

Introduction – Field methods in ‘closed contexts’ : Undertaking research in authoritarian states and places

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Area

Where regimes are closed (or closing), whether haunted by an authoritarian past or abandoning democracy, the selection of research sites and choice of fieldwork techniques are relatively constrained compared to more open regimes. The use of qualitative fieldwork methods—particularly traditional methods like interviewing and focus groups that rely on close contact between researcher and respondents—may prove challenging to conduct, impossible to verify, and unlikely to convince a skeptical audience. Similarly, the closing of regimes may reduce the value of quantitative analyses of voting (since elections are rigged), diminish the utility of official statistics (which are unreliable), or mass surveys (where citizens feel threatened). (Goode 2010, 1055-6)

I. Introduction

David Harvey (2000, 183) once argued that closure, however temporary, is an inherently authoritarian act. This is because: ‘Closure (the making of something) of any sort contains its own authority because to materialize any one design, no matter how playfully construed, is to foreclose, in some cases temporarily but in other instances relatively permanently, on the possibility of materializing others’ (Harvey 2000, 196). The goal of this special issue is to begin a critical discussion about conducting research (in) these spaces of closure. The contributors all conduct their research in places that we have collectively termed ‘closed contexts’ – that is, settings that are predominantly defined by the prevalence of such acts of closure – around the world (from Africa to North America to East Asia). These places might be referred to as ‘illiberal,’ ‘authoritarian,’ ‘nondemocratic,’ ‘coercive,’ or even (non)‘exceptions’ within the prevailing ‘liberal’ system. Indeed, a prime obstacle we have faced in this project is one of language – for it is extremely difficult to capture the diversity of scales at which practices of closure unfold. Thus, rather than trying to define (and thus materialize) a definitive regime of government over a delimited space, we instead adopt the term ‘closed contexts’ as a means to focus on the nature of closure and coercion itself, and to allow for the variety of scales and places at which these practices unfold.

Conceptualizing the practices and spatialities of closure is further complicated by the fact that doing so has historically been tied to certain normative understandings of the operation of power and politics along a ‘liberal’ *versus* ‘illiberal’ binary. In their own ways, each contributor shows how this framing can be deeply problematic – not just theoretically, but perhaps more

crucially for the very methods that we employ in conducting geographic fieldwork. For example: How would you design a research project to assess illegal Chinese logging in an African village, when residents are too afraid to speak about it for fear of retribution from local authorities and/or criminal networks? How and can you undertake focus group research in a place where there is no free media, but where subjects do not see themselves as ‘coerced’ into repeating state ‘propaganda’? How do you access what is behind the ‘closed doors’ of detention centers and military apparatuses of ostensibly ‘liberal’ states? Or how can you conduct research in the face of intense secret police surveillance, and what are the ethical questions raised by conducting cross-cultural fieldwork in ‘cultures of fear’ (Mitchell 2002)? And who are ‘you,’ the researcher, and what is your role in the power relations of these various closed contexts around the world?

These are some of the questions raised and addressed by the contributors to this special issue. We are especially concerned with asking, what makes conducting research in these closed contexts different from more ‘open’ settings? In doing so, we aim to move beyond the liberal/illiberal binary toward a theorization of spaces of closure and their (sometimes more, sometimes less) unique methodological problems. The literature on field methods in geography is almost completely silent on this issue. As such, those of us who work in such settings must typically rely on texts about specific methodological tools that have been developed for ‘open’ (i.e. ‘Western,’ ‘liberal,’ and/or ‘democratic’) settings. But as we illustrate here, these tools often fail to adequately translate into our field sites, given the distinctive configurations of power relations, subjectivities, and technologies of government in closed contexts.

By emphasizing the differences between open and closed contexts, and pointing to the difficulties of applying a set of methods designed for open settings, our aim is not to ‘throw away’ the time-worn toolkit of geographic field methods. In contrast to what appears to be such an impulse in the literature on ‘non-representational theory’ (e.g. Dewsbury 2010; Thrift 2008), the contributors here are all guided by certain feminist ethic, in which we argue that, not only is it impossible to entirely avoid representation, but ‘we cannot and should not evade the academic and political responsibility of speaking for/on behalf of others through interpretations of the world that start, if not end, with the political interactions that take place in [our fieldwork]’ (McDowell 2010, 170). Rather, as I shall detail below, we collectively call for more careful efforts to theorize the operation of power *with an eye to the broader fields of power relations in which we conduct our research.*

In this focus on the political context in which we generate, analyse, and present our data, we necessarily engage with important discussions about the ethics of field research, which geographers have long considered (e.g. McDowell 2010; Moss 2002; Staeheli and Lawson 1994; Thrift 2003). In particular, we highlight the heightened significance of careful research design for closed contexts, in which constraints on the discursive environment often mean that it is either undesirable or unsafe for us as researchers or for our participants as political subjects to engage in certain conversations. Although this process of critical reflexivity may carry heightened significance in closed contexts, we find that it is a vital exercise for *all* researchers. The insights and questions raised by our fieldwork in closed contexts are thus of equal importance to our colleagues working in more open settings – not just by challenging the normative liberal/illiberal binaries, but also by promoting a more modest, and ultimately more incisive, role for ourselves as researchers.

II. Closure and openness: beyond the liberal/illiberal binary

As I have already noted, much social science scholarship has historically (and frequently only implicitly) assumed a mode of conceptualizing power and politics along a certain continuum, in which ‘liberal’ or ‘democratic’ polities are conceptualized as the opposite of ‘illiberal’ or ‘authoritarian’/‘despotic’ polities. Since the incorporation of certain Foucauldian-inspired critiques within critical geography, this is less true of our discipline than, for example, political science, which has a long history of classifying regime types along this decidedly normative scale (e.g. Huntington 1991; Linz 2000; Ottaway 2003). Not only do these accounts frequently assume an essentialist understanding of what constitutes ‘real’ or ‘full-fledged’ democracy (especially, e.g., Zakaria 1997), but they all take for granted a distinctive understanding of how power relates to coercion. This implicit vision is based on a negative and one-dimensional conception of power, i.e. as an outside force weighing down upon autonomous, free-thinking individuals (Mitchell 1990).

Many poststructuralist scholars, by contrast, have sought to reframe discussions about political regimes in terms of ‘how actual relations of subjugation manufacture subjects’ (Foucault 2003, 45) instead of ‘taking for granted the existence of a body called the governed’ (Veyne 1997, 150). Challenging the top-down conception of power and subjectivity, these scholars have instead treated power as also operating ‘productively’ or ‘positively,’ rather than

being solely a ‘negative’ and ‘external’ force (e.g. Lemke 2011; Mitchell 1990; Nealon 2008; Oksala 2005; Rose 1996, 1999). In this critical approach, the analysis of power should not just ‘concern itself with power at the level of conscious intention or decision’ (Foucault 1980, 97), but must also attend to practices of government, or the ‘conduct of conduct,’ in the manufacture of political subjects (see also Billig 1995; Bourdieu 1977; Giddens 1979; Veyne 1997). Subjectivities are thus situated in time and space, and are constantly (re)produced in the practices of various actors, as well as certain meta-discourses such as ‘liberalism.’ Indeed, a major contribution of Foucault’s (2007, 2008, 2010) work on liberal governmentality is to illustrate how such discourses are bound up with certain conceptions of human agency, contributing to the development of certain tactics by which individuals are simultaneously governed *and* govern themselves.

It is sometimes remarked that liberalism governs through freedom whereas illiberalism governs through obedience. Unfortunately, this simple binary obscures more than it reveals. Liberalism, in Foucault’s (2008, 14-16) formulation, entails a self-limiting governmental *ratio*, which stands in marked contrast to that of despotism. There is a *ratio* to despotism, but it is not one of self-limitation: ‘Despotism is an economic government, but an economic government which is not hemmed in and whose boundaries are not drawn by anything but an economy which it has itself defined and which it completely controls’ (Foucault 2008, 14). Yet, as Foucault notes, ‘those two “diseases of power” – fascism and Stalinism [...] used and extended mechanisms already present in most other societies. More than that: in spite of their own internal madness, they used to a large extent the ideas and the devices of our [i.e. Western/liberal] political rationality’ (Foucault 1982, 779).

And just as ‘liberal’ techniques of government can be used under despotic regimes, so to are there dubiously pervasive ‘pockets’ of despotism in many ‘liberal’ and ‘democratic’ places, such as the United States’ immigrant detention centres and military apparatuses explored by Martin and Belcher (this issue). Mitchell Dean (1999) attributes this to the fact that liberalism is ‘interlaced with forms of despotism’; for example, John Stuart Mill only applied his doctrine of liberty to those ‘in the maturity of their faculties’ and he saw despotism a legitimate mode of governing those deemed unworthy – as long as the goal was their improvement (Dean 1999, 133). This division inherent to liberal rule means that it is often a slippery slope between the ‘good despot’ and ‘unjust’ despotism.

To see the significance that certain actors invest in this defining certain political interventions as ‘just’ or ‘unjust,’ we only need to look to the ‘noble’ improvement schemes of development, which frequently employ disciplinary tactics of surveillance, control, and closure (Li 2007). In fact, disciplinary power is predicated on the authoritarian act of enclosure introduced above: ‘The first action of discipline is in fact to circumscribe a space in which its power and the mechanism of its power will function fully and without limit’ (Foucault 2007, 44-45). Not only does this apply to the materialization of space, as in Harvey’s (2000) and Foucault’s (2007) formulations, but so too can acts of closure be *temporal* acts of oppression when ‘time’s indeterminacy and openness is colonized’ by plans for the future (Buck-Morss 2000, 67), as we have seen throughout communist histories of five-year plans or development agendas throughout the global South. So too are the scripts of ‘liberalism’ and ‘democracy,’ with their othering of ‘illiberalism’ and ‘authoritarianism,’ disciplinary practices. Resting on a range of moral geographies, the power to police the borders of these ideological constructs entails the power to foreclose alternative imaginings of subjectivity and political arrangements.

Accordingly, we argue that in order to better conceptualize the operation of power in both open and closed contexts, it is necessary to move beyond the discursive constraints of this policework. Although we acknowledge that all binaries are artificial, they can sometimes be useful – and we aim to illustrate through this special issue that the conceptualization of ‘open’ and ‘closed’ contexts can be a productive means of overcoming the theoretical and normative problematics of the liberal/illiberal binary. We argue that the issue of closure and openness allows us to attend more specifically to individual practices of governing the self and others, without lapsing into an assumption that such practices are everywhere the same in a given country, region, or village, and into assumptions that these places are constituted by and through liberal subjects and power relations.

III. Field methods in closed contexts

Compared to the extensive body of literature on liberal technologies of government, there is much less work on ‘non-liberal’ arts of government (but see Dean 1999; Foucault 2008, 187-192; Optiz 2011; Valverde 1996). Regardless, we can draw the important conclusion from the Foucauldian work on discourses of liberalism that subjectivity and agency are likely to be alternately conceptualized in places *not* subject to its discursive hegemony. If this is the case and

if, as I have already suggested, the development of academic field methods originated in more open, predominantly Western, contexts, it is plausible that these methodological tools would tend to operate on certain assumptions about how subjectivity and agency works in these places (with their particular history of liberal governmentality). As the contributors to this special issue illustrate, there are indeed different understandings of agency and subjectivity at work in our various field sites. On a related note, there are also different norms surrounding the expression of ‘opinions,’ which may be either tied up with a ‘culture of fear’ stemming from such varied circumstances as extreme violence, poverty, or threat of oppression (Mitchell 1990, 2002), or the more structural violence of less overtly violent fields of power relations (Bourdieu 1977; Gramsci 2008).

In both cases, more meaning can often be found in *silences*, rather than what is openly expressed or practiced. Timothy Mitchell, writing on rural Egypt, explains:

[T]he convention of reducing meanings to those ideas available to individual villagers and expressible in the form of attitudes, so that they may be collected from questionnaires or interviews, tends to exclude the possibility of representing the experience of violence. Those who live intolerable lives, coping with poverty, unemployment, hunger, and other more direct forms of coercion, must somehow express their condition and yet may be unable to find the opportunity, the courage, or the language to do so. These are conditions that may express themselves not in attitudes or accounts of observable events, but in silences, an unwillingness to respond, or the sheer inability to narrate. None of this can be explored by the conventional methods of political analysis found in the works on rural Egypt. (Mitchell 2002, 177)

How, then, are we as researchers to account for these silences, when field methods are so firmly focused on accounting for visible or utterable phenomena? Further, how can we conceptualize power and subjectivity without presuming a field populated by liberal subjects, agencies, and norms? Each author in this volume seeks answers to these questions in their own manner, so I will now turn to a brief overview of their individual contributions.

Sarah Turner’s paper (this issue) on ‘red stamps and green tea’ considers the ethical and practical dilemmas of navigating the complex micro-politics of unequal relations between central state actors and marginalised groups. For her, the Sino-Vietnamese borderlands in the upland Southeast Asian massif represent a ‘closed context’ insofar as residents there are subject to (en)closure by lowland-based rulers through variously-scaled apparatuses of surveillance and censorship. Reflecting on 15 years of research with ethnic minorities in these borderlands,

Turner concludes that this context of closure contrasts from more open settings in that it is extremely challenging to ‘reach the voices one wants to hear, with many layers of bureaucracy controlling access,’ and with local research participants highly wary of state officials and of speaking openly about political concerns. Turner reflects on her own sense of responsibility as an academic, arguing that she cannot neglect her relative position of power vis-à-vis her informants, which compels her to advocate for these ‘enclosed’ residents. Doing so is of course a political intervention in itself, and thus demands intense sensitivity to informants’ selective and strategic silences and self-censorship. For Turner, challenging as this may be, the unique research relationship in this closed context also demands that she give back to the communities in the most relevant way she can – whether through material provisions, bureaucratic support, or airing their voices through academic publications.

Lauren Martin and Oliver Belcher’s paper (this issue) on ‘ethnographies of closed doors’ explores two similarly closed contexts in the United States, in which closure is selectively enacted by bureaucratic obstacles and varying degrees of (self-)censorship. In their effort to move beyond the liberal/illiberal binary, they reconceive the analysis of ‘liberal’ norms of open information as governmental technologies. That is, the discourses producing the norms are themselves disciplining tools that various actors (researchers included) deploy to gain access to information, or partake in the authoritarian acts of closure. By focusing on the highly dispersed set of actors involved, they argue that state institutions, such as the immigration and military agencies of their fieldwork, are not ‘coherent’ bodies ‘bent on obscurity,’ but are produced through a wide range of situated practices and forms of knowledge. As Martin and Belcher illustrate, this can sometimes be a boon for research in closed contexts, whereas at other times, it can lead to unexpected moments or experiences of closure, despite all narratives of ‘openness.’ They accordingly call for researchers in nominally ‘liberal’ and ‘illiberal’ states alike to have a heightened sensitivity to the ways in which governmental technologies of openness and closure are strategically woven together.

In my own contribution (Koch this issue), I reflect on my experiences of conducting focus group research in Kazakhstan, as a means to challenge certain conceptions of the autonomously-held ‘opinion.’ First historicizing ‘liberal’ norms about the meaning of ‘free speech,’ I argue that the ‘opinion’ is itself a technology of government in democratic systems. But in various places around the world, people are not necessarily governed and do not govern

themselves through this technology. I consider Kazakhstan's discursive environment as a 'closed context' to illustrate how, in nondemocratic settings, there may instead be a prevailing normative system that punishes 'free speech,' rewards the repetition of state-scripted speech, or both. This situation is only 'problematic' for social science researchers if their field methods are aimed at 'uncovering' research participants' opinions. For this reason, I argue that it is especially important in closed contexts to employ a practice-based theoretical framework that attends to performance and variable modes of subjectivity, rather than focusing on 'opinions' and 'motives,' which carry implicit liberalist assumptions about autonomy and agency.

In her contribution, Ingrid Nelson (this issue) also takes up a practice-centred approach to navigate the complex micro- and macro-politics of conducting ethnographic work on Mozambique's illegal timber trade. Reflecting on Shaw's (2011) notion of the 'adventure/danger impulse' of researchers who study 'dangerous' or 'sensational' topics or places, she argues that a certain academic preoccupation with titillating research results can lead to insufficient attention to the embodied interventions of the researcher herself. Nelson recounts her own practices of mobility in the *miombo* woodlands of Zambézia to illustrate how this can not only introduce ethical challenges into the conduct of field research, but it can also lead to theoretical aporias about the nature of power dynamics shaping closed contexts. She thus challenges researchers to move beyond anxieties about the potential harms of research *products* by giving more critical attention and reflection on the mundane *practices* of researchers and their intermediaries.

Michael Gentile (this issue) considers a different kind of research intermediary in his contribution: that of state surveillance authorities. He positions certain post-communist states as 'closed contexts' in their continued reliance on these secret service agencies (known there as the 'organ'). While many researchers in closed contexts face serious challenges in conducting fieldwork due to such authorities – even if it simply takes the shape of avoiding certain subjects due to fear of their wrath – scholars rarely acknowledge this in presenting their findings. Nor has it been the subject of substantive discussion within the methodological literature on field research. Recounting his own various encounters with the 'organ' in Eastern Europe and Central Asia, Gentile's intervention provides a unique insight into its internal hierarchies, as well as the hierarchies of risk faced by researchers in these closed contexts.

As all of these pieces illustrate, the research process in closed contexts is itself fraught by a certain 'culture of fear.' Far from internal to the context itself, scholars are equally part of this

culture. We come to the field – and participate in its construction – with our own silences and political projects. And yet, as we all aim to illustrate, this does not doom field research in ‘closed contexts’ to failure any more than ‘open contexts.’ Rather, careful conceptualization of power and subjectivity becomes absolutely paramount to the process of research design. While this may seem to be a straightforward conclusion for geographers, who have long been incorporating the feminist call for attending to one’s positionality in the research process, this special issue aims to broaden this micro-political message by emphasizing the centrality of macro-political contexts (and their myriad technologies of government) in the conduct of fieldwork. And we hope that by exploring this through the language of openness and closure, rather than that of liberalism and illiberalism, we might gain a fuller picture of how all these binaries are interwoven in our own practices and subjectivities – whether we are citizens or scholars of the United States, Mozambique, or Vietnam.

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