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Revisiting "For ethnography in political geography"

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Nick Megoran's (2006) article, "For ethnography in political geography: Experiencing and re-imagining Ferghana Valley boundary closures" was a much-needed contribution to political geography when it was published 17 years ago. And it continues to be a relevant reminder for political geographers, as we reimagine the shape of fieldwork after extended Covid lockdowns and the myriad financial and physical challenges of fieldwork facing students and scholars today.

The first sentence of Megoran's article is refreshingly direct: "This article argues that ethnographic participant observation is a research method neglected by political geographers, yet one that could enrich and vivify the growing, but somewhat repetitious, body of scholarship on both critical geopolitics and international boundaries" (Megoran, 2006, p. 623).

Megoran issues a clear and forceful call for more ethnographic research in political geography, which he argued had been widely neglected in our subfield in the 1990s and early 2000s. Focusing on ethnographic participant observation, he argues that it is an excellent tool to correct an "imbalance" in political geography research that had till then been "poor at incorporating an appreciation of everyday human experience with textual analysis" (Megoran, 2006, p. 623).

Megoran orients his article in a positive direction, focusing on the benefits of ethnography instead of attacking the methodological problems that it could "correct." But the underlying critique reflects a broader discussion in the field that some geographers were getting too occupied with textual analysis at the expense of reflecting lived human experience (Crang, 2005; Dittmer and Gray, 2010; Müller, 2008; Sharp, 2000).

In the early 2000s, the critique of narrowly or excessively textual methods was also situated within a discussion about the need for political geographers to "re-assert the regional" (Toal, 2003) through better integrating our discipline's theoretical questions with area studies training and fieldwork (see also Dahlman and Ó Tuathail, 2005; Gibson-Graham, 2004; Murphy and O'Loughlin, 2009; Paasi 2003).

According to my records, I downloaded Megoran's (2006) article 15 years ago, in April 2008. This was when I was in the last year of a Master's program in Russian and Central Asian studies at Harvard, and just about to transfer to the University of Colorado-Boulder to begin my studies under John O'Loughlin. At Harvard, I had become seriously disillusioned (to put it mildly) with political science approaches to fieldwork and their frequent disregard for geographic context. I had finished my Dartmouth undergrad studies in Geography in 2006 and this gave me a true appreciation for the field, as well as fieldwork. My Harvard interlude taught me that I could not tolerate a discipline that did not respect deep empirical research and even actively discouraged or erased this kind of scholarship.

So when I came across Megoran's call for more ethnographic research in political geography, I felt even more enthusiastic about joining the field. For my subsequent MA and PhD research at CU-Boulder, I would wholly commit myself to political geography, while also continuing my regional focus on Central Asia. Megoran's broader body of work in Central Asian studies was a powerful influence for me, as well. But as he points out in his *Political Geography* article, the kind of research he was able to do in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan was quite safe for him as a British male, whereas "an unaccompanied British female would quite likely place herself in danger of sexual harassment in similar circumstances" (Megoran, 2006, p. 629).

This positionality issue was something I had already learned from my first research trip to Kazakhstan in 2005 as a student – a white, American woman, alone and only 19 years old. So while I knew that

ethnographic research was intellectually valuable, I also felt the physical and emotional constraints of undertaking this kind of research personally. As I started to prepare for my first dissertation research trip to Kazakhstan in 2009, I was also filtering these methodological questions through the lens of debates in the 1990s and early 2000s about the hyper-masculinist ideals of "fieldwork" in geography (Dowler, 2001; England, 1994; Kobayashi, 1994, Sparke, 1996; Staeheli and Lawson, 1994; Sundberg, 2003).

The "crisis of representation" arising from these critiques about the ethics of fieldwork, which was much debated at the time and which I have written about elsewhere (Koch, 2016, 2020), weighed on me heavily. At this formational period of my graduate studies, then, Megoran's "For ethnography in political geography" was enlightening and lightening: he openly acknowledged the challenges of ethnographic fieldwork, while also gently reassuring readers that many of the ethical dilemmas of masculinist research can be overcome by joining ethnographers in rejecting pompous claims to generalization.

Instead, he explains simply: "Different researchers with different focuses would produce ethnographies different to that here. As a result, this article does not inflate its claims. It is but one glimpse into a moment when the states of the Ferghana Valley started genuinely to *feel* like different countries for those living alongside their boundaries" (Megoran, 2006, p. 629). And this is precisely what the rest of the article offers: an honest discussion of the violence of changing border regimes in a small community where people are not caricatured as victims, but humans to be remembered with generosity and kindness.

What I encountered in this article – and what continues to make it impactful today – was a model of intellectual humility that positions the researcher (and the reader) as a peer rather than an "expert." The moralizing scripts common to much academic writing, then and still today, are absent from Megoran's account of the Central Asian border landscapes he was observing. Instead, readers are trusted to *feel* with the author and those he meets and introduces us to in his stories about the everyday impacts of shifting borders in the Ferghana Valley.

As with all good ethnographic writing, Megoran's stories elucidate the broader argument without relying on the intellectual jargon that geographers are still taught gives us credibility as "experts" (see Billig, 2013). Refusing the expert positionality is, to my mind, the most basic starting point for a feminist research ethic. But in taking this approach, Megoran also does not get hamstrung by the "crisis of representation" anxiety about speaking *for* others. He instead accepts his responsibility and privilege to speak with a lovely story in closing the article:

> In spring 2000, I visited the village of Turkabad on the Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan boundary. An enraged man, when he was told that I had come from England to learn about the border, looked me in the eye, pointed his finger straight at me, and said, 'That's very good – you go and tell the world what they are doing to us here!' I promised him that I would, and this article is an attempt to honour that undertaking by depicting, 'a sense of what it is like to live in other worlds, a taste of ethnographic things.' But that is not merely for taste's sake. Boundary control regimes in the Ferghana Valley have inflicted unnecessary harm on its inhabitants, and this story has been repeated at borders across the world. An ethnographically informed critical political geography must, in my opinion, therefore commit itself to, 'trying to think around and against borders' and the goal of a world of 'open borders.' (Megoran, 2006, p. 638)

Megoran's vision for a world of open borders is as aspirational as it is inspirational. But the intellectual humility he demonstrates in the article is something all political geographers can manifest immediately (Koch, 2020). We can resist masculinist claims to Grand Theory and generalizations that erase context and neglect human experience. We learn the limits and possibilities of our individual positionality as scholars. And we can learn to harness this positionality to be responsible allies to the people we meet in

our fieldwork, in our classrooms, and our everyday lives. As an admirable example of how political geographers can reflect on this challenges, Megoran's humble article has – and will continue to have – a mighty impact.

Declaration of competing interest

I have no conflicts of interest, real or perceived, to declare in relation to this submission.

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