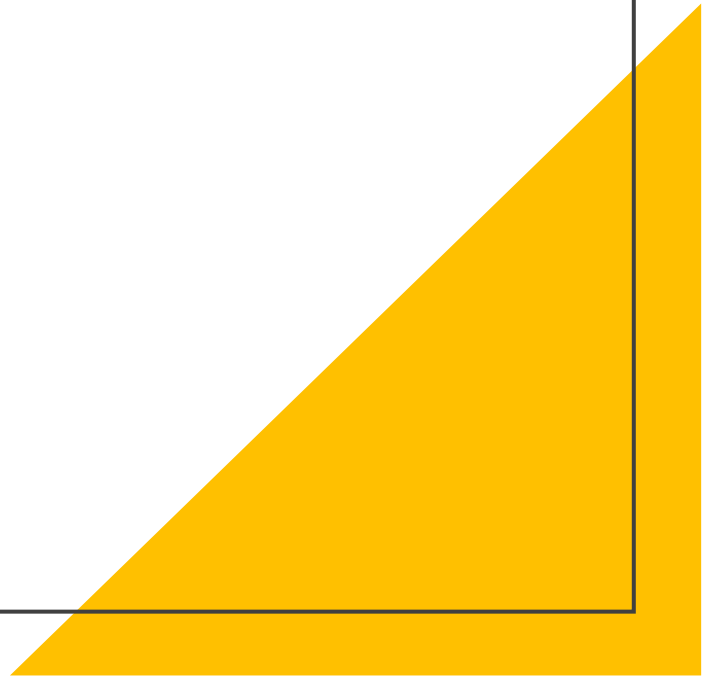




Ethnography

Doing Political Research



Ethnography and Participant Observation?

- Ethnography
 - Extended immersion of the researcher in the life of a particular 'social world,' for example, a far-right political group, a police unit, the House of Lords
 - Can involve observation of group and individual behaviour, participation in group activities, interviews with groups and individuals and analyses of material culture, written documents etc
 - Aim to reach deep understanding of the group's culture
- Participant observation: a core method of ethnography involving the observation of a 'social world' as a participant
- Focus on the politics of the everyday and lived experiences

Types of Observation

Complete participant

- The researcher is native in the social world
- Reflexive insider accounts - experiences become data in retrospect
- Diaries, notes, professional output etc become sources


Participant observer

- The researcher enters the social world to study it and participates to a greater or lesser extent
- Taking part in participants' daily lives, collecting observational data

Complete observer

- The study of naturally occurring data, where the researcher is not present
- For example, audio/video recordings, photographs, documents, websites

Etic vs Emic

- Etic: the perspective of the analyst who learns the rules and norms of the social group, reflects on this learning process and identifies the significance of the rules learned
 - Emic: the perspective of the insider, the native, who sees things 'through the eyes' of participants, allowing access to the logic and norms of the participants
 - Ethnographic research allows the researcher to adopt both roles, and the tension between them drives ethnographic analysis
- 
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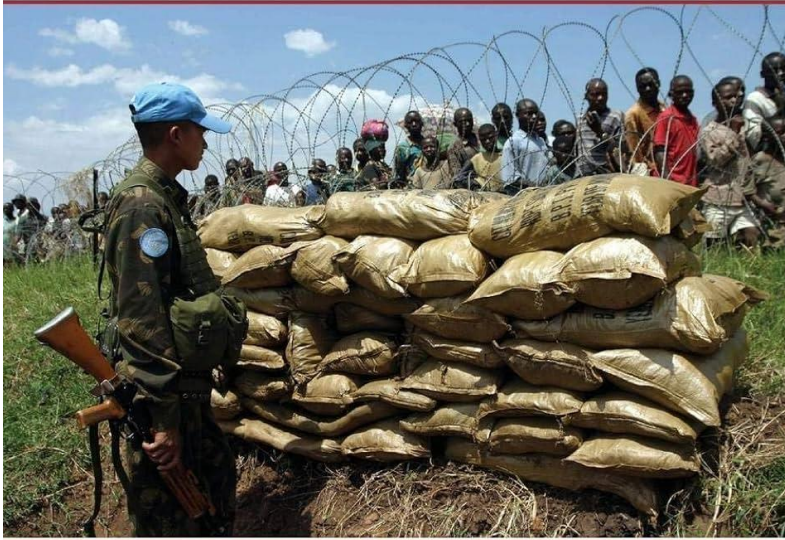
Ethnography vs Interviews/Focus Groups

| | Ethnography | Interviews/Focus Groups |
|------------------------------|--------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| <i>Type of interaction</i> | Informal | More formal |
| <i>Role of researcher</i> | Participant/observer | Clearly defined role as researcher |
| <i>Setting</i> | The social world under investigation | Often distinct from the social world |
| <i>Recording information</i> | Field notes | Audio/visual recordings + notes |

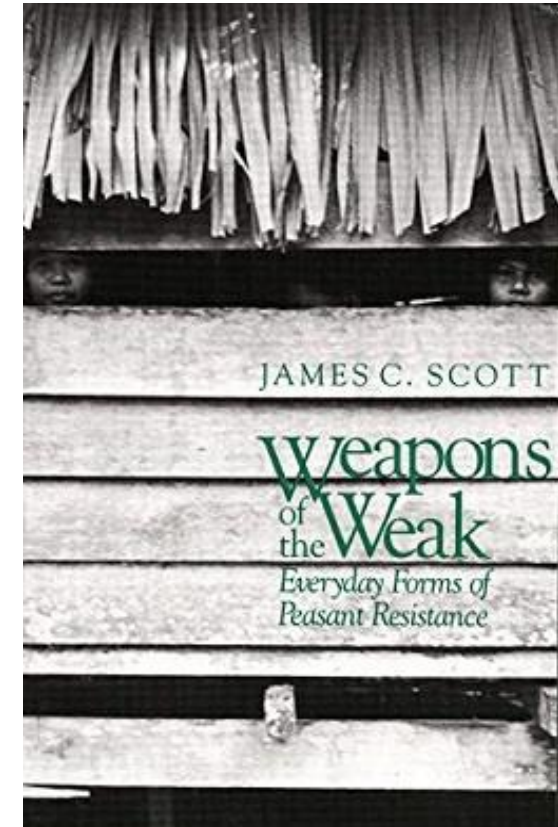
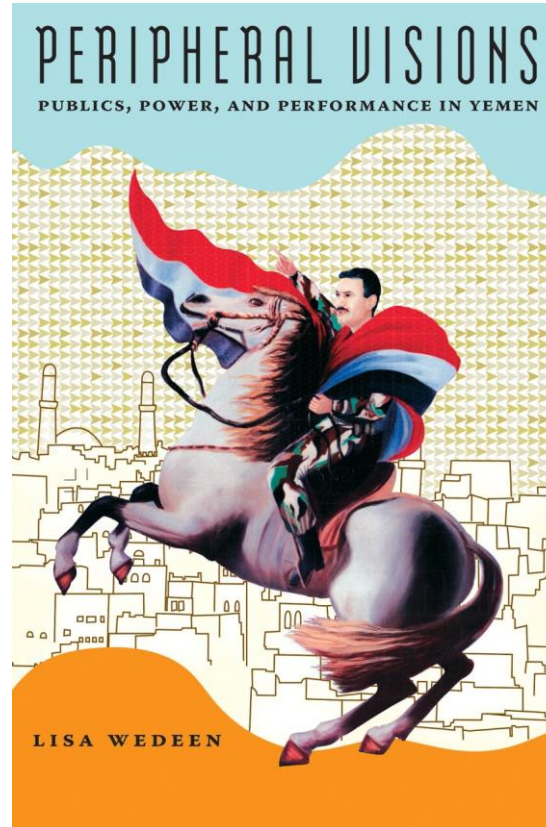
Ethnography in Political Research

PEACELAND

*Conflict Resolution and the Everyday Politics
of International Intervention*



SÉVERINE AUTESSERRE

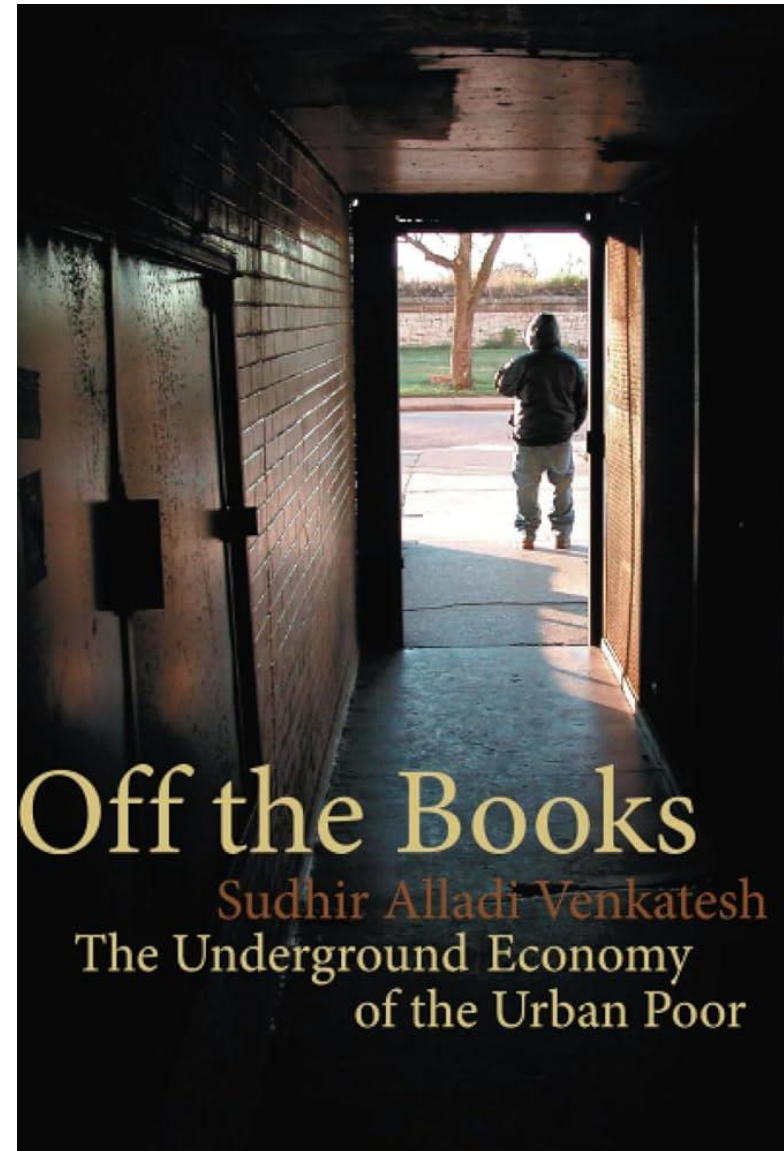


Designing Ethnographic Research

- Identifying research sites
 - Open vs closed settings
 - Representativeness?
- Overt vs covert (ethical implications)
- Extent of participation
- Use of one or multiple sites and comparison
- Often dependent on practical issues

Access

- Access shapes the study
- Open settings are much easier to get access to
- Often a pragmatic decision, based on existing networks of connections
- Gatekeepers, key informants and earning trust are crucial



Overt or Covert?

- Why covert?
 - Access to naturally occurring phenomena, not influenced by the presence of the researcher
 - Impossibility of gathering data in any other way
 - Participants may insist researcher participates in potential illegal or dangerous activities
- But
 - Violation of informed consent
 - Danger of blowing cover
 - Difficult to take notes and combine with other methods

Comparison

- Benefits:
 - generalisability
 - questioning of concepts
 - studying the effects of practices in different settings
 - refining of the political phenomena under study
- But: comparison often requires more resources

The Case for Comparative Ethnography

Erica S. Simmons and Nicholas Rush Smith

In recent years, a number of methodological guides and review articles have attested to a resurgence of ethnographic methods in political science.¹ Undoubtedly part of the appeal of this ethnographic turn, and particularly its interpretive variants, is the ability of a researcher adopting an “ethnographic sensibility”² to open up old debates within the discipline and “invite novel ways of imagining the political.”³ The (re)emergence of ethnography in comparative politics, in this sense, can be seen as a disruptive force within the sub-discipline. Indeed, ethnographers challenge how political scientists study everything, from subaltern resistance,⁴ to civil war violence,⁵ to authoritarian domination.⁶

While such work has made important theoretical advances, ethnography is still often thought of as a method best suited for producing in-depth knowledge about a single case.⁷ Ethnographers have good reasons—both epistemological and practical—to conduct in-depth work on single cases or specific contexts. However, many ethnographers conduct field research in multiple sites or compare multiple practices within a single site to develop theoretical insights. One can see, for example, how comparisons have helped ethnographers better recognize changing patterns of global governance and securitization across space by focusing on discrete field sites,⁸ reveal how concepts of democracy can have different meanings across language groups within the same country,⁹ or identify causes of differing patterns of labor mobilization across regions¹⁰—all insights that shed light on fundamental questions in comparative politics. However, ethnographers are rarely explicit, either in ethnographic works themselves or methodological work on ethnography, about the comparative logics that inform their claims or the specific benefits that follow from comparison.

This article has two goals: (1) to show that comparative ethnographic research can advance understandings of political worlds and thus deserves a prominent place in the repertoire of comparative politics and (2) to elaborate the logics of inquiry behind such comparisons so that scholars will be better equipped to use them. We do so by making the case for what we call “comparative ethnography,” by which we mean ethnographic research that explicitly and intentionally builds an argument through the analysis of two or more cases by tacking back and forth between cases to identify either similarities or differences in the processes, meanings, concepts, or events across them in the service of

Conclusion

- Ethnography is the traditional method of anthropology but is increasingly used in other social sciences
- Conducting ethnography is time-consuming and there are many practical challenges
- It gets us closer than other methods to lived experiences and everyday understandings of political processes, but there is a trade-off with generalisability