right kind of questions and avoiding saying anything that might seem too controversial or "out of place." Talpin concludes that it seems arbitrary to try to separate deliberation as a practice from its supposed effects, as deliberation is the process itself. Separating deliberation from its effects would be like separating the dancer from the dance. What the citizens learned first and foremost was to deliberate according to the guidelines set and kept by the local political leaders. As Lee's startling studies also show in the US context, playing good citizen in these situations that the participation industry tends to create can often require entering a rather apolitical or even depoliticizing game (Lee 2010).

This example is not chosen to show that participatory democracy is a sham, but to stress that the internationally promoted image of participatory democracy does not actually capture these processes. Rather, these forums teach people a kind of organizational style (Eliasoph and Lichterman, 2003). They learn to follow the "rules of the game." One cannot become a decent member of the neighborhood council, the bureaucracy, or the activist group, for that matter, until one knows what the unspoken "organizational style" is. The importance of mastering the organizational style to learn appropriate modes of participation is not new; Mansbridge (1983) describes how and why, in the classic site of civic engagement, Vermont town meetings, working-class people routinely could not bear to be outspoken participants.

In a more current site of civic life, Eliasoph (2011) portrays programs that aim at fighting social exclusion and promoting empowerment among underprivileged youth. These "empowerment projects" end up doing something quite different from what they are designed to do. In the whirlpool of project-based government funding, evaluations, and unspoken missions, the young people learn to represent "underprivileged youth" and talk and act in a fashion that satisfies the expectations of the program planners. Instead of being empowered in ways that the doctrine of these programs promises, they become capable of playing in the world of projects where money is scarce, goals unrealistic, and the results sought very far from their own realities. They learn how to navigate these quasi-governmental, quasi-civic, quasi-political organizations that receive funding from state and nonprofit sources—a skill that may come in handy if they themselves end up getting jobs in this increasingly prevalent "hybrid" nonprofit sector. In this way, participants are in fact learning how to navigate our current *political* world, in which it is increasingly difficult to find the boundary between "government" and "nongovernmental organization" all over the world—where some NGO's budgets and political power exceed those of many governments. Along with this political structure comes a political culture—for example, in the form of an increasingly international language that an anthropologist studying NGO's efforts at building civic life in Albania calls "projectspeak" (Sampson 1996).

This is not to say that the "structure" of an organization determines its styles of communication. In the Brazilian, university-based activist groups that Mische studied, three very different styles predominated. In one, members tried hard to always agree and bond and express their feelings; in another type of group, members sharpened their swords with loud debate verging on fights; and in still a third type of activist group, members explored ideas without feeling the need to conclude anything (2001).

Studies such as Mische's show that we should be uneasy when we talk about political culture "in general" and wary of making broad international comparisons. Instead, the spectrum of comparative analysis widens and gains in color, detail, and pertinence when carried out with ethnographic tools. In comparing French and Finnish styles of politicization, Luhtakallio (2012) showed that broad international comparisons are nonetheless possible. There are

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features that characterize large cultural entities, and analyzing how they come to be—that is, through and in what kind of processes they actually exist—is the key to understanding what is it that makes them "general features." At the same time, important fissures and weak signs of change that mainly escape the eyes of policy analysis–based model builders become apparent, and seeing these seemingly insignificant features of political engagement makes it possible to get beyond two-dimensional comparisons. Luhtakallio, for example, concluded that on the one hand, when examined close up, the French contentiousness in interactions between activists and decision-makers included activists' implicit knowledge that they were contending with stagnant, out-of-reach hierarchies that kept the power configurations intact. On the other hand, the Finnish culture of consensus and inclusive decision-making included putting a lot of effort into quelling conflicts and depoliticizing issues of controversy, instead of dealing with them through a political process.

Finally, all these examples show that be it the "participation industry" or another type of political institution or group, careful ethnography can tell us an additional, a different, and sometimes even the opposite tale from the official story, and the stakes can be high.

"Politics" in the Making … and Not

The second perspective elaborates on the ways ethnography provides for tools to recognize politics in the making and the crucial but hard-to-catch processes of politicization and depoliticization, politics happening and failing to happen (Carrel, 2006; Eliasoph, 1998, 2011; Hamidi, 2006, 2010; Luhtakallio, 2012; Lichterman, 2005). Both are features that statistical, macro, interview-based, and even multimethod analysis mainly ignores: to render something visible that is all but not there yet, or does not happen, requires ethnographic crafting. Yet these processes are crucial in grasping the essence of politics. Here the question is how new issues emerge, and what hinders them from emerging, on the agenda.

Ethnographers often become interested in new, nascent forms of politics before other students of politics notice them. Political ethnographies bring to the fore the blurring of borders of habitual fields of action in showing things that are emerging and have not yet solidified into "politics" but are social work, or theater, or voluntary aid work. This is due not only to their sensitivity in recognizing political processes, but also to the logic of ethnographic research: no institution, structure, or research context is a "given" when the meanings and meaningfulness of action are under scrutiny. Furthermore, the ethnographic approach is probably the most prominent tool for analyzing the whys and hows of the *absence* of politics: the variety of hindrances and obstacles to politicization and fragilities and failures of political processes. (Huspek and Kendall, 1991; Eliasoph, 1998; Carrel, 2006; Wolford, 2006; Auyero and Swistun, 2007; Näre, 2011). We next consider these two sides of how ethnographic research captures situations that constitute politics.

Hamidi (2006, 2010) envisions a conception that can include political action (*le politique*) that takes place outside the sphere of institutional politics (*la politique*), such as established social movements, but also activities that are not easily recognized as political to begin with and in which the actors do not necessarily "actually think" they are engaged in political activism. Hamidi talks about graffiti writing, asking whether tagging is a form of "political communication." She says that the question is a bit wrong: whether tagging is a form of politics or not depends on how the taggers imagine it and talk about it in relation to what Hamidi calls "organized conflict." This approach steers a middle ground between searching too "low" and saying that tagging is, of course, a form of vague "resistance," versus searching too "high," only examining official, public discourse aimed at changing policy. Hamidi's definition combines the necessary "conflictualization" (Duchesne, 2003) that denaturalizes a problem—the essential first step in politicization—with an approach that organizes varied objects into a category that is large enough to act upon. The latter can mean naming the forty-seven humiliations experienced by immigrant youth as "examples of racial discrimination." This is the process of "raising the problem to a level of generality" as the authors of *On Justification*, the influence of which in European political research is nearly inescapable, put it (Boltanski and Thévenot, [1991] 2006). It is also the key to the process that leads from the "I want" to the "We have the right to" that Hanna Pitkin described as the metaphor for a process leading to public-spirited thinking and principles of justice.

Hamidi's study (2006) also puts her "enlarged concept of politicization" to work when figuring out why there seemed to be so little "politics" going on in the associational activities of immigrant-dominated suburbs. Despite the often conflictual setting of the activities, conversations in the associations were rarely "political" in any obvious

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sense. It turned out that there were features that were particularly efficient in taming political expressions, such as defining a problem as being of a psychological nature or stressing the urgency of the case of, for instance, a victim of domestic violence, instead of including political reflection in the process of helping out.

In a similar manner, Eliasoph (1998) concludes that particular organizational styles turned situations and activities that could have a political dimension into something else: people combating a proposed toxic dump in their neighborhood could analyze the corporate policies that make so much toxic production possible, and they could discuss the government's role in allowing so much toxic production, its lax regulation, and its own share of toxic waste production, when they mention that the US military is the largest toxic producer in the nation. They could say to one another quite clearly that the waste should not go in someone else's backyard. They could say this kind of thing over breakfast with one another or in casual conversations outside of meetings with one another. But the moment the radio and TV mikes go on in a press conference, these same people say, "I care because I'm a mom," and express concerns about their own local neighborhood. There was a pattern: what they can easily say in one context—in casual contexts—was hard for them to say in another—the press conference—and the result was an evaporation of political speech from public situations.

Carrel (2006) notes in her study—concerning politicization processes in consciousness groups for residents of a disadvantaged neighborhood—that as important as recognizing politicization is recognizing the fragility of these processes. Carrel tells the story of "Lila," who has been on the list of applicants for government housing for several years. Lila is a participant in a social worker–led group in what is called a "difficult neighborhood" in Paris. She is an unemployed young mother, a French citizen of Algerian origin. In the kick-off meeting of the group, she is angry and aggressive, reluctant to participate at all. A social worker had put in a great deal of effort persuading her to attend. The principal reason for her attitude was that she had waited for a long time to get an answer to her housing application and had become convinced that her application had been deliberately "blocked" by a Mrs. Martin, manager of the housing services, whom she openly accused of racism. She rocked between resignation and rage, having received no detailed explanation for the failure of her application. Over a period of six months, Lila and Mrs. Martin engaged in an exchange and an inquiry into the procedures that determine who gets public housing. Lila learned that while the local council collects applications and decides on a preselection, the final decision is made elsewhere. Thus, Mrs. Martin was but one link in a long chain of decision-making. Lila debated and confronted, along with the group, the inadequate provision of public housing and the opacity of the granting procedures. During this experimental program of participatory democracy, she shifted from "I am a victim of racism, they don't want to give me housing" to "As applicants for public housing, we demand explanations from elected representatives and administrative authorities." Lila's shift provides Carrel with a textbook case of a Pitkin-inspired instance of "I want" becoming "we have the right to." At the end of this project, Lila gave a public speech before the housing management committee criticizing the opacity of the process and the inadequate provision of affordable housing in the area. This was the peak of her engagement, however. After finally acquiring an apartment, she withdrew from political activities (Carrel, 2006).

Lila's is a story of a successful political learning process, and at the same time a story of the fragility of these processes. Even once it happens, politicization is not something a person possesses or an achieved group characteristic. It may be tempting to think of it as an achieved state of affairs, which comes with a big solid box of "civic skills" (Verba, Brady, and Schlozman, 1995), but following the process over time, with the patience and eyes of an ethnographer, reveals the situational nature of politics and politicization. Political emancipation of "the poor and marginalized," as this case would seem to be, may not be a lasting, linear progress story even once it has started, but exactly the kind of "come-and-go" of "raising justifications to a level of generality" that Hamidi (2006) describes. Undeniably, Lila went through a process of emancipation of some kind, and yet a year later, when the ethnographer returned to the field, Lila was not an activist, nor did she express any political interest—on the contrary, she had withdrawn from all participation, going nearly all the way back to her original position, except that now she was no longer homeless. Should the people who ran this experiment in participatory democracy call this a success? In some ways, it certainly was—she was no longer homeless. But in another way, it was not: Lila's passion for democratic participation was evanescent and vanished when she got the apartment she needed.

In a study of environmental suffering in the "Flammable" shantytown in Buenos Aires, Auyero and Swistun (2007) show how an ethnographic approach can reveal reasons for collective passivity. Inhabitants of a polluted poor neighborhood in the vicinity of an oil refinery kept *waiting* for a change in their dangerous living conditions, instead of acting. They were hesitant and confused, living in a generalized cloud of not knowing what to do and when, not

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knowing if a change was about to take place or not. The authors show how this general atmosphere came into being, defining everyday life in the neighborhood. The antipoliticizing effects of small enhancements and vague but constant (and mainly unkept) promises by the authorities and corporate representatives positioned the local inhabitants' sense of time, as Bourdieu has put it. Rather than living on their own calendars, it was as if they were living on a calendar that was oriented to others.

By slowing down the camera like this, ethnography can reveal obstacles to political engagement and the personal and social consequences of political engagement and its absence. In sum, it can uncover the fragility of political processes.

Theorizing Politics through Ethnographic Evidence

It may seem obvious that if one wants to study political communication, one should study a political organization—an activist group, political party, or public hearings, for example—and theories from Tocqueville onward point to civic associations as the places to go if a person is looking for the cultivation of civic skills. When the ethnographer selects a site according to what seems, in the light of theory or "common sense," to be the dependent variable, she usually finds something other than the expected. An ethnographer can discover the qualities of relationships and material conditions in workplaces, or churches, or political activist organizations that shape political communication one way or another, showing how and why political communication arises where it does, and when, and between whom. Ethnography, in other words, takes the concepts of Burke's "pentad" (1945) and shows how they reflect and create everyday *situations*.

These situations, repeated often enough in a widespread enough way, create organizational forms that shape the kinds of political communication that can unfold therein. Milburn's remarkable book (2009) on communication patterns in nonprofit organizations in the United States shows this "sedimentation (Ricoeur 1991" clearly. "Often enough" and "widespread enough" are, of course, admittedly vague terms; further research could clarify how and when people come to recognize what is acceptable in a new kind of organization. Eliasoph's (2011) exploration of these processes in nonprofit- and government-sponsored youth volunteer programs offers an initial way of thinking about the processes of sedimentation. In an era of state "devolution" of crucial government functions—for example, social services, education, policing—to nonprofits and "community-based organizations," studying these cases, which are more and more prevalent, is a way of examining the state's new configuration. This is the new face of the state—which is still the first thing people mean when they say "politics." The problem is that it is no longer as easy as it once was to say, with certainty, "this is 'government,' and this is 'not government.'" Now the state's boundaries are not so clear. "Widespread enough" and "often enough" may be good enough for now, since our seemingly solid structures are more obviously *processes*, sedimenting and eroding and re-sedimenting into things that look solid, till they dissolve again. Ethnography helps remind us that history does not "freeze," but is a series of path-dependent events that never just stop (Warren, 2009).

Another way that ethnography makes us retheorize political engagement is by showing how people "embody" it. For example, Mahler (2006) examines extremely dedicated "politicos," who work day and night with seemingly boundless energy. Mahler's case consists of politicians and campaign workers on the Senate level and the questions of what has made them take politics as a vocation and what keeps them at it. Mahler shows—with a rather rare approach (in ethnography) based on biographical and historical accounts—that the observable political actions are not what makes the political experiences special, but instead the "feel": the way people enact them together, fueling and refueling each other's passion in a mutual conflagration of spiraling energy, that allows these super-activists to survive with almost no sleep for weeks and even months at a time when they are working hard on a campaign.

Detailing the levels of engagement in political processes can be the principal objective of a study, as it was in Olga Koveneva's comparative study of the alternative grounds for the protection of environment and defense of the area in a French and a Russian nature park, which portrayed the differences in how actors in the two contexts related themselves to the material world they were defending and the ways in which these differences affected political action (Koveneva 2011). The park was a shared political space in both contexts, but the process of politicization grew differently and had different impacts according to the level of "communicating the common" the people practiced. The French nature-defenders spoke and acted on a public level of justifying their arguments,

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proving the representative nature of their groups, and grounding their claims on expert knowledge. The Russians, in contrast, refrained from public justifications and communicated mainly on the level of familiar, local loyalties and engagements, diminishing the possibility of a public political process considerably. Thévenot's (2006, 2007) theoretical work provides the idea of the three regimes of engagement: publicly justifiable engagement, engagement in a plan, and familiar engagement. The first is the level of "politics," with its anchorage in public justifications. Nevertheless, as Mahler's and Koveneva's works both show in different ways, political action and processes of politicization do not reside exclusively in the realm of "public," but are instead complex combinations of routines, habits, plans, and choices. The key question in understanding these processes and their different grounds in different contexts is the question of moving from one "level" to another and transforming people's personal and particularistic attachments into issues of higher levels of generality. In all these studies, it becomes clear how the "how" and "why" are related; to learn how a quality of engagement arises opens a route to finding out why it does. This theoretical apparatus is almost exclusively based on ethnographic research that provides tools sensitive enough to capture these momentary processes (see Thévenot, Moody, and Lafaye, 2000; Doidy, 2005; Thévenot, 2006, 2007; Koveneva, 2011; Breviglieri et al., 2009 Charles, 2012).

Unanswered Questions and Current Challenges

Many ethnographers have recently begun to explore virtual communities and the multilevel and multimedia mobilizations taking place online, creating new understanding of belonging and corporeality in political processes (Fay, 2007; Laine, 2011). Corporality and its absence present a new, underexplored avenue for thinking about political ethnography. Feeling its absence in online communication heightens our awareness of just how much political communication is nonverbal.

The following example from before the Internet era highlights both the nonverbal and the materialized features of politics: When East and West Germany merged after the fall of the Berlin Wall, and police officers from the former communist East and capitalist West had to get along and forge a new government body in their new republic, their everyday habits were different, in major and minor details. For the East German officers, for example, it was normal to take off the uniform at home, while for the former West Germans, it was proper to take it off before leaving the precinct office. This difference in habits makes sense when one considers that in East Germany, housing was allocated mainly through a person's job, whereas in the former West Germany, private, home life was as separate from work life as it is for us in the United States; home and work were more separate. The taking off of the uniform solidifies this in a convenient "device," as Latour (2005) or Thévenot (2006) would put it. Participants implicitly know that the uniform, or its absence on the way home, summarizes a whole way of life and a whole political system. In the spirit of this anecdote, we need more research, not necessarily on Web activism in a vacuum, but on the relations between embodied and disembodied political communication (e.g., Polletta and Lee, 2006; Laine, 2011; Luhtakallio, 2013). The problem in this regard is how to track these kinds of underlying features of politics deliberately: Where do we look if we don't know where it is? How do people, and organizations, connect and disconnect their embodied selves to/from their online selves?

Another set of challenges for ethnography of political communication is the puzzle of doing comparative research. In the pressing task of increasing transnational understanding on political engagement, ethnography is an important research strategy. But it is difficult to know what can stand as equivalents from one society to the next. Already in this chapter, American readers reading about Carrel's case of public housing would have a very different set of assumptions about it than the French people in her case. Our US welfare state is (still) so much weaker and smaller than theirs that it might even seem strange that anyone, much less an immigrant, would take housing as a right that the state must guarantee. If we were to conduct ethnography in the United States, could a public housing project stand as equivalent enough to function as a comparison? We doubt it. In Hamidi's studies of French immigrants from North Africa, could we use them as equivalents to immigrants to the United States? Or would they be equal to African Americans, since immigrants from France's former colonies in North Africa are, de jure anyway, full citizens, as blacks are here? If we wanted to study a nonprofit here, would it be the same as studying one in a nation that had a strong welfare state? One way around this puzzle is to study the same organization across various nations—for example, Amnesty International (Gray, 2007). Another is to do what Luhtakallio (2012) has begun, by showing how activities that look similar in different nations face similar tensions in meshing their different missions, but solve them very differently.

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Finally, as the discussion of Web-based citizenship and activism shows, it is a great challenge, and an even greater opportunity, for ethnographers to find out how to delocalize our inquiries. Since early ethnographers such as Gluckman wrote about seemingly local events, it has been clear that the "here and now" is never just here and now. In Gluckman's famous colonial-era case (1958, 1967), a bridge in Zululand was inaugurated, and the local ceremony reflected and embodied and reproduced not only local power relations, but also a whole set of relations between colonizers and colonized. His task was to show that a participant simply could not understand the ceremony without this implicit background knowledge. When, to take a more current example, Mexican immigrants in Los Angeles become union activists in their new place of residence, they have one imaginary foot in LA and the other in Mexico; the activism is both here and there, and the money, the people, and the imaginations flow back and forth (Fitzgerald, 2004). The local is never just local, but is always haunted by these invisible ghosts. Ethnography's challenge is to reveal these invisible ghosts as they proliferate and move faster and faster.

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