

**Hanging Out in International Politics:  
Two Kinds of Explanatory Political Ethnography for IR**

Forthcoming in *International Studies Review* (July, 2015).

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**Abstract:**

The use of ethnographic methods is on the rise in International Relations. However, research in this area has largely been constrained to critical or interpretive analysis of non-traditional objects of study. This has been driven in part by two practical problems that limit ethnographic analysis: that of aggregation, since international phenomena are necessarily large in scale, and access, since institutional settings are often closed or secretive. While we commend critical and non-traditional research for driving much-needed expansion of the disciplinary agenda, we offer a complimentary account, arguing that scholars can also use ethnographic methods in explanatory research. To do so, we draw on two methodological literatures in anthropology. The first approximates ethnographic research through historical immersion. The second applies ethnographic methods at multiple research sites, tracking transnational phenomena across them. The paper sketches prospective studies of each kind, concerning the creation and implementation of the United Nations. While neither method is entirely new to IR, the methodological literatures in question have yet to receive systematic treatment in the field.

**Word Count: 14,990**

**Acknowledgements:** The authors would like to thank especially Edward Schatz, along with Simon Pratt, Johanna Nykanen, Janice Stein, Jeffrey Kopstein, participants in a panel at the 2013 ISA Annual Convention in San Francisco, three very helpful anonymous reviewers, and the journal's editors.

## Introduction

Political scientists, including scholars of International Relations, have made increasing use of ethnographic methods over the last two decades. This shift has been accompanied by intensive debate over the role and practice of ethnographic research in the study of politics: what kinds of questions it can rightly address, what kinds of data it can gather, and how data should be interpreted. Thus, while ethnographic fieldwork is robust and growing among political scientists, how it should be conducted, and why, remains contested.<sup>1</sup> In political science writ large, disagreements arise in part because ethnography is methodologically distinctive both in what observational and participatory knowledge it acquires, and in how it makes that data useful for explaining and interpreting the social world.

Such disagreements about the role of ethnography seem to be especially strong in IR. This owes in part to apparent practical limits on ethnographies of international politics. Since IR traditionally addresses itself to large-scale phenomena such as great power politics, and to events occurring behind the closed doors of governments and international institutions, IR ethnographers face problems of aggregation and access [“scale and secrecy” (Schatz 2009a:307)] somewhat more acutely than other fields. Perhaps for this reason, ethnography in IR has tended to address issues and empirical matters that traditionally lie at the discipline’s margins. Such research has done much to broaden the discipline’s scope, by bringing in new objects of study and subjecting the core of discipline to trenchant and needed critique. A lively debate persists about the proper application and purpose of ethnographic methods.<sup>2</sup> However, relatively little ethnographic research directly addresses core or traditional areas of emphasis for IR.

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<sup>1</sup> For reviews in IR and elsewhere in political science, see: Vrasti (2008), Wedeen (2010), Lie (2013). For general methodological guidance, see: Bayard de Volo and Schatz (2004), Gusterson (2008), Schatz (2009b).

<sup>2</sup> See, for example: Vrasti (2008), Rancatore (2010). The discourse on ethnographic methods in IR now also includes a journal, *International Political Anthropology*.

This article takes stock of the “ethnographic turn” in IR, showing what ethnography can and has done, and in so doing re-evaluates the method’s potential scope of impact in the field. We aim to facilitate bridge building between international political ethnography and more traditional explanatory tools of IR research. Our purpose is primarily constructive: we show not that certain kinds of international political ethnography are correct and others not, but that these tools can be adjusted for application not only to critical or empirically localized projects, but also to more conventional areas of study for IR. We do so by exploring practical frameworks in anthropology for applied ethnographic research that permit IR scholars to deliver ethnographic analysis in unconventional ways. To date, much methodological importing from anthropology to IR has been theoretical.<sup>3</sup> We aim to counterbalance this with hands-on advice for research design and practice. In so doing, we review how ethnography can be used to address explanatory questions in IR research, both on its own and in conjunction with other methods. We then draw on two emerging trends in broadly ethnographic work. Both have roots or counterparts in anthropology, but these have not always been systematically drawn out. Our purpose is to synthesize: much of the methodological research we review by anthropologists has yet to be fully taken up by IR, or has not been taken up systematically.

The first of these methods involves modeling primary historical research on ethnographic methods. Drawing on approaches occurring at the intersection of ethnography and history can allow the researcher to recreate and understand localized fields of subjective and intersubjective meaning (Cohn 1980; Medick 1987; Ohnuki-Tierney 1990a; Murphy, Cohen, Bhimull, Coronil, Patterson, and Skurski 2011). IR scholars can thereby gain a quasi-ethnographic grasp of important historical events and processes, often drawing on primary written sources. A large

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<sup>3</sup> In addition to sources above, see: Yanow and Schwartz-Shea (2006), Brigg and Bleiker (2008).

literature on historical analysis in anthropology (including the subfield of ethnohistory) offers ways to do this.

The second approach involves conducting conventional ethnographic immersion across multiple locations. So-called multi-sited ethnography, a term coined by Marcus (1995), offers a way to address transnational phenomena as a participant observer, by linking socially connected research sites across a single study (Marcus 1995; Hannerz 2003; Falzon 2009b; Coleman 2011). Since phenomena of interest to IR scholars are rarely singly located (and are even more rarely so when one excludes closed institutional settings), this offers a way to apply IR-ethnographic methods to international-political phenomena that are transnational or global in scope.

In order to clarify possible applications, we offer examples of possible studies designed to use each methodological toolkit. These are drawn from the institutional-cultural history and contemporary practices of the United Nations. The first concerns the founding of UN institutions, and attendant institutional cultures. The second concerns the acquisition, provisioning, and distribution of food aid by the World Food Programme. While these examples are strictly prospective, they serve to clarify the analytical scope of the methods on offer.

The article begins by discussing ethnographic methods, their extant uses in IR, and the apparent barriers they present. It then discusses the value of explanatory ethnography, and how such approaches may be deployed in combination with other methods. It goes on to elaborate the two options described above, suggesting possible projects in which they could be applied. It concludes by discussing remaining limitations on immersion in IR and assessing prospects for future research.

## Ethnography and IR

Ethnography itself remains a somewhat contested concept even among cultural anthropologists, despite its centrality to their discipline.<sup>4</sup> It is usually conceptualized as both a data gathering tool and a broader interpretive ethos. Geertz's (1973b:6) classic account notes that "doing ethnography is establishing rapport, selecting informants, transcribing texts, taking genealogies, mapping fields, keeping a diary, and so on. But it is not these things, techniques and received procedures that define the enterprise." Instead, the defining feature is ethnography's distinctive aims. For Geertz, the focus should be on humanity as "suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun... the analysis of it [is therefore not] an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning" (Geertz 1973b:5). Borrowing from Gilbert Ryle, Geertz terms this "thick description," a term that has been widely appropriated by ethnographers in IR. The data gathering process that produces it has generally consisted of immersion: describing and assessing a particular socio-cultural context through direct and lengthy participant observation, and assessing data gathered thereby through hermeneutical or interpretive methods.<sup>5</sup>

Ethnographers have continued to expand the approach beyond the *in situ* immersion of participant observation to include "interviews, conversational and discourse analysis, documentary analysis, film and photography, life histories," and other materials that permit thick or "deep" description of a culturally distinct setting (Hobbs 2006:102). This expansion of research materials has been linked to long and often wracking debates over recent decades about anthropology's purpose, including both its research goals and its role as a site of social critique.

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<sup>4</sup> Since our concerns are primarily practical, we do not dwell at length on well-trod philosophical accounts of interpretation, hermeneutics, and related matters. Key texts on interpretation in social science include Taylor (1971), Geertz (1973a).

<sup>5</sup> Renato Rosaldo terms this process "deep hanging out" (quoted in: Clifford 1997:56), a phrase from which we draw our title.

These critical self-assessments, prominent in the 1980s (see for example: Clifford and Marcus 1986; Marcus and Fischer 1986), questioned the nature and purpose of ethnography as both a method and a genre of writing.<sup>6</sup> Echoing these self-examinations, much of the literature on ethnography in IR has focused on the method's theoretical status: on what kinds of questions it can ask, on what it permits us to infer, on how it stands in relation to other methods, and on its status as a "critical" enterprise. Indeed, these matters can sometimes seem the dominant issues surrounding IR ethnography (Vrasti 2008; Rancatore 2010; Lie 2013).

That so much ink has been spilt on theoretical aspects of international political ethnography is striking, since the most immediate and foreboding constraints on studying world politics ethnographically are practical. Ethnographic methods pose a double challenge for scholars of IR concerned with relatively conventional areas of study—problems of access and aggregation that seem to make the study of international politics resistant to thick description by a participant observer. IR scholars cannot generally gain inside access to governments or international institutions (Schatz 2009a:306). Even banal, everyday matters of official conduct are often shrouded in secrecy, both from other international actors and from domestic political rivals.<sup>7</sup> The state often black boxes itself, leaving the researcher with little access to immersive experience. As Schatz (2009a:307) notes, these problems are not unique to IR: "Conducting ethnographic immersion about matrimonial relations between spouses might be no more possible than conducting a similar study about the causes of war."<sup>8</sup> Inversely, if studies of quotidian social life can be made possible through careful and creative research design, perhaps

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<sup>6</sup> For a useful gloss of this history, contextualized in personal anecdote, see Carsten (2012). However, as Wedeen (2010:262–64) notes, debates among anthropologists have since largely moved on to other matters.

<sup>7</sup> Black boxing the state can often be theoretically and methodologically justified—see Waltz (1979), Fearon (1995). Interpretive approaches are more likely to have recourse to the socio-cultural settings inside governments and other institutional frameworks.

<sup>8</sup> Likewise, international political phenomena are not without correspondences and linkages to other social phenomena. For example, as Neumann (2013) has shown, the social practices of diplomacy are shot through with longstanding, often quotidian social practices not usually linked with diplomatic formality.

international political ethnography can as well. However, sites of likely investigation by IR scholars still seem especially challenging, being as they are often official sites of concentrated power, able to remain closed to outside observers.

Moreover, institutional closure to investigation is linked to a second practical difficulty: aggregation. IR has classically framed itself as the discipline focused on large-scale, transnational phenomena. A focus on local sociocultural specificity can therefore seem ill suited to addressing macrosocial phenomena like great power war, the global economy, and international institutionalization. The small pool of sites where localized ethnographic immersion might seem intuitively helpful (sites of authority in governments and international institutions) are precisely those bureaucratic settings where access is least likely to be granted. Here again, the problem is not unique or absolute: anthropologists may also address themselves to phenomena involving scale. Indeed, they have done so increasingly as the discipline has moved out of its traditional research site in the archetypal remote village. Still, the issue is significant, since IR, perhaps as much as any field of study, deals in matters that are large by any measure. How can the study of the local be brought to bear on phenomena defined by the scope of their aim and impact?

Existing ethnographic studies of international politics have addressed these issues in several ways. Some have taken them as an opportunity to widen the discipline's scope. For example, instead of addressing nuclear deterrence, Gusterson (1998, 2008) addresses the social life of nuclear scientists. Similarly, Cohn (1987) embedded herself with defense intellectuals, reporting on the professional discourse and culture through which they addressed themselves to nuclear strategy.<sup>9</sup> Elsewhere, ethnography of international institutions was permitted simply by

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<sup>9</sup> See also Galtung (1986), who provides an anthropological sketch of UN bureaucracies, but does so in general and often structural, rather than closely observed ethnographic, terms.

being in the right place at the right time. Barnett's (1997, 2003) study of the UN response to the Rwandan Genocide resulted from his happening to be a policy officer at the US Mission to the UN at the time of the genocide. Systematic access of this sort has been relatively rare. Neumann (2002, 2007, 2012) is almost alone in accessing the upper levels of government institutions and gathering ethnographic data in real time and at length, the result of years spent in the Norwegian foreign ministry, where his immediate object of study was the quotidian practice of diplomacy.<sup>10</sup>

These are fruitful and productive expansions of the disciplinary agenda, and are in many respects reason enough for the discipline to engage ethnographic methods. However, while these studies indicate that the problems of access and aggregation can be overcome, they offer no systematic way of doing so. As a consequence, while they prove the value of an ethnographic approach, none gives rise to systematic prescriptions for IR-ethnographic research design. While their authors clearly aim to make ethnographic work more common in IR, and offer advice for research (Cohn 2006; Gusterson 2008), basic practical problems of how to study core the subject matter of the field continue to lack systematic solutions.

Despite these constraints, the interpretive ethos of ethnography is already at work in much of the discipline. Emphasizing culture and process over material outcomes, constructivists have the strongest theoretical linkages to ethnography in IR. Constructivist empirics however have tended to rely on existing historiography, on interviews, or on other publicly available information.<sup>11</sup> These sources, while useful, and while also available to ethnographers, are not the primary materials of ethnographic research. However, attempts to broaden the methodological

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<sup>10</sup> This is not to exclude de facto international political ethnography conducted in other disciplines. While, we cite examples throughout this article, the range is large and diverse enough to resist easy summation here. See also for example Wodak (2009).

<sup>11</sup> Classic examples include Adler and Barnett (1998), Risse, Ropp, and Sikkink (1999), Finnemore (2003).



scope of constructivism have often taken on an explicitly or implicitly ethnographic tone.<sup>12</sup> The result has been that constructivism exhibits what Schatz calls “an ethnographic sensibility that goes beyond face-to-face contact” (Schatz 2009a:308).

Two related recent trends in IR nonetheless suggest grounds for framing constructivist and related research in broadly ethnographic terms. First, the recent “practice turn,” among chiefly but not exclusively constructivist IR scholars, suggests further affinities (Adler and Pouliot 2011).<sup>13</sup> Since practice emphasizes social life as lived—as *done*—investigating it calls for irreducibly experiential or immersive research. Bueger (2013b) especially has linked empirical study of practices to participant observation and other forms of immersive study (especially the study of texts), under the rubric of “praxiography”. This emphasis on practice suggests both additional affinities between ethnography and the study of international politics, and a remit to expand the range of empirical material available, since the study of practice often involves non-traditional ethnographic materials such as texts (we turn to this below, under historical ethnography).

Second, a recent turn toward actor-network theory (ANT) suggests that ethnographically investigating sites of power and knowledge construction may be especially fruitful. Existing studies focus on phenomena ranging from airport security (Schouten 2014), to state failure (MacKay 2006; Bueger and Bethke 2013), to global finance (Porter 2013), to international organizations (Bueger 2013a).<sup>14</sup> Since ANT has deep roots in anthropological immersion—originally aimed at laboratory science (Latour and Woolgar 1986; Latour 1987; Law 2004)—this

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<sup>12</sup> See, for example: Pouliot (2007).

<sup>13</sup> The turn toward the “logic of practicality” (Pouliot 2008) in IR draws on Bourdieu (1977, 1990), and on research in social theory more broadly (Schatzki, Knorr-Cetina, and Savigny 2000).

<sup>14</sup> A recent forum in *International Political Sociology* (Best and Walters 2013) addresses ANT in IR. For a sympathetic critique, see Nexon and Pouliot (2013) in the same issue.

theoretical reorientation suggests significant methodological affinities with the broader “ethnographic turn.”

These approaches are methodological fellow travelers of ethnography. They illustrate not just that it is possible in IR, but also that it can be used to conduct substantial explanatory research. Where Vradi (2008:283) has called for IR to move beyond the ethnographic prescriptions of the 1970s, adopting a more critical stance, Wedeen (2010:263–264) has gone further, calling for a move beyond anthropology’s philosophical and critical reflections of the 1980s and 1990s, toward the conduct of practical research. To that end, we aim to “update” IR’s ethnographic methods, by broadening their scope.

### **Explanatory International Political Ethnography**

In an effort to advance a more practical, empirical, applied IR ethnography, we take as a point of departure Wedeen’s (2010:257) contention that “interpretive social science does not have to fore swear generalizations or causal explanations and that ethnographic methods can be used in the service of establishing them.” While much ethnography is critical or chiefly descriptive in purpose, many studies, including the studies in IR surveyed above, offer explanations—analytical purchase or leverage on substantive phenomena of international politics. Ethnography is thus often distinguished from conventionally neo-positivist methods not by a refusal to explain, but by the kind of explanation offered. Ethnographic approaches are suited to answering certain kinds of questions, chiefly those that resist simple or intuitive causal explanations. Where explanatory causal mechanisms or consistent correlations—law-like regularities—are unclear even in retrospect, interpreting may be a prerequisite to offering an explanation.<sup>15</sup> We identify two ways in which ethnography may be used for explanatory

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<sup>15</sup> Relatedly, ethnography is like many other methods in that it may be, but need not be, critical. For example, broadly structural theoretical methods in IR may be aimed at conventional explanations (Waltz 1979) or at critically

purposes: first, as a means of developing causal explanations directly, and second as a pre-theoretical tool for developing the analytical concepts or categories from which explanations are built.

Employed on their own, ethnographic methods can and have answered a distinctive range of questions in IR, as we show above. Such accounts are often explanatory: for example, showing how and why the UN and its great power members did little to curtail the Rwandan Genocide (Barnett 2003), or explaining why diplomatic speeches persistently strive to say as little as possible (Neumann 2007). Such accounts demonstrate empirically how and why the world is as it is. Put differently, they address themselves to empirical puzzles, in the classic sense of the term: phenomena in the social world that should not intuitively be as they are. Such explanations are causal, in the sense that they explain what produced a particular outcome, or pattern of outcomes. An immersive approach allows explanation of cultural regularities that other methodological tools cannot readily access.

However, this is not the only explanatory use for ethnography. In combination with other methods, it can offer the researcher empirically grounded theoretical building blocks. Such theoretical component parts are sometimes readily available, but not reliably so. Both conventional social-scientific neo-positivism and sociological explanations based on Weberian ideal types seek to answer questions by identifying correlations or causal linkages between social phenomena. Where the component parts of an explanation are often themselves non-obvious, the first task analysts face lies in uncovering the building blocks of explanatory theory.<sup>16</sup> Where and

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re-evaluating and supplanting received world views (Wallerstein 1979). Scholarship is made critical by its purpose (Cox 1986), more so than by its method.

<sup>16</sup> Such explanatory components may be neo-positivist variables, or instead the components of a Weberian ideal-type explanation, of the type Jackson (2010:112–55) calls “analyticist.” Regardless, the moving parts of the explanation must be arrived at before the explanation can be derived. For neo-positivists this means identifying variables. For Weberian or sociological analysts, this means the process of ideal-typification. As Jackson (2010:147) notes, Weber is somewhat less than clear about how the process of deriving ideal-types should proceed.

when the foundational categories forming explanations remain contested, they may themselves need to be understood before law-like regularities may be established. This is a task to which ethnographic methods are often well suited. In such instances, interpretive and explanatory tools have a complimentary relationship: interpretive methods provide the tools or components of explanations that may be tested or evaluated using other approaches.<sup>17</sup>

In comparative politics, the use of ethnographic methods in this second way is most extensively associated with the work of David Laitin, who variously links socio-cultural conditions or contexts with political outcomes, addressing phenomena such as intra-state conflict in Nigeria, and Russian-minority identity emergence in post-Soviet states (Laitin 1986, 1998).<sup>18</sup> Similarly, Kalyvas (2006:247), in his otherwise quantitative study of the distribution of violence in civil wars, bases data collection on detailed interviews he characterizes as ethnographic. Laitin (2003) has elsewhere associated this mixed approach with three basic types of research: formal theory, quantitative analysis, and narrative, with ethnography corresponding broadly to the last. Laitin endorses the careful combination of these approaches in designing research.

Thus, where the first approach above treats ethnography as a source of explanatory research on its own, the second relies on a collaborative relationship between ethnography and other methods. Methodological pluralisms and cognate frameworks have recently proliferated in IR. Sil and Katzenstein (2010) call for an “analytic eclecticism” that transcends traditional methodological boundaries to permit empirical synthesis across them. Jackson (2010) calls for a pluralism that, while unwilling to rely on the willy-nilly recombination of methods, nonetheless

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<sup>17</sup> Indeed, they may be necessary to one another. As Hopf (2007) has argued, interpretive studies often implicitly employ positive methodological assumptions in their inferences. Inversely, positivist scholars necessarily implicate interpretations in constructing their analytical categories. For a sympathetic skeptical reading, see Chernoff (2007) in the same volume.

<sup>18</sup> See also a symposium in *Qualitative Methods* concerning methodological issues in Laitin’s work (2006), and Wedeen (2010:258–59).

endorses a plurality of philosophies of science in the discipline. Conversely, Monteiro and Ruby (2009a) call for a rejection of foundational philosophies of science as such, in favor of a “foundational prudence” that rejects philosophically grounded frameworks. Friedrichs and Kratochwil (2009) locate an alternative to such foundations in the task-oriented framework of philosophical pragmatism: here, social science becomes a social practice, marked by distinctive goals that shape research design and methodology. None of these approaches should be mistaken for an “anything goes” rejection of methodological rigor. Instead, the core common feature across them is a belief that science cannot be built from a single set of methodological or metatheoretical tools alone. The debate on how to make methodological pluralism philosophically and practically workable is clearly ongoing.<sup>19</sup> We take no position on it here, other than to note that all of these conceptions of social science offer both a place for broadly interpretive (including ethnographic) methods in the discipline. Moreover, most endorse, with varying degrees of reservation, mechanisms for cross-pollination across methods. While these accounts are all in favor of pluralism across individual studies, they disagree about the tenability of pluralism within projects.<sup>20</sup> In this article, we focus on the explanatory power of ethnography itself. Specific methodological combinations, and their philosophy of science implications, will likely need to be worked out at the level of individual projects. Since debates about foundations are ongoing, scholars may also vary in the frameworks they advocate for pluralism across methods. Thus, however important, it is beyond the scope of this article to treat them

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<sup>19</sup> All of these publications have been followed by fruitful, but as yet unresolved dialogue. Important references by and about these authors include Jackson (2009), Monteiro and Ruby (2009b), Ahmed and Sil (2012), and a symposium in *Qualitative & Multi-Method Research* (2010). On the application of such approaches, see Poteete, Janssen, and Ostrom (2010).

<sup>20</sup> Skepticism about methodological pluralism is strongest in Jackson, for whom the problems of translation across methodological and especially meta-theoretical toolkits make integrating them in individual projects difficult (Jackson 2010:210). Elsewhere, he argues for a more specifically defined role for ethnography in IR (Jackson 2008).

systematically. Instead, we offer a few remarks below under the rubric of the two ethnographic methods on how combinations may be possible in practice.

Our primary task is more limited and more concrete than resolving these philosophical problems. We aim to distill tools for *practical* international political ethnography. We do so by offering two approaches that broadly permit ethnographic data gathering and interpretation. These approaches may, in some instances, be useful in conjunction with non-ethnographic methods. The following sections set out two simple methodological toolkits for research design. Empirically, these tools show how researchers might begin to design research that brings ethnographic methods to bear in unconventional ways on an important area of research for the field: the creation and everyday operation of international organizations. Neither method is new. Both are, to varying degrees, well established in anthropology. Indeed, they have approximate counterparts in IR. However, IR research to date has not provided systematic guidelines for research. Thus, our purpose is to synthesize, making these emerging approaches more readily available.

Each account also offers examples of studies that might be conducted in these ways. In both, these examples offer alternate ethnographic accounts of the origins and operation of the bureaucratic cultures of the UN system. We have opted for new, potential or prospective cases, rather than descriptions of existing studies, for two reasons. First, while extant research is of great value (we note examples in both instances), few if any studies we know thoroughly and exclusively exemplify either approach. Sketching new cases makes clearer the contours of the methods, thus providing clearer guidelines. Second, these potential studies address the same class of phenomena: the emergence, cultural practices, and pathologies of the UN system of institutions. Focus on one empirical frame of reference allows for clearer contrast of the two

approaches' respective scope of applicability. While an anthropological sensibility has been brought to bear on the UN before (Galtung 1986; Barnett 2003), existing studies do not overtly or thoroughly adhere to these two modes of research.

The first applies ethnographic analysis to historical contexts. While IR scholars hardly need to be told to examine history, additional methodological frameworks for doing so permit additional questions to be answered—questions about how social meanings are created and re-created, and how these shared understandings constrain policymaking or condition cross-cultural interaction. While constructivists have long concerned themselves with these matters, a historical-ethnographic method can sharpen inquiry into not just how ideas shape outcomes but also how the ideas themselves are shaped. In so doing, it offers a distinctive way for ethnographic IR scholars to “study up,” focusing on past sites of power in international politics.

Second, since many publically accessible international phenomena occur over too large a space to facilitate localized “deep hanging out,” ethnographic inquiry can be conducted across multiple locations. Many important international phenomena are *transnational*, in the sense of occurring in multiple localities sequentially or simultaneously. Methodological advances in multi-sited ethnography over the past two decades offer opportunities to investigate them.

Both are, by degrees, already in use in IR. Documenting them programmatically offers an opportunity to expand and entrench their usage, by making clearer their utility and possible scope of inquiry. These are not the only distinctive approaches to ethnography available. For example, shadowing (Czarniawska 2007) offers a novel set of tools for research, especially in the study of organizations (Czarniawska 2008; Gill 2011). Event ethnography allows the study, often collaboratively, of large, singular occurrences like summits, protests, and other “mass” events (Little 1995; Brosius and Campbell 2010). Autoethnographic methods already have advocates in

IR (Brigg and Bleiker 2010). Such approaches no doubt offer additional scope for broadening the field's horizons.<sup>21</sup> We emphasize historical and multi-method approaches because, as we attempt to show below, they appear to offer the most untapped potential for IR research, and appear to most directly address the problems of access and aggregation we discuss above. Our purpose is not to downplay these other approaches, so much as to provide a necessarily selective point of entry to broadening the available methodological menu.

### **Historicizing Ethnography for International Relations**

Historical ethnography leverages primary historical sources to produce ethnographic understandings of past sociocultural settings. At first blush, a historical approach may appear to conflict with the implicit first rule of ethnography—that it must involve contact, immersion, participant observation: in a word, *presence*. However, an approach to past events that brings an ethnographic sensibility to archives, memoirs, interviews, and other primary source points of historical access offers to help recast the study of historical international politics. Indeed, rather than being a second-best approximation of “real” immersion in lived environments, historical approaches to ethnography offer a significant advantage: the ability to track emergence and change over longer periods of time.<sup>22</sup>

Despite locating itself geographically in archives and other sites of primary record, rather than in traditional sites of anthropological research, the method set out here remains

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<sup>21</sup> Indeed, one might add also meta-analysis of existing ethnography (Noblit and Hare 1988; Britten, Campbell, Pope, Donovan, Morgan, and Pill 2002). Such approaches differ from those take here in that they involve no new ethnographic inquiry. Such approaches have proven especially fruitful in the study of nursing (Paterson, Thorne, Canam, and Jillings 2001; Walsh and Downe 2005). For an importation to IR, see Hollinger (2013).

<sup>22</sup> Some political ethnographers have expressed skepticism about terming such historical research ethnographic: “while oral history, archival research, and open-ended interviews are qualitative methods of data gathering, and while all of these may *complement* the use of ethnographic methods, they are not ethnography” (Bayard de Volo and Schatz 2004:267 [emphasis original]). The anthropological literature at least partly disagrees with this view. While anthropologists using these approaches have not always termed them ethnographic, they have frequently used them to ethnographic ends. See also however Neumann's (2012:2–6) complimentary but nonetheless contrasting account of ethnography.



meaningfully ethnographic—it is not merely a new label for constructivist or discursive historical research.<sup>23</sup> The approach is ethnographic insofar as it focuses on the production and reproduction of political culture itself, and does so by way of immersion in these meanings. History becomes the site of culture best approached through thick description. If indeed “the past is a foreign country,” then researchers can approach it like an ethnographer arriving in the field.<sup>24</sup>

### *History and Anthropology in Dialogue—Assets and Pitfalls*

Combining history and ethnographic methods has a number of precedents.<sup>25</sup>

Ethnohistory, a subfield of anthropology, deals with the historical reconstruction of cultures to which ethnographers do not have direct access.<sup>26</sup> The last few decades have also seen a broader dialogue between historians and anthropologists, on the potentially fruitful relationship between the two disciplines. Cohn (1980:198) noted three decades ago that the two disciplines “Both aim, whatever else they do, at explicating the meaning of actions rooted in one time and place, to persons in another.” Broadly, the historical turn in some anthropological research has aimed to overcome the implicit assumption that cultures are fixed and static things that can be observed and recorded without reflection on their origins or trajectories (Ohnuki-Tierney 1990b:3). It thus expands rather than constrains the scope of analysis, improving rather than diluting it. Others have since framed a historical approach to anthropology as a way of regaining anthropological

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<sup>23</sup> Much constructivist research treats ideas as independent variables for explaining political outcomes. While many constructivists treat ideas as dependent variables in need of explanation, the methods used often differ from those discussed here. They may treat ideas differently (as identities or norms, rather than culture as such), and applying different methods, often discourse analysis. Discursive approaches treat the written or spoken source materials as webs or networks of signifiers, thereby making discourse itself the object of study. An ethnographic approach, even when it addresses itself to written materials, includes a material as well as discursive world in its scope of inquiry. On discursive methods, see: Hansen (2006).

<sup>24</sup> The quotation, from L. P. Hartley, appears in Comaroff and Comaroff (1992:14). Hartley (2002:17) adds that “they do things differently there.”

<sup>25</sup> Some such accounts may already be familiar to IR scholars. Much of the literature that informs Snyder’s survey of the anthropology of war is historical (Snyder 2002). Scott’s (1998, 2009) work is extensively informed by history. Elsewhere, historical ethnographic approaches have been especially fruitful in science and technology studies. See, for example: Latour (1993). See also Geertz (1990) on history. More recently, see discussion in: Michaud (2010).

<sup>26</sup> For reviews, see: Krech (1991), Harkin (2010). A journal, *Ethnohistory*, has been in print since 1954.

insight after the assimilation of “traditional” societies into the modern, industrial world (Sahlins 1993). As Marcus (1986) has noted, traditionally ahistorical ethnography obscures these processes.<sup>27</sup> Alternately, one may view an ethnographic approach to history as a way to recover historical nuance in the face of structural or otherwise narrowly macro-historical approaches to the past (Medick 1987). Thus, there are scholars in both fields who view a combined approach as not only possible, but potentially fruitful.

The approach is not, of course, without limitations. Historical ethnography does not provide direct ethnographic access to the international political present. Because archival and documentary materials are likely to be available only long after the events and processes under study are over, this approach has the same documentary limitations as historiography. We must wait for archives to open and personal papers to be released, before we can study them. Still, this approach offers a distinctive approach to ethnographic research in IR.

It may clarify to both link and contrast this approach with two other methods in IR associated with historical texts. Both exhibit significant philosophical and methodological overlap with historical ethnography, and may form part of the historical-ethnographic toolkit. However, neither is exhaustive of it.

First, discourse analysis has similar theoretical foundations, and also deals in textual interpretation. It does not, as is sometimes said, reduce the world to text. However, it does take texts as the primary materials for social analysis, analogizing other materials to text in order to understand features of and interactions between discourses.<sup>28</sup> Ethnography linked to texts proceeds in broadly the other direction: it approaches them as part of a more generalized view of culture as holistic, contextualized, lived experience. Historical ethnography thus takes a more all-

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<sup>27</sup> Indeed, it is the methodological problem of increasing cultural mobility and change that motivates Marcus’s interest in locating ethnography across multiple, globalized sites, to which we turn below.

<sup>28</sup> On discourse analysis in IR, see: Milliken (1999), Hansen (2006), Neumann (2008).

embracing view, locating text, speech, conversation, and other language, within a larger social sphere to be interpreted through active engagement with it. Discourse analysis may therefore be understood as forming part of the historical-ethnographic toolkit.

Second, genealogy, itself often linked to discourse analytic approaches (Milliken 1999:246–48), is similar to the approach we describe. While discourse analysis offers practical tools for interpreting texts, genealogy offers theoretical tools for constructing interpretations of history. Genealogical analysis originated in Nietzsche (2003), and was established more rigorously by Foucault (1984a, 1984b). It offers one way of conducting broadly ethnographic research about history, aiming to provide a “history of the present” (Foucault 1977:27, 31): to explain how present social conditions arose not out of social-evolutionary necessity, but through passing, happenstance events and discontinuous social processes. Like ethnography, genealogy now has an established history in the field (Bartelson 1995; Price 1995; Jackson 2006). Moreover, as Vucetic (2011) has recently argued, Foucauldian genealogical analysis need not reject causal explanation. It thus forms part of the broader historical explanatory toolkit social scientists may deploy.<sup>29</sup> Such explanations aim to explain, by interpretation of the past, our present circumstances to ourselves, and to do so processually, showing how past produced present. This is a historical-ethnographic task.

However, it is not the only possible historical-ethnographic approach. Since historical ethnography treats the past as a foreign country, explaining it on its own terms as a distinct object of study becomes a task unto itself. It may also focus on the past for its own sake. Such studies may, but need not be, comparative, contrasting and linking the past with and to the past. A study might, for example, compare the institutional cultures of the American and Soviet

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<sup>29</sup> Foucault was fond of describing his books as methodological tools: “I write for users, not readers” (quoted in Vucetic 2011:1299).

defense establishments during the Cold War.<sup>30</sup> Historical ethnography thus offers both a processual (genealogical) and a comparative toolkit.

Many extant implementations of history in anthropology have been geared toward reconstructing the past as experienced by marginal or postcolonial peoples, or other groups at risk of being “othered” as exotic or foreign. Since applications in IR are likely to focus on centers of power, the task differs accordingly. Rather than the goal being to deconstruct marginalizing narratives and uncover submerged cultural patterns, it is to make sites of well-known power comprehensible by casting them in new light. Rather than making the strange familiar, the goal is to make the familiar productively and usefully strange.

Historical ethnography involves distinctive advantages and challenges, differentiating it from other historical approaches to IR. Archives, of course, do not speak for themselves. On the one hand, they do not push back, interrogating researchers’ intentions and understandings in the way live ethnographic subjects can.<sup>31</sup> On the other hand, they do not simply yield information inertly. As rational choice IR scholars will recognize (Fearon 1995:390–91), the authors of primary source materials may face incentives to misrepresent circumstances as they experienced them. They may also misperceive their political circumstances (Jervis 1976). Like live interviewees or subjects of participant observation, archival materials can elide, mislead, dissemble, lie, contradict one another, offer competing interpretations of past events and long-vanished social settings, and generally face the researcher with as many difficulties as advantages.<sup>32</sup> One must approach them with methodological prescriptions already in mind in

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<sup>30</sup> Some such work has been done; see Hopf (1994, 2002).

<sup>31</sup> Consider the relief with which one researcher discovered that, unlike interviewees, archival documents “cannot tell their reader she is inappropriately dressed, that she should not also look at that other set of documents because it will mislead her, or that she is not qualified to read beyond a certain point. And they cannot ask who sent her and why she is there in the first place.” Live subjects, of course, can do all of these things (Luehrmann 2011:273).

<sup>32</sup> On selecting primary and secondary historical materials, see Lustick (1996).

order to put these materials to good use. An ethnographic sensibility offers a basis for dealing with these issues in a systematic way.<sup>33</sup>

As Feldman (2011:102) has noted, even before archives can lead or mislead the researcher, they must first be construed *as* archives, rather than as the official records they originally were. This conversion of purpose “always involves mechanisms of exclusion... In order for files to become archives, they need to be extracted from their original working networks... in this regard archiving has to be seen as an act of disempowerment”.<sup>34</sup> Even the most professionally maintained archive thus speaks not purely with the voice of the documents implicated, but also with that of the archivists who assembled them, including and excluding according to standards, scholarly or otherwise. Archival availability, unavailability, selectivity, and the like, are all subject to political manipulation. More prosaically, archives of interest to IR researchers may often be those exposed to misadventure—war, insurrection, and so on. As Feldman (2011) found, sometimes what is available is determined chiefly neither by meticulous archival standards, nor by official censorship, but instead by the vicissitudes of the political history being studied, which damage the materials with which the researcher would work.<sup>35</sup>

Direct on-site data gathering such as participant observation—the default mode of ethnography—remains in many respects preferable. However, the advantages of the traditional approach should not be overstated. Just as primary historical materials offer only secondhand knowledge, the data recorded in field notes, interview transcripts, and the like, are secondary as well—in both cases the work of interpretation has already begun before the analyst him or

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<sup>33</sup> Here again, there are linkages to the practice turn. Accounts of practice often bring a textual emphasis to immersive study (Pouliot 2008; Bueger 2013b; Weisser 2014).

<sup>34</sup> This, while we focus on documents as points of departure, their production can also be subject to ethnographic investigation, at least in the present. This may be fruitful for contentious political documents. See, for example, Riles (1999, 2006).

<sup>35</sup> For a personal account of the individual and idiosyncratic experience of archival research, see Farge (2013).

herself begins to interpret. While direct experience offers access to the interpretive context, such access is never unmediated or privileged: it is always mediated by interviewees, by the observer's own biases, and so on. Indirect data gathering, often available through primary and secondary historical sources, can be used to reconstruct historical context, and provides quasi-immersive data for interpretation. Either way, as Geertz (1973b:9, 15) notes, "what we call our data are really our own constructions of other people's constructions of what they and their compatriots are up to". Consequently, "anthropological writings are themselves interpretations, and second or third order ones to boot." In his own case, he refers not to events he witnessed, but to events he recorded as oral history. Since there seems little reason to privilege oral over archival historical sources, his claim seems to extend to the methodological specifications set out here. Understood on these terms, a historical ethnographic approach offers to contribute valuable insights that would otherwise be inaccessible, including closed institutional environments and periods of institutional-cultural change the timing of which observers cannot know until it has passed.

Historical ethnographic work might be linked to studies using other methods in multiple ways, building interpretively the core categories of analysis out of which hypotheses may be drawn and variables identified. Scholars wanting to conduct historical studies of ethnic conflict using texts, but analogous in design to (for example) Laitin's or Kalyvas's work, might begin here. Alternately, scholars intending to study specific institutional settings in the present might begin by assessing the emergence of institutional culture, and thus of intra-institutional incentives, by documenting how that institutional culture was created. The proposed study of the UN discussed below offer such examples.

IR scholars will find much of this familiar. Ethnographic historical reconstruction is, for example, central to Hopf's (2002:23–25) reconstruction of American and Soviet foreign policymaking during the Cold War—although his methodological specifications are more explicitly discursive than those proposed here. For a genealogical variant, see Jackson (2006). The remainder of this section offers methodological advice and examples.

### *Guidelines for Research Design*

Because there is no unified historical ethnographic method, let alone one attuned to the needs of political scientists, this section offers general, foundational guidelines only: four ground rules for international political historical ethnography that circumscribe and provide a basis for research in this area. The first two circumscribe the range of possible objects of study. The second two identify and limit materials and methods of research.

First, and most obviously, the object of study should be amenable to thick description. This means not only that it should be possible to describe it immersively, but also that there be some added value to analysis thicker than that provided by quantitative, pre-statistical qualitative, or other more conventional approaches. It must also expand on issues available to conventional constructivist approaches. Since historical constructivist research often (but not always) relies on existing secondary historical research for empirical data, the emphasis here on thick, description of primary materials is relatively (if not absolutely) different. The historical puzzles to which this approach is applied must be situations wherein the social phenomena before us remain opaque, even knowing the outline of events and basic historical context. Such puzzles are likely to emphasize explaining processes rather than explaining outcomes.<sup>36</sup> Since the close observation of social processes is tied up with both the constitutive effects of social interactions (the usual focus of ethnography) and how they unfold over time (i.e., their history),

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<sup>36</sup> On “how” questions in IR research, see Wendt (1998:104).

this methodological approach is uniquely well suited to these sorts of phenomena. Below, we propose applying this to an international organization—specifically, the founding of the UN, thus emphasizing the formation of its bureaucratic culture.

Second, the “site” of the study—that is, the historical location of the events and processes under examination—must be localized: it must involve a circumscribed environment in which the phenomenon under study occurs. Thus, “the causes of interstate wars, 1945-1989” is not a viable object of study for this approach, as it lacks the degree of locality necessary for immersive study. Nor could one address the political economy of Latin American sovereign debt in the postwar period—such an object of study, while no doubt complex, and perhaps requiring detailed archival work or interviews, would likely be neither localized enough nor intersubjectively “thick” enough to permit this sort of analysis. Historical ethnography is of use to study international politics only where there is an immediately shared (physically or temporally localized) social space with population having enough in common culturally or socially for that commonality itself to be the object of study. Absent this, it is unclear what constitutes the “field” in which fieldwork is conducted. In the context of IO formation, the physical locations being documented would be international meetings at which the organization was established and the locations of its first bureaucratic organs. The researcher would thus follow the emergence of a bureaucratic culture by locating research where the organization was created.

Third, sources should be chiefly, indeed overwhelmingly, primary and first person. Since the goal is to approximate the experience of direct immersion, the preferred sources of information are those that document the viewpoints of those directly immersed in the experience. Thus, memoirs, diaries, interviews, correspondence, and other sources of individual recollection



should be the dominant points of entry.<sup>37</sup> Other archival sources—official documents, press reports, and the like—will likely serve an important role, but mainly one to do with framing, establishing basic historical facts and context. Electronic modes of communication may qualify as well. In studying an IO's establishment, the researcher's materials would likely be the organization's archives and the personal papers of the decision makers and other elites involved.

Fourth, these points of view should be multiple. Since the historical political ethnographer cannot participate, directly observe, and physically immerse him or herself, sources should represent multiple points of access to the phenomenon under study. This prevents the researcher from being entrapped in a single perspective. Put differently, it ensures that what is documented is the intersubjective space of the social or cultural sphere, not the subjectivity of individual experience. This has been termed “triangulation”: reference to multiple points of view grants access to a shared, intersubjective object of study (Pouliot 2007).<sup>38</sup> These multiple sources should represent points of view of a culture or other shared social context. This is because the goal is not to obtain access to any approximation of an objective truth about the political world. Instead, it is to access a shared viewpoint on it—that is, a political culture, suitable for ethnographic examination, and thus to interpret a site of ongoing interpretation. Thus, in the context of IO formation, one would study the diplomats, bureaucrats, and heads of state implicated in producing the institutional culture under study.

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<sup>37</sup> While archives and memoirs represent the least perishable sources, thus offering the longest scope of access to the past, interviews are presumably as good or superior. On ethnographic interviewing, see Spradley (1979).

<sup>38</sup> The term has a lengthy history in the humanities and social sciences, generally referring to the identification of shared (intersubjective) truths, through references to multiple points of view. Triangulation has linkages to Nietzsche's perspectivalism (Nietzsche 1976; see also discussion in Jackson 2010:122–28). Among analytical philosophers, it dates at least to: Davidson (1991). In a somewhat different sense, Denzin (1978) and Jick (1979) use the term to refer to triangulating findings across research methods. On the problem of the researcher's subjectivity in ethnography, see Crapanzano (1986).

*A Possible Study: The Creation of UN Institutions*

A possible application of the approach would be a reassessment of the founding of the UN system. While the UN is in many ways central to international politics, IR scholars have chiefly viewed it either as epiphenomenal to the international balance of power, or as a rational institutional framework intended to facilitate international cooperation (Mearsheimer 1994; Keohane and Martin 1995). On either reading, the UN serves mainly as an empty vessel into which the dynamics of international power politics are poured. Despite this, it is well understood that the UN has a wealth of bureaucratic and institutional culture, practice, history, and pathologies (Barnett and Finnemore 1999; Weiss 2012). Its impact on the international system extends well beyond its successes and failures in preventing and permitting warfare, to include aid distribution, disaster relief, global public health, and a host of other major and minor issue areas. It handles these efficiently and inefficiently, in times good and bad.

And yet, while studies in individual issue areas exist, no extensive study has been conducted in IR of how these institutional frameworks came into being, taking the institutional shape they did. The historical, cultural, and conceptual space created at the UN's founding conferences and after remains largely uncharted and untheorized by IR scholars. This is remarkable, given that, in scale and complexity, the work of institution building undertaken was massive. In 1948 alone, "more than four thousand meetings of organs of the United Nations were held in Lake Success [New York], Paris, and Geneva. Add the meetings in the Far East, Latin America, and elsewhere, add the meetings of the specialized agencies of the United Nations, and the figure climbs into the many, many thousands" (Eagleton 1949:5). The system was enormously complex even in its infancy, much more so than IR scholarship commonly indicates.

While much of this has been detailed already by diplomatic historians,<sup>39</sup> the phenomena most likely of interest to IR scholars—the emergence of institutional processes, dynamics, cultures, and pathologies—require social scientific analysis. Since the issue involves “how” questions, or questions concerning processes of creation or transformation, a historical ethnographic approach seems well suited to the task.

Clearly, the scale and complexity of the subject requires some narrowing. Thus, a possible study might consider the emergence of bureaucratic norms and practices within the context of one or more specific branches of the UN bureaucracy. The General Secretariat, concerned as it is with the maintenance of international peace and security, and with the then-new institution of peacekeeping, would make an ideal case. One might look alternately at the early bureaucracies of the WHO, the UNHCR, or UNESCO.

Alternately, instead of following a single institution, one might follow an institutional transition. Thus, the handover of institutional roles and responsibility from the remnant League of Nations to the UN system might be studied. This transition was not trivial, involving as it did the handover of international legal responsibility for the prevention of another World War, along with a range of more prosaic but tangible matters—among them coordinating other pre-existing international institutions (e.g., the ICJ, the ILO, and the like) and transforming the League mandate system into the UN trusteeship mechanism. These processes are tied up with the e scholars reviewed: Pouliot and Neumann. Then the rest of Vraști’s reductive types are ell understood by IR scholars.

Because the UN’s founding is historical, access poses relatively minimal problems. The UN Archives are open to researchers.<sup>40</sup> In many cases, personal papers of major figures are

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<sup>39</sup> See, for example: Hilderbrand (2001).

<sup>40</sup> The United Nations Archives are found online at <http://archives.un.org/ARMS/>

available. Certainly, this is the case for the first three Secretaries General.<sup>41</sup> A wealth of biography and secondary historical research exists. One could further refer to the interviews and other documentation in the UN Intellectual History Project.<sup>42</sup>

A study evaluating the rise of UN bureaucratic culture and politics—or more likely the rise of a specific portion of it—would offer a point of entry to a uniquely important institution in postwar international politics. Moreover, in doing so it would shed light on the historical foundations of the discipline.

### **Multi-Sited Ethnography for International Relations**

A second approach to expanding the use of ethnography in IR employs immersion across multiple locations, contexts, or institutional settings. Originally identified and widely promoted by Marcus (1995), such “multi-sited” ethnography has a history of use in anthropology (Gustavson and Cytrynbaum 2003; Hannerz 2003; Falzon 2009b; Coleman 2011). Studies on this model can be used to explore institutional or other recurring processes in the international system. A possible study of World Food Programme (WFP) aid distribution is briefly sketched below.

Multi-sited ethnography “pursues a strategy or design of research that... takes unexpected trajectories in tracing a cultural formation across and within multiple sites of activity” (Marcus 1995:96). Put differently, instead of immersion in a single cultural location (the canonical ethnographer in a remote and implicitly bounded village), immersion happens at a series of linked locations of cultural production and reproduction. Consequently, “following

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<sup>41</sup> The papers of Gladwyn Jebb, who served as acting Secretary General during the UN’s initial establishment, are held at Churchill College, Cambridge (Cook 2012:80). The papers of Trygve Lie are held at the Norwegian National Library (UN Secretary-General Trygve Halvdan Lie 2012). The papers of Dag Hammarskjöld are held at the National Library of Sweden and Columbia University Library (UN Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld 2012). Limited official papers of all three are held by the UN Archive.

<sup>42</sup> See review in: Berg (2006).

connections, associations, and putative relationships are... at the very heart of designing multi-sited ethnographic research” (Marcus 1995:97). Appropriate locations of research are thus linked by association with a single international phenomenon, which recurs or is reproduced across a chain of sites. Possibilities might include financial markets, international activist networks, or (as suggested below) aid supply and delivery.

### *Ethnography in Motion—Assets and Pitfalls*

Multi-site ethnography deals with the problem of aggregation by end-running it. Since traditional ethnography is necessarily local, it cannot directly evaluate large-scale global events or processes. While it can certainly treat such phenomena as context or background, it is not intended to look directly at the mechanics or cultural drivers of, for example, capitalism, globalization, or nuclear deterrence.<sup>43</sup> A multi-site approach deals with this problem by understanding the category of the “international” somewhat differently. By taking together a series of localized phenomena as something translational or global, a distinct frame for inquiry opens.

The essence of multi-sited research is to follow people, connections, associations, and relationships across space (because they are substantially contiguous but spatially non-contiguous)... Multi-sited ethnography involves a spatially dispersed field through which the ethnographer moves—actually, via sojourns in two or more places, or conceptually, by means of juxtaposition of data. (Falzon 2009a:1–2)

As anthropologists who practice multi-sited research have stressed, discontinuous space transforms ethnographic work less completely than one might think. Space itself is socially constituted: the remote village of canonical ethnography is bounded not so much by natural borders, as by the social practices and material culture of its members (Massey 2005:9; Falzon 2009a:4). A discontinuous or multiply located site is simply one in which the phenomena under

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<sup>43</sup> On the ethnography of globalization, see: Gille and Riain (2002).

study are distributed differently than one might expect. Indeed, increased transnational communication and mobility mean that such sites are now increasingly common.

Multi-site ethnography requires relatively little revision of established methods. Anthropologists have long worked at multiple locations, even when focusing on one. A mid-century ethnographer encountering a tribal culture in the Amazon Basin would have had to begin by demarcating the object of study. This would have required identifying its geographical and historical scope, cultural near and distant kin, and so on, necessarily engaging multiple locations. “Thus, fieldwork as traditionally perceived and practiced is already itself potentially multi-sited” (Marcus 1995:100). Moreover, self-consciously multi-sited ethnography has now been in use in social anthropology for at least two decades. Hannerz (2003:203–206), for example, has conducted field research among foreign correspondents. Garsten’s (1994) study of the Apple Corporation addresses center-periphery relations within the company’s transnational structure. In both cases, the phenomenon under study necessitates a research design that reaches beyond the traditionally conceived field.<sup>44</sup>

Critics of multi-sited approaches have generally emphasized the risk of gaining breadth at the expense of depth: “A programme that proposes to be more routes than roots... could well end up... robbing ethnography of its central tenets” (Falzon 2009a:7). Elsewhere, critics suggest that a conceptual misunderstanding is at work: research of this sort is better understood as documenting not multiple sites but a single discontinuous one (Hage 2005). While these concerns are real, they are not insurmountable, and moreover will likely impact IR scholarship less than traditional anthropology. International politics may be geographically dispersed, but is usually also institutionally or conceptually circumscribed. Thus, lines of demarcation should be relatively easy to draw. On the second concern, whatever the merits of construing such spaces as

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<sup>44</sup> See also chapters in Collins and Coleman (2006).

single but discontinuous, rather than multiple, it is unlikely to significantly alter research design in practice. Moreover, multi-sitedness better captures the physical and cultural discontinuity of people and locations.

Multi-sitedness also permits collaboration. Ethnography has traditionally been a solitary pursuit (Marcus 2009). However, given the challenges of simultaneous data gathering in more than one place, and the time required for immersion in multiple locations, collaboration becomes a desirable approach. This appears to pose a challenge unique to ethnography: how should researchers maintain consistency across multiple viewpoints in multiple locations? One research team claims to practice

a reflexive methodology for working across and with difference. Our collaboration is not data gathering under a common theoretical umbrella. Instead, our collaboration requires negotiation across epistemologically diverse terrains and partially ‘articulated knowledges’... this is collaboration with friction at its heart... The methodological work of collaboration should not be hidden; the knowledge we gain depends on it. (Matsutake Worlds Research Group 2009:198)

Put differently, multi-sited collaboration poses not just unique challenges, but also unique opportunities. Multiple points of view across multiple sites allow both the triangulation of a broader sociocultural whole (the context itself, rendered through the views of its constituent individual members and multiple individual researchers), but also an opportunity to lay bare the workings of ethnographic method. The rule here should be the same as the rule for data collection and analysis in quantitative research: methods, materials, and outcomes should be public.<sup>45</sup> The negotiations necessary to conduct a multi-site, multi-author study should be made clear in the text. Indeed, there is an advantage here. Anthropologists are necessarily at risk of

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<sup>45</sup> On public methods, see King et al (1994:8). On replication in IR, see a symposium on replication in *International Studies Perspectives* (Symposium on Replication in International Studies Research 2003).

disagreeing on ethnographic findings (Heider 1988). Collaboration enforces a need to resolve, or else make clear, these disagreements.

Collaborative or otherwise, multi-sited research permits, and indeed encourages, IR scholars to broaden the disciplinary agenda. Not all phenomena rightly termed international, global, or transnational are hidden within governments and international organizations. NGOs, international protest movements, and mobile refugee populations are all multiply located and, at least in principle, available to the participant observer. Moreover, the international political ethnographer need not study only subaltern, marginalized, or peripheral perspectives. Some international financial markets can and indeed have been observed in this way (Knorr Cetina and Bruegger 2002a, 2002b). Hannerz's (2003) study of foreign correspondents addresses how public knowledge of international events is created, and thus could inform analysis of how public opinion on foreign policy is shaped. Thus, while IR's strictly traditional objects of study will likely continue to remain unavailable in real time, a range of other phenomena are quite visible to immersive observation. Indeed, many of these are potentially quite important to IR's traditional objects of study: war, peace, foreign policymaking, and the international economy.

Multi-sited approaches might be linked to various projects using other methodological toolkits. Where multi-cited ethnography can be used to gather data amenable to quantification, a range of possibilities emerges. Kalyvas's (2006) work on civil war across multiple localities in Greece is once again a useful analogy. Alternately, multi-cited ethnographies might be combined with large-N data to jointly track processes and outcomes in the operation of an international organization. The suggested project below might track the ethnographic side of such an account of the World Food Program.



Clearly, multi-sited ethnography has affinities with ANT, a theoretical approach we discuss above. The two differ, potentially if not necessarily, in the following ways. First, ANT is primarily an ontology: it establishes assumptions about what constitutes the world, and in consequence how we may study it (Latour 1987; Law 2004). Ethnography, multi-sited or otherwise, is a method: a set of tools for gathering and interpreting data. In practice, ANT scholars have often employed ethnographic methods (Callon 1986; Latour and Woolgar 1986; Mol 2002), but need not. Thus, second, ANT is not necessarily multi-sited. It may be single-sited (Schouten 2014), or even, as with one classic study in science and technology studies, historical (Latour 1993).

Nonetheless, clear parallels to multi-sitedness already exist in IR. In comparative politics, Bevir and Rhodes (2003) derive much of their analysis of the British political system from multiply located ethnographic investigations. Cohn (2006) has explicitly identified multi-cited ethnography as a useful method for feminist IR scholarship, and there seems no obvious reason why it would not be useful elsewhere. One might also note Barnett's (2003) relatively mobile investigation of UN bureaucracy and diplomacy. While Pouliot's (2009) analysis of NATO-Russia relations is less explicitly ethnographic, it nonetheless captures some of the geographically varied ethos of this approach.<sup>46</sup> The following section offers guidelines for research on this model.

### *Guidelines for Research Design*

Since research under this approach amounts to conducting a conventional ethnography at each site, advice is limited to two guidelines for site selection. First, sites need a common thread—a line joining them that forms the context or overall field of the study. Marcus identifies several types of such threads: categorical or conceptual paths one can follow from site to site.

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<sup>46</sup> See also discussion in Lie (2013).

Two seem especially useful for studying international political phenomena. First, and perhaps most obviously, one may follow people: “the procedure is to follow and stay with the movements of a particular group of initial subjects” (Marcus 1995:106). Studies of refugees, migrant labor, foreign correspondents, or aid workers could take this form. Second, one may follow a thing—a physical object or equivalent, such as a financial instrument, tracking the social interactions of a socially constituted object (Marcus 1995:106–108). Thus, one might study food aid flows by following a shipment of flour or cooking oil from origin to destination, tracking its social interactions along the way. A food aid shipment, after all, would not exist were it not for a perceived need, political pressure, institutional culture, and any number of other social factors. Likewise, derivatives are largely the constructions of inventive financial experts.

A second rule stipulates retaining some degree of cultural commonality across sites. This may be the culture of aid workers, traders, civil society organizations, anti-government protestors, or other non-traditional ethnographic subjects, but cultures they nonetheless are. Even when following an object, physical or otherwise, people interacting with it will likely share a vocabulary and practices in so doing. Since these commonalities will constitute the substance of the project’s object of study, they are necessary to its unity. While the researcher will not likely know the full content of these in advance, he or she should know broadly that a common culture across sites exists, and be able to delimit its conceptual, institutional, and physical or geographical borders in advance. The commonality need not be absolute. Rather, it should be such that there is *some* coherent cultural framework, from which deviations and extrapolations can be identified across sites. In most cases, but especially in areas of greater technical expertise or cultural insularity, prior knowledge will likely be necessary. Put more simply, the researcher

must know what one cultural category all the sites belong to: framing it in advance will likely be necessary for a manageable research design.

*A Possible Study: WFP Food Aid Distribution*

A prospective application addresses food aid delivery. Few things are as politically contentious globally as food. According to the UN (World Food Program 2010:4), the World Food Program fed “101.8 million people—84 million of them women and children—in 75 countries in 2009. An unprecedented 4.6 million metric tons were delivered,” while taking in US\$4.2 billion from donor states. Despite its relatively low cost in global terms, this represents an extraordinary leveraging of manpower and resources. Inversely, however, corruption and other forms of malfeasance associated with aid distribution are significant and well-publicized problems.<sup>47</sup> What conditions on the ground permit the agency to do more with less, and yet still suffer significant bureaucratic pathologies? The story of how this aid is funded, procured, and distributed is largely a matter of indirect knowledge to IR scholars—we know relatively little about how the system itself functions on the ground, in practice. Indeed, much of what we do know, we get from the organization itself.<sup>48</sup>

An attempt to fill this gap might be made using a multi-sited ethnographic approach. The issue gives rise to a series of locations (involved in aid funding, procurement, production, transport, and distribution) linked by a common object to be followed—food aid itself. The researcher could begin by assessing the political and bureaucratic funding and procurement decisions involved, tracking the food itself as it is acquired, and following it through to delivery. The researcher would note adherence to, deviations from, and dysfunctions of, the prescribed

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<sup>47</sup> See, for example: United Nations (2010).

<sup>48</sup> An edited volume (Lewis and Mosse 2006) offers localized ethnographic analyses of aid distribution conducted by anthropologists.

system along the way. Since the range of locations would offer access to a range of similar and differing regional and institutional cultures, the interaction between the distribution process and cultural context would be opened for documentation. By tracking aid across borders, and through transnational funding and distribution channels, the research would capture a fundamentally international aspect of the issue. It would thus be of potential interest not just to those concerned with foreign aid and development as such, but also scholars of international institutionalization and international political economy.

This approach would not be without limitations. On its own, such research would document the idiosyncrasies of one aid distribution project, potentially limiting generalization across multiple contexts and situations. Moreover, it would be limited in what it could document—the researcher might not, for example, expect to observe corruption at work. Nonetheless, the project would serve an important purpose, shedding empirical light on an under-documented aspect of the international system.

## **Conclusion**

The aim of this article has been to suggest practical directions in the application of ethnographic methods in IR. To that end, we have proposed two alternative methods for approaching immersion in the study of world politics. Taking up the relevant methodological literatures in anthropology offers a way to broaden application in IR. One approach broadens the definition of ethnography as understood by IR, applying it to historical research. The other broadens the applied scope of this methodological toolkit by proposing ethnographic research across multiple linked locations, so as to assess the implementation of state and international organizational policy. These approaches “end run” the traditional formulation of ethnographic

field work as local study of a single, immersive context—a kind of work often not readily available to IR scholars.

Applications of IR ethnography to date have chiefly been to phenomena not traditionally studied in IR, often with critical theoretical underpinnings. This broadening of the disciplinary agenda is to be celebrated. Additionally, these methods might, if adapted as we describe here, be applied to explaining better-trod matters of international security, economics, and (as we have suggested) institutionalization. Such approaches supplant neither traditional studies of these subjects, nor extant ethnographic research in IR. Instead, they offer an opportunity to open more extensive dialogue between the two.

Indeed, ethnography is no longer a wholly new approach in IR, and as international political ethnography has grown and matured, it has become more varied. There are, in effect, two streams of ethnographic work in political science, which either “take pride in the method’s unruliness... or attempt to fold ethnography into mainstream political science” (Wedeen 2010:256). A useful disciplinary conversation about it, in both its both critical and explanatory forms, likely needs to make room for both. This big tent approach may benefit from adjustments in how the method works in practice. Tellingly, Pachirat (quoted in Wedeen 2010:256) finds that those in the disciplinary mainstream “often revert to the language of ‘disciplining’ and ‘harnessing’ ethnography”. While our aim has been to make the method more readily available to more mainstream scholars who ask more mainstream questions, the task need not be seen as a disciplining one. Instead, having more than one kind of ethnography at the table serves to expand its role in the field, permitting both IR’s mainstream and its internal critics to more effectively engage one another. Put differently, it may offer an empirical site for dialogue between theoretical orientations. Our immediate intent has been more practical—to show how non-

standard ethnographic approaches have opened research opportunities in anthropology, and have begun to do the same in the study of international politics.

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