

MEETINGS, ORGANISATIONS, AND ACTIVISMS: A ROUNDTABLE ON FIELDWORK IN ORGANISATIONAL SETTINGS

Yichi Zhang (editor), Luke McGinty, Cristian Erazo Romero &
Evgeniya Pakhomova (discussants)ⁱ

I belong to a clan that bases itself on *fieldwork* yet rarely talks about it, *if at all*... There are exceptions but for the main part *writingwork* and *fieldwork* in this clan are supposed to look after themselves like a kid learning to walk or swim after being thrown in at the deep end.

Michael Taussig, *And the Garden is You* (2024)

It is not as though we necessarily lack training in fieldwork methodologies. As PhD students at a UK higher education institution, we attend courses and workshops on participant observation, fieldnotes, and interviews. Some go beyond the schematic, offering insights from seasoned fieldworkers who share their experiences and dilemmas. A growing number of publications focus on the practical (e.g. Elliott and Wolf-Meyer 2023), emotional, and ethical dimensions (e.g. Kulick 1995; Stodulka et al. 2019), contributing to the demystification of fieldwork. And yet, the mystery persists.

ⁱ All four contributors were PhD students at the University of St Andrews when this discussion took place.

Fieldwork often feels too personal, too embodied, and too improvisational (Malkki 2007) to be critically measured or standardised. Building social relationships is not easily reduced to protocol, and realities in the field almost never conform to the expectations laid out on ethics application forms. Shryock (2016), responding to Ingold's critique of ethnography (2014; MacDougall 2016), likens the paradox of celebrating fieldwork while struggling to articulate it to the awkwardness of sex education – the 'But how do I... do it?' dilemma – where gossip and fantasy may sometimes teach more than the classroom. It seems that while the discipline does what it can, the preparation for pre-field researchers and the support for post-field reflection are never quite enough.

Indeed, all this only strengthens the case for continually improving our understanding of a methodology that is central to anthropology and significant to many other social science disciplines. My own fieldwork in Jamaica, for instance, was exciting, fruitful, and challenging in ways that cannot simply be captured by the notion of 'embodiment'. It was nothing like I had imagined or read about beforehand. Reflecting on my pre-field preparation, I realise that one of the most helpful pieces of advice came from my supervisor who encouraged me to think through a specific scenario of potential conflict. In that spirit, I wondered whether sharing scenarios or situations among my fellow PhD cohorts might be helpful to other pre- and post-field researchers. It could potentially offer a more

concrete form of pedagogy and create opportunities for community building, especially while our memories and feelings about fieldwork are still relatively fresh.

We therefore organised two roundtable discussions with PhD students who have studied or are currently studying at the University of St Andrews, grouped around shared research themes. The dialogical approach has the potential to create a kind of ‘collective effervescence’, to use Durkheim’s phrase. Within it, cultural and personal connections and comparisons can emerge allowing for a more holistic understanding of fieldwork beyond our sub-fields.

The first discussion took place in October 2024 in St Andrews, featuring Cristian Erazo Romero, Luke McGinty, and Evgeniya Pakhomova. All three conduct research in organisational and activist settings, a growing area of interest in recent years. Like many others, they developed their projects and fieldwork out of personal trajectories both within and beyond academia. Some of their reflections are familiar, such as fieldwork’s serendipity, social anxiety, and occasional exhaustion, while others are specific to their personal journeys.

An important takeaway from the discussion, I think, is the need to reflect on the fluidity and rigidity of boundaries, both in terms of the organisations the researchers engage with, and their own positionalities and identities. The experience of working with

organisations, especially in urban settings as seen in Evgeniya and Luke's cases, largely departs from the archetypal 'village' fieldsite that has long structured anthropological imaginaries. Time and space in these urban organisational settings tend to be more clearly demarcated, leading fieldworkers to become more intensely, but perhaps less broadly, involved in people's everyday lives. These social conditions, along with the presence of social media platforms, call for renewed attention to methodological questions.

At the same time, one might argue that such settings make it more difficult for researchers to access the kind of 'imponderabilia' of everyday life that more self-contained socio-cultural contexts could allow. This contrast becomes especially clear when comparing our dialogue here to the second roundtable, which focused on religion, religiosity and religious communities. The concerns that researchers bring to the field, the ways they present their work, and what their interlocutors choose to share or withhold all differ markedly between the two discussions. This is also reflected in the tone of the two dialogues, where this first emphasises fieldwork's matters-of-fact qualities, while the second leans into its mystical dimensions.

Either way, our interlocutors' lives outside the immediate situation of fieldwork inevitably seep into our work. The same can also be said of the fieldworkers themselves. The identities of the three anthropologists are not easily separated from the various roles they inhabited before, during, and after fieldwork, whether as fellow

activists, migrant workers, volunteers, or community leaders. Their field sites were never far removed from their own sense of ‘home’ and belonging—a scenario increasingly common today. As a result, the boundaries between self and other become even more blurred, challenging traditional imaginaries of ethnographic distance.

Finally, the discussion shed some light on the transit into post-fieldwork writing, before we opened the floor to the audience. Instead of including that final exchange here, we invite the reader to reflect and raise their own questions.

The Discussion

After meeting a few times beforehand, we crafted a list of questions ranging from how each of us devised our projects to the different styles of data gathering and writing up. The audience consisted mainly of pre-field master’s and PhD students, along with a few undergraduates and lecturers from the department. That afternoon marked the first time we openly spoke about our field experiences, something we were both eager and anxious to do. We also carried a quiet worry that the discussion might not prove useful...

Yichi Zhang [YZ]: Thank you all for joining us today. My name is Yichi, and I’m the organiser of this event.

Evgeniya Pakhomova [EP]: Hi everyone. My name is Evgeniya Pakhomova. My research looks at how activism is used as a medium through which people can negotiate and renegotiate their national and ethnic identities, their sense of moral responsibility and their vision of what the future might be. I carried out my fieldwork with three London-based Russian antiwar organisations.

Luke McGinty [LM]: My name is Luke McGinty. My research is thematically quite similar to Evgeniya's, in that I also work on temporality, particularly futurity. My fieldsite was Madrid, Spain, and I worked with anarchist activists there. I don't really like the term 'activist' in my research, and hopefully we'll get into that a bit later. But I work with anarchists, and my research deals with how political ideologies inform the personal and interpersonal values people demonstrate in their daily lives, and how political belief influences the quotidian lives people lead, specifically in the urban context.

Cristian Erazo Romero [CER]: Hi, my name is Cristian Erazo Romero. I work on the everyday implementation of a conditional cash transfer (CCT) programme in the Putumayo region of Colombia's Amazon. My research looks at the work and daily social life of CTT staff and a group of mostly female community leaders who are both beneficiaries and intermediaries of the state in this programme.

YZ: Before we move on to other questions, I'd like to begin by asking: is there a topic you're currently writing about?

EP: I am currently writing on what it means to be indigenous and Russian, and how indigenous people who also share a historical experience of colonisation have a very different relationship to the war that is happening in Ukraine right now, even though they are Russians at the same time.

LM: At the moment I am writing about physical space. I focus on the ways politically constituted organisations create, recreate, and reformulate the physical spaces they inhabit, as well as the interconnectedness of physical space and rhetorical space: how physical space affects and influences the social relations that happen within it.

CER: I'm thinking of and writing about meetings. Like this one (we're having right now). (Cristian and the attendees laugh). It is because the community leaders I work with are expected to organise a series of meetings. These meetings are called 'community well-being encounters.' In these 'encounters', the community leaders bring together beneficiaries. They are also in charge of the logistics of these events. I'm looking at the experience of being an organiser of these meetings and the meaning that these meetings have for the people involved in the programme. I'm wrapping up a section of the thesis that has to do with meeting attendance. In this section, I was looking first at the social contract that beneficiaries must sign to enter the programme and how leaders re-elaborate the idea of the contract by placing meeting attendance as a fundamental criterion that

beneficiaries should follow. And then I moved to the attendance list, which is the documentary record of the meetings, and now I'm writing about the lived experience of the meeting. That is, how the leaders conceive of these events, the errands they need to run to organise them, and the activities that usually take place in these spaces.

YZ: And it's interesting because it's really all about people, their interactions, and the kinds of spaces these take place in. So, let's go back to the beginning of your project: how did you first conceive it? Which groups of people were you planning to work with, and in what kinds of contexts? What sort of preliminary research did you carry out before going into the field, particularly regarding social settings and relationships?

EP: My project has an interesting origin story. I was initially planning to go to Ukraine to carry out my fieldwork since I had a feeling that there has not been enough scholarly or just general attention paid to the annexation of Crimea. It seemed to me that it had completely gone out of the news. However, in the middle of my first year Ukraine was back in the news headings with a very violent twist, so I had to think, what should I do now?

And I was thinking on my feet. In May 2022 I had a preliminary idea of a new PhD project, in October I had my pre-field viva, and in November I passed my ethics application. I wanted to continue focusing on Russian-Ukrainian relations in some way, yet for my own

visa purposes I wanted to stay in the UK. I didn't want to take a year off and go somewhere else. So, I was thinking within these constraints. I could have potentially worked with Ukrainian refugees, but for practical as well as ethical reasons, I decided that it's probably best to not worry people who are just coming into the country as refugees and might be suspicious of attention from a Russian researcher, so I decided to focus on Russian antiwar activists instead.

And a particular interest in that was that I would get to work in an emerging field. While planning the project, I knew that Russian antiwar organisations were being created in London. I knew that they were doing protests, and successful protests at that. They were starting fundraising activities over the summer, but I didn't know exactly how it was going to play out or in what state they were going to be in January when I would be starting my fieldwork.

It was a very interesting experience. I didn't know which exact organisations I was going to work with because a couple of them that I had in mind had already fallen apart by the time I started my fieldwork. A couple of others said that for security reasons they are not happy to participate in the research.

So I think the way I conceived my field site was by just, you know, moving and seeing what is feasible and trying to figure out how I can turn that into a project, which I suppose is quite different from how Luke and Cristian approached their fields.

LM: Yeah, I mean, quite different to how I did it. I conceived my research based on my long-running personal and academic interest in anarchism. I knew that I wanted to study anarchism with anarchists. And Spain seemed like a good place to do it, because of its long history of anarchism: the period immediately before and during the Civil War is a good example, but anarchism has remained a significant force in Spanish politics ever since, and it continues to be something that many people are drawn to, and even more people draw influence from, even if they don't explicitly consider themselves "anarchists"

In terms of organisations, anarchists, contrary to what you may think, are very organised people. But it was hard to look at this project through a prism of actual existing organisations because in practice they tend to be constantly in flux: there are groups which emerge and then disappear. So, I didn't have a particular organisation or organisations that I knew or had faith in when I first designed the project.

I hoped that when I get there, I would be able to gain access to them, and I did to some extent. Although what I found was that I had much more success in engaging with and talking to people than I did with "talking to" organisations, so to speak.

CER: In my case, I am emotionally attached to the place I did my fieldwork. I've been visiting this region [the Putumayo] for a while now. My first visit was when I was an undergraduate student. I have

friends there and knew some of the leaders I'm working with. Apart from these relationships and the nice experiences accumulated over the years; the attachment has to do with feeling this place like a second home. Part of my family is from a neighbouring region in Colombia's South called Nariño. There has been lots of migration from Nariño to Putumayo. I remember being impressed during my first visit to Putumayo when I noted that my first last name, Erazo, is a very common last name there. It's not that common in the rest of the country. So, I feel a sense of belonging there, like I feel it in my home city. I was expecting to do the PhD as a continuation of these experiences, but also as an extension of the experience itself. I wanted to not only continue cultivating friendships but also meet more people and travel more across the region and stay longer in the place.

At first, I imagined my fieldwork divided into two municipalities because my best friend there used to live in Mocoa, which is the capital city, but they moved to San Miguel, which is a municipality near the border with Ecuador. And so I was hoping to move between the two places, and I did for the first months. Then I realised that it was difficult to just being in the two places trying to follow two different processes.

My idea was to compare what it means and what it is like to be a leader in these two different areas. Because Mocoa is the bureaucratic centre of the region, whereas San Miguel is a place where the most coca crops

are cultivated and where illegal groups still command certain things of everyday life.

I changed my plan half-way through the field, and I decided to focus on the programme and leaders in Mocoa alone.

YZ: I think we can come back to how those changes happened later. But first, how did you prepare for fieldwork, considering some of you had prior connections and others didn't? What did you do before going into the field, particularly in terms of ethics and other preparations?

LM: As I said, I wasn't able to do much concrete preparation in terms of being in touch with people or organisations. The informal preparation I did was quite similar to what Cristian was talking about, being involved with the thing I wanted to study, which in my case is anarchism. I had also done research on anarchism at undergraduate level so was quite well-versed in the subject.

For me, preparation functions like an expansion of the life experience I already had, and thinking about (and relying on my knowledge of) how anarchists might expect to be approached and how it might be possible to access the kinds of groups I was interested in.

EP: It's interesting, because I think that you just hope that you arrive and you meet the right people, and it works out for you. I had a certain date. It was January 5th when I told myself, OK, that's the day when I'm sitting down and writing emails to the three organisations that I

want to work with. I spent so much time thinking about how to position myself because it's difficult to explain what an anthropologist does to people who don't study anthropology. It's a strange proposition: 'I want to work with you and while doing that I will be collecting information'. It sounded extremely suspicious.

In the first organisation that I contacted, I was put in touch with one particular person who, fortunately, knew what anthropology was and she was very excited about it. So, she gave me very quick access to the group. In another case, an organisation was going back and forth for a month, and I later learned that they had one member who was really against participating in my research. But then she left the organisation, and they returned to me. So, I think the most difficult thing for me was to think about how I should position myself and how I should explain what it is that I'm planning to do.

YZ: Does it feel anxious when you were getting in touch with them?

EP: There were definitely situations where I would just press the send button and immediately close my laptop, just to decompress a little bit. But after I approached the first couple of organisations, and I saw that there was general interest in what I was doing, it got easier even when talking to a few organisations with which we didn't end up working together. They were very nice, agreeing to meet in person, and they've explained their decision.

YZ: I always thought, contacting people online can be tricky and they can just stop replying to you sometimes. Did that happen to you?

EP: Yeah, I kind of had to accept that they will do things in their own time. There wasn't much that I could do apart from identifying quite a few organisations and keeping in mind that I can ask someone else if this one doesn't respond. I have started with a small number of organisations, and once an organisation would stop responding or respond with a 'no', I would email another one, and that's how I eventually ended up with three. This was an optimal scope for me because then I realised how much work it was going to entail, so I stopped on the third one.

LM: On that note, I think it is important to recognise how weird and artificial the distinction made in anthropology between 'online' and 'offline' fieldwork is. It can be difficult to approach people online, but a large part of people's everyday lives is online: that is how people communicate. So I think it is important to envelop that way of communicating into just general ethnographic methods.

CER: In my case, I had a friend, Elisa, who was helping me connecting with other people. When I first entered a meeting with the leaders of the programme, there was a woman who kept saying that Elisa was asking people to help an anthropologist, and that this was 'bullshit.' In other words, it didn't make sense for her to help a random anthropologist to understand the work they did as leaders. I was

listening to her, but she didn't know me or who I was. When the meeting started, she asked out loud 'who is replacing Elisa?' I raised my hand, and it was quite awkward. She then knew I was 'the anthropologist.' With time, we became friends. This speaks of the time taken to build relationships in the field.

I can also say that many leaders and programme staff cared too much about responsibility, meaning being there in the meetings, being there on time and guide a group of beneficiaries. I was able to build relationships by being responsible with them.

YZ: Yes, I remember an event during my fieldwork with a local organisation. I did a lot of work for that particular event, and at the end of the day, the Vice President of the association said he didn't see me as just another researcher who comes, collects data, and leaves. It felt like I had earned his respect, through the work I did and the care I showed.

EP: I think this can also complicate the relationships in some way. Once you get to know people better, they start treating you differently. I worked with the organisations as a volunteer, to use their own terms. I did not propose projects of my own, but, for example, I helped to run social media pages and things like that. But after a while a couple of people were saying, come on, you should have more of a say in how we do things, you've been with us for so long, you have earned the rights to participate. And it was a difficult thing for me at that point

because on the one hand it felt very nice to be treated in that way. But on the other hand, I was still a researcher with my own agenda.

What do you do with that trust? It's a difficult question. And now that I'm writing, I sometimes have to think about some information that was shared with me in private. And maybe it's best to keep quiet about it because it was said to me as a friend and not just an anthropologist.

YZ: Boundaries can be quite blurred at times, I agree... our professional identity is only one part of who we are. Following that thread, were there many things that took you by surprise during your fieldwork? We all know it is very different from what was written in the ethics form, but how exactly?

EP: I actually had so few expectations that I had few surprises. But of course, the people that I worked with were very different from the ones that I read about. And that has to do with the fact that I was working with emergent organisations, and it was a new generation of activists. People who were not activists prior to the full-scale invasion were getting involved, like those whose day jobs were in consultancy firms or IT. Quite a few of my participants worked for META; these are not the people who would be participating in activism a few years ago. So that is very interesting, and, in some cases, those were positive surprises. It is nice to see how the people who only occasionally attended street actions before became engaged in formal activism.

LM: I had a similar kind of lack of expectations. An unexpected surprise for me was the difficulty I had in gaining trust as an anthropologist. A lot of the groups I worked with come from this milieu where people are always looking for more people, more participants, more people to be part of their group. But when you add the element of being a researcher, it unsettles people a little bit. This speaks to the problem of positionality as an anthropologist: because I had been quite used to being part of political groups as an uncomplicated member of the group, when I came to position myself as a researcher, I also unsettled myself. I felt less comfortable in that place [I used to be at ease with]. I think this is another similarity with Jane's research: there's a strange kind of suspicion on the part of political activists around researchers. Because there is always the fear of someone being a spy.

But even being aware of that common suspicion, I was quite surprised by that experience because I expected anarchists particularly to be quite open and quite welcoming and not have too many “rules” so to speak, and they ended up having, in some ways, more rules [than anyone].

CER: We were in a year of electoral politics in Colombia during my fieldwork. I was interested in this because some leaders of the programme were also involved in electoral campaigns. They work as leaders in these settings as well, gathering people for politicians,

visiting houses door-to-door to talk about the candidate (basically, the grassroots work for mostly male politicians).

One day someone heard me talking about my work and about the leaders of the programme. I said they were barely recognised by the state, despite the importance of the work that they do. So, this person turned out to be a member of the team of a candidate running for mayor in Mocoa. She invited me to a meeting with the politician. And I went because I wanted to know more about political meetings. Then, in the meeting, the said politician asked me about my work, and I told him everything; a very detailed explanation about leaders, what they do, why are they important. After hearing me talk for a while, he looked at me and said he was going to use what I had said in his campaign speeches. I hadn't even considered that possibility.

I was quite naïve. I just thought I had a lot of information, and it was a good space to share. But I did think it could be adapted for political purposes, and what I did was, basically, updating this person and explaining to him a very important social policy in Colombia, the CCT programme I was working on, and he just used it for his own purposes.

So, what I am trying to say is that sometimes, in the field, we just want to do everything. We want to participate in any space we can, and we want to talk to as many people as possible. We always try to be nice. People are usually kind as well, but situations like this could also happen.

YZ: Going back to the spy thing a little bit, there was also once I met with some new people in my fieldwork. Then one of them drove me home, on the ride he said, 'my sister thinks you are a spy. But I don't really care. Even if you are, I think it's just really cool.' And I didn't even know how to respond to that.

EP: I was never a direct target of spying accusations, but I was a target of a lot of jokes, for example, that I am an 'officer' collecting information for the Russian police. These jokes were made in good fun, as by then we knew each other quite well. But the jokes also made me seriously consider how I am going to address the issues stemming from the sensitivity of my research. That was why I decided that I would be working only with grassroots activists and would not get involved with politically ambitious projects.

I was offered on one occasion to work with the group that was participating in international lobbying, and I've decided to draw a line there because I felt like if I was going to research that sort of stuff, I might attract attention to myself and put the grassroots activists with whom I was working and who were not interested in that type of exposure into danger of association with that.

YZ: My research is with the Chinese community in Jamaica. I was always consciously steer away from the embassy people whenever we are having like a very big gathering. It can be risky even if they knew

that I exist, it was best not to keep close touch with them. I wonder what other difficult situations you have encountered beyond this one?

EP: The biggest difficulty for me was to work with people who, although not directly, but still were impacted by the war. They were very tired and very upset and very angry and exhausted, and they had a lot of very difficult emotions that have built up.

As Luke said, when you are both an activist and a researcher, you get to show different sides of your personality. When I'm an activist, I'm unfortunately one of those people who jump into arguments. I'm one of those people who want to be inside the debate and argue for the correct way to do things. As a researcher, however, I had to hold myself off. There was a very big value in simply waiting and seeing. Especially when there would be a couple of bad news in a row, you could really feel people being affected by them. I just tried to remain calm and see how the perspectives would change on in a week or so. It was important to take a step back occasionally.

LM: There is one similar situation that I can think of. A group that I worked with in Madrid was part of a wider network in Spain. This is a network of men who identify as feminists, and who want to put their feminist thinking into practice: to interrogate the things in their lives which are influenced by what they see as internalised misogyny, and discuss ways to fight against that, both as individuals and as a group. They were trying to interrogate their place as men in society and try

to figure out ways to oppose patriarchal values within themselves and as a result hopefully to oppose them more generally, and socially, and culturally.

I went to one of their events, and I got into an argument with them over the particularities on how to oppose patriarchal thinking. I thought what they are proposing sounds like doing things in an aggressive, confrontational way, it feels like trying to shame people into stopping a behaviour but not really stopping a way of thinking. Basically, these guys just want to confront sexist men aggressively in public, which I think can be very helpful in the short term, but not long term. So I got into this argument, it was a difficult situation, and I didn't end up doing much more work with the group as a result.

CER: Personally, I am not that kind of person who argues, but there were obviously many difficult situations and difficult emotions throughout the field. These were not related to organisation work or my fieldwork necessarily, but to other everyday life things.

For instance, it was kind of strange for me being in Colombia but not being with my family, who live in another place. As I also spent the year before preparing for my fieldwork abroad [in the UK], this time being away accumulates itself, and it was a mix of emotions sometimes.

YZ: Indeed...I have not been back home due to mixed reasons for three years, and I only returned after my fieldwork.

Following on from that, what did the routine of your fieldwork look like? How did you actually work with your participants, especially considering that many of them probably had day jobs and were only involved in organisational work part-time?

LM: I really had no routine. The types of people I sought to understand with my field belonged to political groups but also had whole lives outside of their political activism. Or I should say, their activism was just one significant but small part of their lives. So I thought if the only thing that I was doing with my fieldwork was going to meetings constantly and working with organisations I wouldn't be getting a full picture of the kind of life that the person I wanted to understand with my fieldwork was living. I didn't want to lapse into looking at these people as some kind of Weberian "ideal type" of "the activist" and lose sight of everything else that made up their lives.

For that reason, I deliberately tried to not have a routine because I was trying to live a life as close to that person's life as possible. Which of course included sometimes going to meetings or protests, but sometimes was about just doing other things like going to the supermarket or meeting for drinks or whatever. I think this speaks to some general problems or issues in anthropology: when we talk about "access", of course we generally mean access to things like social groups, but we also have to think about what specific aspects of a person or their identity we do – or are able to – gain access to. And if

we find ourselves only trying to access the things which are in line with our research interests, doesn't that pose a pretty significant problem?

EP: A lot of my routine depended on how the organisations were structured and worked. I engaged with organisations that did not have physical offices; their members were just random Russians who lived in different parts of London, and they decided to do something together when the full-scale invasion of Ukraine began. So, I didn't have a routine per se, apart from a few weekly meetings that we had. Many of them were scheduled on Zoom.

I didn't expect how much of my work was going to be on Zoom – so I guess that was the surprise for me in fieldwork. But it was very interesting because the main activist working hours for my informants were 5:00 pm until 11:00 pm, after their day jobs.

I did not know much about most of my informants' lives outside the organisations, and there are a few reasons for that. First, I thought that, well, they don't know too much about each other either. They themselves developed these ways of working together without knowing too much about each other. Of course, I knew where they worked, lived, their overall migration history. My degree of socialisation with them was probably higher than the one they had amongst themselves, because I was present at all events and calls. Occasionally people would just gather and go to a party together or

have lunch to discuss things. I tried to attend as many of such in-person gatherings as possible.

Deeply inside, I was starting to question whether I am indeed doing ethnography. What am I doing in London, when majority of these things are on Zoom? So, there was anxiety about trying to make it to as many in-person events as possible.

But there was also once again the question of privacy and security. I sometimes felt that my informants didn't feel comfortable to disclose certain details about their personal lives, and my goal was to stop and not ask further.

Occasionally I also held semi-formal interviews if I had questions for a particular activist.

YZ: I guess this form of socialising in meetings always has a lot to do with how London as a city works, right?

EP: It was very interesting when I was in my pre-field viva. One of my examiners asked which council I would be based at, because a lot of activism in London is council based. And I was like, well, here's the thing, it's going to be London because that's where the protests are happening. But there is no particular location.

CER: In my case, there were many things going on in one year of operation of the programme. The CCT entails a cycle involving payment collection, well-being encounters, leaders' committees, and

the day-to-day work in the office. So, I was trying to be involved in the whole picture as much as possible. On the one hand, I was a leader of the programme myself, representing a group of beneficiaries from some neighbourhoods of Mocoa. On the other hand, I was also an intern in the office for three months. I had a routine, especially during the last months. It consisted of going to the office in the morning and staying there all morning, sometimes all day; in the afternoons, I usually did interviews with current and former leaders and staff.

YZ: And how do you balance that institutional organisational responsibility with your part of research where you are actually also participant observing and writing notes and so on? Do you write your fieldnotes off working hours or...?

CER: Yeah, I write fieldnotes and do recordings because some days you are just too tired, and you don't want to write anything, so I just recorded myself.

EP: For me it was before 5pm. Before my volunteer work usually started.

LM: For me it was a question of balancing the position of me as an activist versus that of me as an anthropologist. I don't think those things necessarily have to be totally separate. A lot of the notes I took, and the kind of thinking I was doing in the field relates to the activism that I was experiencing or observing through the lens of my own

experiences – historically as well as in the moment - and my own values and ideals.

I got to a point where I was quite worried that I was doing a kind of auto ethnography because everything [I wrote] was just about how it was different being an anarchist in Spain than in Scotland or in the UK. There was a lot of that cultural comparison. Eventually I got to this point where I realised that I was just a person who was quite similar to people I was working with. And that helped me get to the point where I felt doing this self-reflexive work was helpful and relevant to my research and my understanding.

YZ: But then how did you answer that question eventually? How is it different in Spain?

LM: There's a lot to say on that, but I think the main difference between Spain and Scotland in terms of anarchism is the history. The position of an anarchist for that reason is different in Spain because there's a cultural weight, a real residual kind of polarisation, a hangover from the Franco period and the Civil War.

Anarchism in the UK is seen as, in comparison, something like a novelty or a curiosity, whereas in Spain it feels much more real, and in some ways much more dangerous. That's because anarchism has had a notable effect on Spanish politics and was one of the forces which drove the polarisation which led to the Civil War. And in the post-war period, the Franco dictatorship, it was one site of resistance to Franco

and to fascism, so it was a flashpoint for violence and discord between, basically, leftist and rightist tendencies. Those divisions of course persist in Spain and anarchism in many respects retains its position within that structure of antagonism.

YZ: Let's talk about meetings. I guess all of you have attended a lot of meetings. How were them? Any fun, exciting, exhausting...or?

EP: I think towards the end it definitely became boring because, once again, I was doing far more meetings than any usual activist would. So, for me it started to get very, very repetitive. It was still valuable, of course. It becomes especially interesting when you look at some of those later notes and compare them with what you wrote at the beginning of fieldwork. You notice the differences which you missed at first. But also sometimes, of course, it was exciting. Sometimes you come to meeting, not expecting anything, yet a very interesting discussion takes place. My favourite meetings were the ones where not that many people showed up. Then, instead of following the formal agenda, they would start talking about life and feelings, and it becomes a little bit more personal, so you cannot predict anything. You just have to be there and see what's going to happen.

I think those more personal meetings have actually informed a lot of my thinking and my writing because I'm dealing with quite sensitive or personal things like identity or visions of the future. Such topics rarely arose in formal organisational meetings. But you have these

occasional spaces of intimacy in which people open up very differently, and you just have to catch these.

CER: For me, I think, what happens after and before meetings is interesting. And being in different positions in these meetings was also an interesting experience. For instance, being an organiser, or being part of the office staff, or just being an attendee. People see you in different ways depending on what role you are playing in that meeting. The material and the records you gather from the roles you were playing also change.

For instance, after organising the encounter of the group I was leading, I didn't have any notes either recorded or written about that day because I was involved in a lot of logistical things. I didn't stop to think much and to pay attention in the sense of participant observation.

LM: Meetings were quite important to my research because they are an important anarchist practice. Meetings, in general, tend to function as an expression of the values of the group. In anarchist practice specifically, organising and running the meeting almost becomes the primary thing, as an expression of how anarchism or anarchists ought to work. So the form of the meeting becomes almost more important than its content: what the meeting is about, or the outcome of it.

In anarchist groups, meetings do tend to be very boring and very long because they are of course predicated on not having anyone in charge and having the meeting work along the lines of direct democracy or

consensus-based decision making. So that always leads to a lot of trying to get people to agree on something that they really don't agree on and then trying to navigate how we can deal with the fact that not everyone agrees.

It is, in that sense, also really interesting and helpful politically and analytically as an expression of anarchist values in practice. Looking at anarchist meetings seriously, from an anthropological point of view, can demonstrate how anarchist ideas and values actually can work and do work in the real world, and that people interacting in an egalitarian and non-hierarchical way is actually a viable way of doing politics and doing sociality. It just takes a long time.

YZ: So how would you feel at the end of a very long, tedious meeting?

LM: I think, and this is probably the same as most of my participants, I would be just kind of frustrated. Because – in contrast to what I've just said – often meetings would shift away from talking about a specific thing in a specific (anarchist) way and would just lapse into a meeting about how to do meetings. Which of course becomes cyclical, frustrating and exhausting. As a person, I often came away feeling frustrated, but as an anthropologist I came away feeling like I got a lot of material.

EP: It's very interesting because I think I had the very opposite situation in terms of how the meetings were organised, because, as I mentioned, a lot of my informants belonged to a new generation of

activists coming from the corporate world. They were really focused on efficiency and doing everything on time. Meetings were capped [for time] and had a very clear agenda. Sometimes there was not enough time to come to a solution for a certain issue, yet someone would be like, OK, that's it. We don't have any more time to speak about it. Everyone is tired, we just need to go home, so we have to move on to the next thing.

YZ: There is something I always want to ask. How do you sort of understand these people beyond the rule and boundaries of the organisations, and beyond the roles they play in the meetings?

EP: I'm not sure I'm getting the question.

YZ: It just seems that they have so much life before and after the meetings. How do their norms and practices in their 'other life' slips into these organisational works?

EP: I can actually comment on that a little bit, I think. It once again boils down to me working with very young, very emergent organisations which really change their shape and format quite a lot depending on the membership. Some people would leave, others would join, and it would slowly but surely change the processes.

I think it was quite interesting in the sense that I could very clearly see how certain norms were being constructed because of this life outside of the meeting, how certain people brought different ideas from different contexts.

CER: Well, in the CCT programme, there are rules about what the leader can do or cannot do. For instance, they are not allowed to ask beneficiaries money in exchange of doing certain things. Their service should be voluntary to them. But they also do not have any resources provided by the municipal government or the national government.

When they organise a meeting, they might need money to buy snacks and drinks. But there are no resources for them to buy those refreshments. So, what they do is that they normally ask for a small contribution from every member of the group and with that they buy for everyone.

I guess there are always rules written down, but in practice, there are many things that change. They are also not allowed to merge electoral politics and CCT meetings, but that also happens. It depends on who does what. If there were cases in which the local manager of the programme was merging the two things together, then that's fine; but if you do the same as a leader, then you will be in trouble.

LM: My experience is kind of opposite to Cristian's. In that anarchists make this explicit attempt to not have rules. Which is quite interesting for an anthropologist, because you end up trying to discern the sort of unspoken or unwritten rules which are still to some extent followed in during these meetings or events. No one ever says or sets down how you should conduct yourself, in terms of not speaking over people for example, or avoiding "aggressive" or "macho" behaviour. But the

reactions to stuff like that make it clear that it's not acceptable. It's also important to point out that, again in common with what Cristian says, the social and the instrumental elements of these events inevitably become intertwined.

YZ: I suppose in that sense, it's not so different from other forms of fieldwork. You mentioned incorporating digital methods into your ethnography, but how would you say working with organisations compares to more traditional forms of fieldwork, like living with people in a community?

LM: If you were to set up an allegory between the meeting room as my fieldsite and the village as someone else's, you might say that the village informs all of the ways that one interacts with and relates to participants. I think it's almost exactly the same. The same happens in the meeting room as a result of being part of the organisation. The difference only lies in whether that space captures the entirety of a person's life.

EP: I think having our post-field seminars was very interesting in terms of realising how much we have in common, even though we have different fieldsites. But then you start discussing the problems and the issues that you experienced in the field or while dealing with your data, or also emotional things. And you realise that they are quite similar. I've spent so much time in front of my laptop during my

fieldwork and yet I can relate to someone who did it in a very unusual environment for themselves without a phone.

YZ: I'd like to end with a question about emotions, since you've already spoken about them quite a bit. What kinds of emotions did you encounter in your fieldwork?

EP: Positive and negative. I think after a while you feel like your emotions are under a microscope, exacerbated by the fact that you are not living your life as you would live it otherwise. For me, the difficulty was I am an organised person. I like having a timetable, but it was difficult to have one because you never know when something unexpected might happen. Protests were sometimes announced on a short notice, and things like that. Sometimes you would think that a call was going to happen, or interview was going to happen, and it's cancelled last moment.

In the end, I just wanted to go back to my normal life. I wanted to go back home.

As I've also mentioned, there was boredom occasionally, especially towards the end, but also there was a lot of pride in the people that I worked with. Not that many people go home at 5:00 PM and then sit in front of their laptops, writing grant applications or checking how their fundraising campaigns are going until bedtime.

It was very inspiring, and I think even though I didn't find too much institutionalised hope amongst my informants, they definitely gave *me*

hope, because I could see how people got together and did things. So, a mixed bag, really.

LM: I mean there was a lot of hope that I experienced in my fieldwork as well. I know that you [Yichi] and I actually have spoken a bit about this but there's a kind of strangeness in political activism in Madrid, where people realise and become quite aware of the oppressive forces which act on their lives. They attempt to oppose those forces in different ways but generally they don't really manage to. There is also the underlying and implicit knowledge that the generalised oppressive force in this world - which I call capitalism, and a lot of my informants called it capitalism - is not going anywhere anytime soon. It can't be defeated. The emotion that comes from that, very often, is a kind of despondency, despair and sadness.

But here hope comes from the possibility of transcending or evading capitalism through the ways in which people relate to each other and the ways that they relate to their space. The important thing here is the creation of the type of space I talked about in the very beginning - both physical and rhetorical - in which capitalism doesn't necessarily have to exist and doesn't have to have the kind of influence it has outside of the anarchist movement.

In emotional terms, I think I experienced emotions which felt like a pendulum swinging between hope and the opposite of hope.

CER: In the last months of my fieldwork, I felt I was ready to leave. It was strange because, on the one hand, it was perhaps the best moment in terms of relationships with people and my engagement with the programme, the leaders, the network. But, on the other hand, I think doing fieldwork involves adapting yourself to different situations, different environments, and there is a point where you feel like you don't want to do that anymore, you want to just take a break.

The way I was taught to do anthropology in Colombia (of course, this doesn't apply to all Colombian anthropologists) is by living and working with people. So, most of my fieldwork I was living with friends and interlocutors, and it requires you to adapt yourself to different scenarios in everyday life: the space where you sleep and eat, everything. But adaptation gets to a point where you cannot adapt anymore.

YZ: And towards the end of my fieldwork, I was also quite exhausted. I just wanted to go. But I think there are very different responses. I know people who, when they first left, so desperately wanted to go back to the fieldsite, and then it takes them one or two months to calm down and then there are people who, like me, only start to miss my field after that one or two months.

Do you still keep in touch with people from your fieldwork? Was it easy or difficult?

EP: In my case, London is really not that far away. Lots of my friends live there, so before and after fieldwork I've been going there a lot. And if I go to London, I sometimes think, hey, I would like to meet up with some of my informants and they do the same when they come to Edinburgh. I think we are going to see more and more blurring of the end point of fieldwork. Technically I left in December 2023, but then you know, there was a presidential election for which I came to London, partially because I just wanted to vote myself.

There was a massive queue to the embassy, and I said hi to everyone whom I knew there: friends from uni, my informants, people that I knew from some other projects – everyone was there. It's hard for me to just, you know, completely separate these parts of my life, so we keep in touch. If something big happens in this last year of my PhD, like some big political news, I would go back to London and I would do a little bit more fieldwork, and it's going to be an ad hoc basis.

CER: Yes, I keep in touch with some of them. I guess sometimes you say you are going to leave, and people take the chance of saying certain things, how they appreciate your presence or your friendship. It was a very touching moment for me. And there are good friendships there. So, I try to stay in touch, and I went back this summer for a few weeks. As I said at the beginning, I'm really attached to this place since years ago, so it's like a second home for me in Colombia. I plan to keep going there as much as possible.

YZ: Given the time, I'll ask a final question about 'data processing'. What kind of data are you working with, and how do you begin to engage with it at the initial writing up stages?

EP: My notes are very organised. I have a file for every week and in each file, there are different sections for things that happened that week.

I find it very useful because I've been in the same situation a few times: I'm writing down an ethnographic vignette, and I'm pretty sure I remember what happened, then I open the notes and realise that I don't remember it correctly. A few months have passed, and I have forgotten what actually took place. The detailed notes help me to fact-check.

LM: I'm the opposite, I am incredibly disorganised. Yes, I take an anarchist approach [laughs] but yeah: in the field I didn't write things down when I was working with people, although I wrote down quotes as soon as possible afterwards so I could remember them. Now, I generally use my notes as a tool to remember things like feelings – to jog my memory about how a moment or interaction felt, what I thought was interesting. I find photos very helpful for that as well: for me the purpose of field notes is (and should be) to evoke memories and emotions, rather than being a tool to very literally reconstruct the physicality of the scene.

CER: I also look at fieldnotes and recordings. Like Luke, I tried to do it as soon as possible. Normally at the end of the day.

YZ: Yeah, I'm currently writing something which makes me have to go back to my recordings of some of the shop stuff. And when I opened it, it was like, my God, I forgot how loud this is. Like the noise of the people just fighting the background. It's like so much and it's just...

CER: The soundscapes can be interesting too.

YZ: I think this would be the end of our discussion. Thank you everyone and let us now open the floor to audience questions.

Concluding Remarks

Where have we arrived? Our discussion highlighted the shared blurriness of professional and personal boundaries, the uncertainties of meeting people, and the diverse contexts and personal methods through which fieldwork is lived, none of which can be easily summarised. Meetings can be inspiring, anarchists can be organised, and fieldworkers must remain open to the shifting currents of feelings that make up their encounters. Perhaps what remains is not a single conclusion but a final question: in what tones and styles, do we choose to tell our stories?

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