

## The end of informality?

A few thoughts on Malinowski's legacy and craftsmanship

Jaro STACUL

University of Victoria

---

**ABSTRACT:** This article explores the role of the deep, long-term fieldwork, pioneered by Bronisław Malinowski, and raises the issue of how far his fieldwork style remains a valuable tool at a time when people, goods, money, and knowledge travel with a speed and frequency that were unthinkable until very recently. Drawing upon reflections on the author's own fieldwork in the Italian Alps, as well as on his experience as a university lecturer, it analyzes some of the changes that ethnographic fieldwork has undergone in the last few years in order to assess its value in the face of the pervasiveness of audit culture in the academia and of the emergence of an increasingly individualized society. The article pursues the argument that Malinowski's research methods remain valuable not just as a heuristic device, but particularly as a practice promoting encounters with difference in the public sphere, and fostering participatory models of civic and political life.

**KEYWORDS:** ALPS, CRAFTSMANSHIP, ETHICS, FIELDWORK, MALINOWSKI, PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION.

---

---

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons © Jaro Stacul

*The end of informality? A few thoughts on Malinowski's legacy and craftsmanship*

2018 | ANUAC. VOL. 7, N° 2, DICEMBRE 2018: 95-117.

ISSN: 2239-625X - DOI: 10.7340/anuac2239-625X-3522



Discussing Malinowski's contribution to ethnographic practice is a challenging task for at least two reasons: first, a lot has been written about it; second, the discipline has undergone many changes since Malinowski's time<sup>1</sup>. I can relate to Malinowski's legacy in several ways: I pursued my doctoral studies in Britain, and conducted fieldwork in the 1990s in an Alpine valley in the Italian region of Trentino, not very far from the place where Malinowski himself used to spend summer holidays. I subsequently undertook a new project in Poland, namely, Malinowski's birthplace. Although I became familiar with his research as an undergraduate student, the person who played a major role in stimulating my interest in his work was my supervisor, whose informal supervisor had been Malinowski's student. To a certain extent I feel part of a tradition that had been handed down from one generation of anthropologists onto another.

What kind of tradition? One of Malinowski's major contribution to the practice of ethnographic fieldwork has been his emphasis upon the observation of how people perform a "custom", on how different customs were functionally dependent on one another, and ultimately on the necessity to immerse oneself in a culture in order to grasp the «native's point of view» (Malinowski 1922: 6, 1929: xxxi). Ironically, neither Malinowski's advocacy of the study of the interconnections between different customs nor his particular brand of psychological functionalism achieved much appeal among his students (Kuper 2015: 53-55). Yet there is little doubt that his legacy played a central role in ethnographic fieldwork training until very recently: as a doctoral student, I was told by the person convening the pre-fieldwork seminar to take note of everything while in the field, even of things we might consider unimportant. This suggestion echoed Malinowski's advocacy of keeping a field diary to write down all experiences: according to him, taking accurate notes helps the researcher understand the regularities of a process, and prevents him or her from having «flights of imagination» (Malinowski 1922: 8-9, 1929: xxiv-xxv).

Following in Malinowski's footsteps was assumed to entail some degree of "suffering", in the sense that most researchers were expected to travel to faraway, "exotic" settings, learn the vernacular, endure the harshness of the climate, obtain a research visa, etc. Researchers conducting deep, long-term

---

1. This article is a revised version of a paper delivered at the Symposium *The Malinowskian Legacy in Ethnography* (Free University of Bozen-Bolzano, 21-22 September 2017). My thanks are due to Patrick Heady, Cris Shore, Marilyn Strathern, Elisabeth Tauber, and Dorothy Zinn whose valuable insights and constructive criticism helped me improve the quality of this article and strengthen its argument.

fieldwork had to learn to be “participant observers” and gain an understanding of a specific issue from an intimate relationship with a group of people in the face of several challenges. In Malinowski’s words (1922: 6), they were expected to «evoke the real spirit of the natives».

One of the characteristics of Malinowski’s fieldwork techniques was his reliance upon people with whom he interacted on a regular basis, and he used to quote their statements at length (Malinowski 1922: 17-18). Engaging in informal relationships with different people has been an integral part of ethnographic fieldwork since Malinowski’s time. Yet a clarification is in order: “informality” is often defined as «ways of getting things done», namely, informal practices escaping articulation in official discourse (Ledeneva 2018: vii). In this paper, the same term refers to sets of relationships between people not mediated by money or a contract (like, for example, the informed consent forms that have become part of social research practices in several countries). With Anthropology’s growing interest in issues that decades ago were not even considered anthropological, participant observation as a data collection method declined in significance. While, for example, conducting fieldwork in the headquarters of the European Union or the study of organizations more generally may require some of the techniques of which Malinowski had availed himself (Wright 1994, Shore 2000), the same techniques may be more difficult to apply to the study of fields such as policy. The growth of anthropological studies of the virtual space of the Internet has complicated things further. Moreover, whereas “classic” ethnographic research largely involved focusing on groups of people with a connection with a place, with a locality, movements of peoples and the widespread use of electronic communication have had dramatic consequences on anthropological research, in the sense that scholars may have to deal with informants who are physically in one place and mentally (and virtually) in another. One question that such developments raise is how far the fieldwork style pioneered by Malinowski remains a valuable tool at a time when people, goods, money, and knowledge travel with a speed and frequency that were unthinkable until a few years ago, and the spread of electronic communication has challenged commonly-held ideas about the connections between people and places; the other question that these changes open up is how far the fieldwork techniques of which generations of anthropologists have availed themselves can be communicated nowadays to graduate and undergraduate students.

In an attempt to partially answer these questions, I would like to rely upon my own experience as a researcher and a teacher. Ever since I started my doctoral studies at the University of Cambridge, I have been interested in

issues of nationalism and the state in Europe. In the mid-1990s I undertook a project on localism and local identity in an Alpine valley in eastern Trentino, which is part of the larger region which Malinowski himself used to visit with his students while on vacation. It was meant to analyze the impact, at the local level, of regionalist and autonomist political forces (the Northern League, for example) which were making big inroads in northern Italy. I will not go into all the details of that research project. Suffice it to say, for now, that I did not intend to focus on a specific political ideology or message. Rather, my goal was to understand how certain political messages were accommodated to local-level discourses and filtered through the lens of “local culture”, and the form of participant observation advocated by Malinowski seemed appropriate to this end.

I ended up interacting informally with a wide range of people that included not just professionals or municipal councilors, but also agricultural workers, lumberjacks, hunters, retired men and women, office workers, and so forth. I discussed a broad range of topics with people of different social classes and cultural backgrounds, even though localism and local politics remained my main foci. More importantly, I endeavored to take note of everything: who said what, what meanings are attached to hunting, what my co-conversationalists remember about the past, how the same people relate to one another and to outsiders, my landlady’s endless discussions about her cats’ behavioral idiosyncrasies, stories about strangers trespassing across property boundaries, etc. In sum, most of my sources were embodied in the behavior and in the memory of living people (Malinowski 1922: 3). Obviously, the data I collected was already culturally mediated by the people I met (Rabinow 1977: 150), yet building a relationship of trust with these people enabled me to collect information (and the interpretation of this information) which I would not have been able to gather if I had confined myself to an analysis of political ideologies or official discourses only.

I did not look at the ways different customs were functionally dependent on one another. However, I attempted to understand how society “functions” in small communities, and the fieldwork style introduced by Malinowski enabled me to «read between the lines», namely, assess the ways practices and ideas that apparently have very little or nothing to do with political and economic processes form the background against which such processes are debated and understood by a wide range of people (Malinowski 1922: 10). Hunting is a case in point: in local discourse hunting is significant because, unlike agriculture, it involves movement through an open space, and is connected with humans’ relations with the environment and its social

appropriation. Hunting land is described as individual property, that is to say, a “bounded field” to which only locals should have access. Hunting is also talked about as a means to control and protect land from outsiders, and mapping the hunting land is considered part of the process whereby locality is materially and symbolically produced. In local discourse this is epitomized by the idea that a hunter is like a cultivator who knows his territory well, and knows when the time is ripe to shoot game.

The hunters with whom I talked use the image of “harvest” to describe their practices, thereby implying that wildlife needs to be cultivated like fields, and that hunting “protects” nature by preventing wilderness from advancing. Central to this view is the idea that those who own and control the land also keep it clean and tidy, whereas those who do not possess it (e.g. outsiders) cannot be interested in keeping it clean, simply because it is not theirs. Hunters’ conceptualizations of hunting land as individual or “private property”, for example, helped them make sense of ideas of local and regional identity emanating from regional and other centers of political and economic power, and I became aware of these connections during informal conversations. Some of these ideas may have been passed from one generation onto another, yet they enabled locals to reconcile some of the values of a peasant (or post-peasant) society with those of economic liberalism, most notably hard work ethic, self-reliance, and opposition to the structural constraints of the state.

While this approach helped me understand local identity in the late 1990s, it was put to the test a few years later when my research focus switched from locality to the state (Stacul 2016). This shift entailed rethinking not just my theoretical approach, but also my fieldwork methods: several anthropologists who studied the state in the early 2000s did not avail themselves of Malinowski’s (or Evans-Pritchard’s) fieldwork techniques, but were primarily drawing upon Foucault’s theory. Part of the problem was that because the state cannot be an “empirical given”, until quite recently it was largely dismissed as a subject for anthropological study (Abrams 1988, Trouillot 2001). The other problem was the growing popularity, in the social sciences, of issues such as globalization and neoliberalism<sup>2</sup>. This popularity involved increasing interest, especially in Anthropology, in power relations as well as in uneven development of regions. While this theoretical approach

---

2. By “neoliberalism” I mean a type of economic policy that involves the enclosure of the commons, privatization, and the construction of a framework of open commodity and capital markets (Harvey 2003: 184-190). However, it can also represent a “culture” expressed by inclination towards transparency, competition, responsibility, and self-improvement.

does not preclude forms of fieldwork based on participant observation, it may result in more attention being paid to supra-local processes as opposed to day-to-day social interaction. In this context, formal interviews with bureaucrats (as opposed to informal conversations) are deemed more useful than participant observation itself, and the anthropological study of the state is often understood as the analysis of “state effects”, namely, discourses of politicians, official documents, and so forth. However, there seems to be no automatic contradiction between the anthropological study of the state and some forms of participant observation à la Malinowski, especially when research involves observation of social actors who embody the power of the state, and in what follows I will try to highlight the connections between them.

### *Participant observation and the anthropology of the state*

In 2002, James Ferguson and Akhil Gupta published the article *Spatializing States*, which influenced quite a few anthropological studies of the state. The authors drew upon Foucault’s theory to pursue the argument that states are made socially effective through images and symbolic devices: in representing themselves «as reified entities with particular spatial properties», states become understood as realities encompassing other institutions (Ferguson, Gupta 2002: 982). In this sense, the “spatialization of the state” refers to the sets of techniques whereby states naturalize their authority. My interest was not in the spatialization of the state per se, but rather in the ways the Italian state became understood as an entity with spatial properties between the late 1990s and 2011, when media tycoon Silvio Berlusconi was Prime Minister. Thus, I examined the ways his constructions of the Italian state were reproduced by different politicians at different levels of the body politic.

Even nowadays, underlying Berlusconi’s discursive constructions of the state is a contradiction: when he wants to present himself as the leader close to the people, he promises major works, and represents the state as an entity protecting its citizens; by contrast, when investigating magistrates prosecute him, or when state laws hinder the expansion of his economic empire, he avails himself of the language of business, and casts the Italian state as a “distant” reality and as a bureaucratic and obsolete entity that needs to be modernized and rationalized, and many people I met in the Alps of Trentino declared themselves to be in agreement with Berlusconi’s ideas.

While the state’s legitimacy may depend on its spatialization through discursive constructions from the centers of economic and political power, individual social actors, too, can play a significant role in the localized social

processes through which the state is legitimated (or contested). What makes people's encounters with the state problematic is the fact that they are often mediated by local officials who embody the power of the state through discursive constructions, narratives, performances and public representations of statehood. Central to my analysis was an attempt to find out how local officials, as "mediators" between the state and localities, "represent" the state at the local level and affect people's understandings of such representations. This analysis, then, involved the examination of bureaucrats' engagement in active processes of negotiation, and particularly in a dialogue with different social actors.

In Italy, these bureaucrats play the roles of "administrators" and "mediators" between different administrative levels of state structure. I use the same term "mediation" to describe practices through which power brokers or people familiar with the realm of bureaucracy mediate and "translate" between two different universes, that of officialdom and that of the local community: in this sense, the ability to "translate" between such universes can play a crucial role in creating the essential link between localities and distant sources of authority. The Trentino province represents an intriguing social and political context for the study of this issue, because it is part of the larger autonomous region of Trentino-South Tyrol, and the state and its institutions do not have the same significance that they have in other Italian regions. Moreover, most of the Trentine people do not live in cities, but in villages, and it is the municipal and the regional council, rather than the central state, which loom largest in their lives.

The ethnographic information I analyzed was about the practices of an estate agent who had been mayor of a municipality in eastern Trentino almost continuously from the early 1990s until his untimely death in 2009. Because of the significance of such "mediating" practices in the context of a rapidly-changing political situation, the mayor gained considerable political and economic power not just in the municipality, but also in eastern Trentino. He held multiple positions in political and economic organizations in the area which gave him links to almost every political and economic agency within the provincial territory. He had access to a huge range of information about the people residing in the municipality, and used to present himself as a person at an interface between the state and the local community who is able to "mediate" between the local community itself and the outside world. Furthermore, by describing himself as someone who «can get things done» in the provincial capital of Trento, he could present himself as someone organically part of the community who can be trusted. I knew him personally, and had a few informal conversations with him.

In the municipal territory, where relations of kinship, neighborhood, and friendship represent important resources when dealings with the realm of officialdom become necessary, practices of mediation take two forms: one is that of power brokerage; the other is expressed by the capacity to “translate” between the universes of officialdom and of the local community. When a person needs to apply for a document (e.g. a national identity card or driver license) to municipal or national offices, for example, one usually asks a neighbor, friend, or relative about the procedure, and avoids getting in touch with the offices issuing the documents needed. There are at least two reasons for keeping dealings with bureaucracy to a minimum: firstly, it is deemed preferable to ask for help from a trusted person who already knows enough about the ways of bureaucracy; secondly, contacting public offices is usually deemed a waste of time, since it is assumed that the information they give is incorrect or difficult to understand.

The mayor in question engaged in both types of “mediating” practices, and played a crucial role in affecting locals’ understandings of political transformations and their encounters with state institutions and economic agencies outside the public sector. He wrote various articles in the local magazine and delivered several public speeches to make residents aware of the privatization initiatives occurring throughout the country and of what these involved in the context of the reorganization of the national economy. These articles and speeches served to explain to residents that the area could no longer rely exclusively upon state and regional subsidies.

While he tried to put across the message that getting a job is no longer an entitlement, he also resorted to Berlusconi’s language of business when he stressed the fact that this is conditional on entrepreneurship and on possessing specific skills. During his first two terms as mayor, from 1990 until 2000, he had to mediate between a central state in the process of being strengthened administratively and economically, and a local community that perceived state reorganization as resulting in the state’s becoming more intrusive in local affairs. Although the majority of the people living in the valley voted for him in the elections to the local council in the 1990s, he was not well regarded. Moreover, many of my co-conversationalists shared the view that, like Berlusconi, he could not separate clearly private and political interests either. However, most of them did not think that this was a big problem: as a man of the area said, «Although [the mayor] pursues his own interests, he does not stir up trouble».

The rhetoric he deployed in his speeches, both as a mayor and as a candidate for election to the municipality, contributed to gaining him the support of both manual workers (including the retired) and professionals



who had become disillusioned with national politics. During the 1995 mayoralty campaign, which resulted in his re-election, he presented himself as the person who takes care of the interests of the local community. He committed himself to address a problem that was at the forefront of locals' concerns, that of alienation of landed property to outsiders who do not have any kinship ties in the area. In a social context within which the identification of farmers with their landholdings remains very strong, the transfer of property rights to strangers was perceived as resulting in the loss of community identity. Thus, in one of his electoral speeches, the mayor stated that this needed to be curbed. Most of the people who listened to such speeches were aware of the fact that preventing landholdings from being sold to outsiders was against the mayor's interests as an estate agent. Yet the rhetoric he deployed was very effective at a time when the rise of regionalist parties made local identity a central issue. Implicit in his message was the idea that the community and its territory are "property" of those who were born and have kinship ties in the valley. Moreover, in making space a powerful symbol, the mayor defined the community in spatial terms, and drew a sharp distinction between those who belong to the community and those who do not.

In late 1998, news spread that the municipal council was contemplating the possibility of building a dam at the lower end of the municipal territory and of subsequently creating an artificial lake for the production of electric energy. While the construction of the dam was designed to foster the growth of the local economy, the project aroused deep concern among the people inhabiting the area involved, and some of them roundly criticized the mayor. The mayor, in response, referred to the construction of the dam as just the initial phase of the "intensive therapy" that the local economy needed. Such advocacy served to mediate the locals' encounter with the Italian state at a time of significant economic transformations: as the mayor said in various occasions, the valley could no longer rely upon state and regional subsidies as it had done in the past.

The mayor's role as a representative of the state became prominent during several state-sponsored commemorative ceremonies held in the area. The territory of the municipality he administered had been the theater of fights between the Italian and Austro-Hungarian armies during World War I, and 1996 marked the eightieth anniversary of the arrival of the Italian troops in the valley. At a time when the institutions of the Italian state were losing credibility, the reassertion of the primacy of national identity was high on the agenda of the state itself, and such ceremonies were meant as opportunities to reaffirm the state's image as an entity above localities,

regions, and communities. During the commemorative ceremonies held in the area (which I attended), the mayor gave speeches with patriotic overtones, celebrating the idea of national unity and identity, most of which were meant to reaffirm the continuing relationship between the area and the Italian nation-state in spite of claims to northern Italian identity by different regionalist parties. The mayor highlighted this relationship by representing high moral values which placed him above internal conflicts within Italian society, and served to naturalize and reaffirm the state's authority over the "local".

The mayor's reputation as a loyal and law-abiding representative of the Italian state was questioned when the official of the military police stationed in the area, a man from the South of the country, sued him. According to the official, the mayor had abused his power by issuing permits to renovate two restaurants and a hotel in the village where he used to live, and had circumvented the bureaucratic procedure that the issue of such permits requires. In the face of these charges, the mayor wrote an article in the local magazine to explain that because of the action taken by the official of the military police, the administration of the municipality has become more bureaucratic, and the administrators and inhabitants of the valley can no longer trust one another. Because of these charges, the mayor was brought to trial three times, but was acquitted. Soon after his acquittal, the mayor and the municipal council sued the official of the military police. The decision was made, as the mayor stated, in order to put an end to the growing «psychological pressure» the official had placed upon the administrators of the municipality. The news stirred localist feelings against the official, and most of the inhabitants of the area I conversed with remained sympathetic with the mayor. One comment I heard, in the valley, was that the administration of the municipal council is not the business of an official of the military police from southern Italy, in that he is not familiar with local customs, and therefore he should not have interfered.

The reference to the official's place of origin had a specific meaning as well as a political dimension: one of the key points of the regionalist parties' propaganda (particularly the Northern League's) in the 1990s was the idea that because of a putative lazy and inefficient South, the Italian economy could not grow. In this sense, the official of the military police was believed to embody the inefficiency that is often ascribed to the Italian South on the one hand, and to the state on the other. He was perceived as representing the bureaucracy of the state that prevents the administrators of the municipal council from working efficiently.

Yet central to the mayor's rhetoric was not just the idea of efficiency, but also that of trust. According to him, following national laws to the letter makes the administration of the municipal council more bureaucratic, and more bureaucracy results in diminishing trust between administrators and residents of the area. In pointing to the detrimental effects that following national laws to the letter may have, the mayor implicitly constructed locality as a social context in which its inhabitants know and trust one another, and where negotiation is part of the order of things. In this sense, laws imposed from the outside were described as threatening the unity of the local community, and generalized trust was seen as conducive to efficiency.

Soon after he had been acquitted, the mayor got into new legal troubles, and had to pay a fine of roughly 250 Euros because of his failure to inform the higher authorities in the provincial capital of the issue of a permit to renovate a hotel in the valley. The issue of the permit was looked askance by the military police not just because the higher authorities had not been informed, but because it turned out that the applicant was closely related to the mayor. In a municipal council meeting the mayor admitted that some mistakes had been made when the permit had been issued. Yet he stressed that such mistakes were due to the fact that understanding national laws requires familiarity with an arcane and specialist language. In stating this, he made the audience understand that the Italian state imposes laws that prevent locals and business from working efficiently, and deploys a bureaucratic language that few or nobody can understand.

In sum, the mayor implicitly reiterated a point Berlusconi made several times in his discourses, namely, that national laws were at best irrelevant and at worst a threat to the proper running of public administration. His discursive constructions, then, highlight a perceived opposition between relationships of exchange governed primarily by morality and the supposed "indifference" of state bureaucracy. But here lies the paradox: while in commemorative ceremonies the mayor constructed the state as an entity above society and encompassing its localities in spatial as well as in symbolic terms, after he had been sued it was encompassment that became the object of contestation.

Contestation involved denying the significance of law as a sign of the sovereignty of the Italian state. While the enforcement of law represents one of the techniques whereby locality is made «legible», in James Scott's terms (1998), it was national laws that were pointed to as evidence of the state's "distance" and "illegibility". These images were very powerful, for they enabled the mayor to appeal to people who lost interest in national politics and were not inclined to tolerate abstract ideologies or obscure languages.

The state, then, was mobilized to convey different, even contradictory messages. The mayor contested encompassment by constructing the Italian state as an entity outside the area in terms of knowledge, because its officials are not familiar with local customs; and, more importantly, in terms of language, for very few or nobody in the area can understand the state's arcane idiom. In this sense, because of its putative "illegibility", the state was not represented as "above" locality, but "outside" it.

If the ethnographic challenge facing us is to understand the spatiality of different forms of government, as Ferguson and Gupta suggested in their article (2002), the information I collected has suggested instead that in order to better understand state spatialization, researchers should also be mindful of individual political actors who stand at an interface between the state and local communities. While I acknowledge that state/civil society dualisms should be avoided, I suggest that examining the spatiality of government also means understanding the local actors and localized social processes through which spatialization takes shape, and participation in the daily lives of people is an integral part of this task. It also entails understanding "local idioms" and meanings, and ultimately engaging in a dialogue with a wide range of people who may have different views about the state, its institutions, and its representatives. Local-level ideas about private property, work and bureaucracy, for example, formed the background against which the mayor's discourses (and his constructions of the Italian state) were debated and understood. I am not inferring that an Anthropology of state effects à la Malinowski always works to capture the nuanced ways in which the power of the state itself operates. Rather, I am suggesting that it helps understand processes (including mental processes) through which messages and symbols emanating from national, regional, and other centers are accommodated to local-level discourses<sup>3</sup>. These processes may be more complex than indicated by an approach taking everyday practices of state institutions as its main object of enquiry.

Does the complexity of the above processes mean that the fieldwork style pioneered by Malinowski remains a valuable heuristic device despite transformations in the discipline? One problem we encounter, in attempting to answer this question, is that much depends on what the ethnographer wishes to find out in pursuing research. An additional problem is what

---

3. I am not claiming that my approach to ethnographic fieldwork is unique. The idea that anthropologists should pay attention to the ways in which nationalist ideologies are accommodated to local-level discourses figures centrally in the work of Healy (1999), Herzfeld (1997), and Sutton (1997), to name a few.

represents anthropological research nowadays, and I suspect that there is no agreement among scholars. Much of my fieldwork relied not just upon interviews with politicians, but particularly on observation of and informal interaction with people gathering in places like the café, the public library, the square in front of the church, etc. which Habermas (1991) would probably describe as a «public sphere». Yet the social context within which I studied localism and the state a few years ago has changed considerably. Quite a few of these cafés closed down as a result of depopulation and the economic crisis. Many of the able-bodied with whom I had endless conversations used to have a job in the valley or in its vicinity; by contrast, now they have to commute to other places on a daily or weekly basis, and when they are back in the valley they hardly find time to socialize and have a cup of espresso or a glass of wine with friends or neighbors (or the researcher). For the researcher, in turn, data collection may be even more challenging when potential informants have the Internet connection at home and spend a considerable amount of time in front of the screen. Informality, then, has become a “scarce resource”. How does this “scarcity” affect the ways fieldwork techniques are taught in an academic context? I am turning to this issue next.

### *Encountering Malinowski in the neoliberal academia*

Although I started reading anthropological case studies (including Malinowski’s) as an undergraduate student, it was not until I undertook my doctoral studies in Britain that I understood at least some of the challenges of ethnographic fieldwork. Nowadays undergraduate students become familiar with such challenges early on, given that most Anthropology programs on both sides of the Atlantic offer courses on fieldwork research. The title of this course varies across the universities: Fieldwork Methods, Qualitative Methods, Ethnographic Methods, Ethnographic Fieldwork, and so on. A student majoring in a social science discipline usually takes this course in one’s third year or later. However, some universities allow students to take it earlier if they have the prerequisites, whereas others offer an additional fieldwork course (essentially, a “light version”) in the second year. Books on fieldwork techniques are published by several academic presses, and the students who choose to attend this course are expected to familiarize themselves with one of these publications.

Undergraduate students of British and North American academic institutions start learning about Malinowski early on, when they take the introductory Anthropology course. All the libraries of the universities in

which I have taught hold copies of the documentary video *Off the verandah* (Singer, Dakowski 1986), which I show in introductory classes every semester to give students an idea of the places where Malinowski had conducted research, and of the issues he had addressed a century ago. The video's focus on participant observation as a quintessential anthropological data collection method helps clarify the difference between participant observation itself and "verandah research", namely, a research style based on observation without participation which is ascribed to the generation of anthropologists before Malinowski.

I have taught the fieldwork course several times in the course of my career. Until recently it was taken mostly by students majoring in Anthropology shortly before completion of their studies. Because of its research component, it used to be considered one of the most important (and challenging) courses in an Anthropology program. What makes it challenging is the fact that students are expected to write a short research proposal, conduct research on a topic of their choosing, and write down the findings of their project in the form of a research paper in less than four months. Because of time constraints, there is no expectation that these students conduct fieldwork in faraway places or learn a foreign language. In taking this course, they become familiar not only with relevant anthropological works on the topic, but also with the ways different anthropologists have conducted fieldwork, and with the applications of Malinowski's research methods. Teaching it may also be a highly rewarding experience, especially since it is meant to attract students truly interested in the discipline and committed to putting to practice what they have learned in their studies, and some of the research papers they wrote for the courses I taught were very accurate ethnographic descriptions and developed original arguments. I have remained in touch with some Canadian students who took the fieldwork course not long ago, completed their undergraduate studies, and subsequently found administrative jobs in the public sector. These people got back to me to say that the skills that they had gained from their ethnographic research experience were very helpful while they were applying for jobs, and turned out to be even more useful in the workplace, particularly in cultural policy jobs or in those that entail dealing with publics of different cultural heritages.

With the steep decline in public funding for post-secondary education in western Europe and North America and the subsequent transformation of the higher education sector into a tool at the service of the labor market, universities compete for additional tuition revenue by presenting themselves as institutions focused on students and learning. Meanwhile, the

declining significance of the humanities and social sciences in the academy and the need to increase student numbers in such fields has forced program chairs to waive prerequisites for several upper-level courses. As a result, several students taking a fieldwork course as an elective have very limited knowledge of Anthropology, and those working part-time often choose this course not out of interest, but because it fits in their work schedule. Thus, although the course is designed to introduce students with a background in Anthropology to fieldwork techniques, in practice the person teaching it is forced to make accommodations for students who are encountering the discipline for the first time.

I have faced quite a few challenges, in the last few years, in sparking students' interest in fieldwork and Anthropology more generally, and I understand that other colleagues have experienced similar problems. Some of these problems stem from the fact that students with very limited or no knowledge of the discipline have to plan and complete a research project in a limited time. In an attempt to sort this out, I often encourage them to choose a topic whose exploration does not pose too many problems in terms of access to data, and many students working part-time (especially in North America) end up writing a short ethnography of their workplace based on observation of social behavior.

The students taking the fieldwork course are told to bear in mind three things: one learns by doing participant observation; data collection takes time; one may find out important things by accident. Although most anthropologists often collect a significant amount of data through informal interaction with different people, being able to engage in these forms of interaction is conditional on clearance from a research ethics committee. A lot has been written, in anthropology and cognate disciplines, about the impact of such boards on social research, and it is beyond the purview of this article to add to existing debates. I will simply say that while such boards are meant to promote the highest ethical standards particularly for social research, their growing number actually reflects an increased concern with legal liability and protecting the university's reputation (Kohn, Shore 2017: 229-230). The *Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans*, issued by the Government of Canada, for example, clearly states that Research Ethics Board's clearance is not required for research involving the observation of people in public places where «it does not involve any intervention staged by the researcher, or direct interaction with the individuals or groups» (Canadian Institutes of Health Research, Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada, Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada 2014: 17). However, it is required in most cases, and ethnographic research based on participant observation is not exempted.

Ethics codes produce «responsible practitioners» and refashion the relationship between individual and state (Strathern 2000: 293). Because such codes limit and regulate interaction, they may have the effect of formalizing informal relationships. Anyone intending to interview old friends or co-workers has to keep confidentiality and privacy in mind, and ask interviewees to sign an informed consent form. Many research ethics committees consider problematic and «un-scientific» research involving informality (Kohn, Shore 2017: 235). In formalizing the relationship between the interviewer and the interviewee, such procedures set a limit to what may be said during the interview and in class presentations, and to what may be written in research papers. Because an informal relationship between the researcher and the interviewee is hardly contemplated by the policy statement, many students believing that the goal of research is the “discovery” of something end up with the impression that ethnographic research forms part of a larger bureaucratic exercise. In other words, relationships between researchers and participants, originally meant to be based on informality and trust, often end up being based on formalized audit protocols (Kohn, Shore 2017: 237-238). Some departments manage to sort this problem out by encouraging students to undertake research involving observation only, and eventually only those who need to conduct fieldwork as part of their honors thesis or independent study apply for the research ethics committee’s clearance. But here lies the paradox: following all ethics procedures entails formalizing the relationships between the researcher and the informant, and precludes the collection of meaningful information, just as a research based only on observation is tantamount to the “verandah research” about which Malinowski himself had quite a few reservations.

Among the goals of this course, and of anthropology more generally, is to teach how to make the familiar “exotic”, i.e. how to make sense of the familiar through reflection on and comparison with information collected by various anthropologists in a wide range of locales. An issue I encountered in the last few years is that of the decreasing significance of the “exotic” itself in higher education. When I crossed the Atlantic and started my first academic job in Canada, one of the courses I was asked to teach was on the Anthropology of Europe. Among those who chose it, there were some enthusiastic students who said that they became curious about it because it was not offered for many years. Others explicitly stated that because they had never been to Europe, they thought that they would learn about the old continent by taking this course, whereas others said that they were interested in Europe because their ancestors had come from there.



Interest in Europe and other regions was hardly surprising: most of the regional courses offered by that and other Anthropology departments in which I have been working were about areas outside of North America. Only a limited number of anthropological courses on Canada or North America could be found on the course catalogs. In this sense, completion of an Anthropology degree implied knowledge of and interest in cultures and societies outside one's immediate surroundings, and students undertaking ethnographic research were expected to be familiar with anthropological works on a wide range of regions. Yet as the years went by, more and more academic institutions in Canada encouraged the creation of courses with "Canadian content", namely, regional courses on Canada and indigenous peoples. Whereas the emphasis on Canadian content is designed to attract government funding and increase student numbers, it also has the effect of shifting students' attention (particularly local students) from what happens in different parts of the world to what happens in one's community or region. Phrased differently, it has devalued anthropology's comparative perspective.

Likewise, although the fieldwork course and other research-based courses are meant to foster, among other things, a participatory model of civic and political life, most of the students who have taken such courses in the last few years stated that they do not read newspapers and that they do not follow politics either. This sense of unease, while relating to the public sphere or the realm of politics, is hardly surprising if we allow for the increasing popularity of social and other virtual media. I became aware of this sense of unease when I realized that most of those attending a small-size course (like the fieldwork course, for example) hardly know one another, and are not even interested in getting to know their classmates. Some of these students asked me about the possibility of conducting Internet-based research as opposed to observing people in a public setting, and others asked whether they could use old friends or close relatives as informants. One student who recently took the fieldwork course contacted me to express her concerns about the possibility of conducting ethnographic research on the grounds that she is uncomfortable talking to people she does not know. Interestingly, the above students' sense of unease seem to mirror university ethics committees' widely shared view that even talking to people may be problematic and fraught with danger (Kohn, Shore 2017: 236).

Interest in one's friends seems to echo academic institutions' emphasis on students' involvement in projects that are relevant to their own communities. However, it also seems to contradict one of these institutions' main goals, namely, the promotion of citizenship through education and participation in public life, and mirrors instead a view of citizenship as

passive. Such interest is at odds with the promotion of a public sphere devoted to the production of a democratic political culture, and mirrors a retreat into private identities. Thus, while the supposed aim of field research is to stimulate students' interest in the complexities of societies and cultures (including one's own), it is precisely the understanding of diversity or complexity that is increasingly shunned by students on the grounds that it is considered too difficult. This pragmatic (or passive) vision of education stands in sharp contrast to an image of a politically interested and mobilized citizenry: it mirrors a widely shared unwillingness to encounter difference in the public sphere (Brown 2006: 87-89).

How does part-time work affect students' pursuit of ethnographic fieldwork? The neoliberal economic reforms implemented from the early 1980s onwards resulted in the restructuring of the public sector and economic insecurity, and also meant students' exposure to a rhetoric that emphasizes self-discipline, individual responsibility, flexibility, and entrepreneurship. While this rhetoric is not new, at least in an Anglophone academic context, it became prominent in light of the recent cuts in public funding for higher education all over Europe and North America. As a result, while in the recent past undergraduate students had to resort to part-time work only occasionally in order to meet basic needs, nowadays not having a part- or full-time job is no longer an option, and students have to embrace a present suffused with the disappointments of unreliable futures. The university, as an institution of learning, is adjusting to these changes: whereas it is tasked with producing citizens who are critical thinkers, it also has to communicate knowledge to mobile and flexible workers whose skills have been pegged to a new market logic. In other words, it has to produce employable citizens.

The emphasis on individual responsibility and flexibility has been taken very seriously by most students: being able to pay one's own bills or repay a loan is conditional to commitment to individual responsibility; responsibility, in turn, is expressed by a flexible approach to work, studies, and ultimately by one's willingness to work a variety of part-time menial jobs. Most students with different part-time jobs who took the fieldwork course between 2015 and 2017 did not hesitate to state that collecting data on a regular basis would mean taking too much time off work. Obviously, I am not inferring that all the students who have taken the aforementioned course stated this: some students were very committed and were happy to devote time to the production of an accurate and detailed research paper. However, nowadays these students form a minority even in upper-level classes.

What characterized Malinowski's approach to research was accuracy, in the sense that he sought to take very detailed note of all experiences. Richard Sennett (2006: 103-104) has called «craftsmanship» the attitude which entails doing something well for its own sake. For a craftsman (or craftswoman), the pursuit of quality ideally becomes an end in itself. Mental craftsmanship also exists, as in the effort to write clearly, and teaching Malinowski's fieldwork techniques is designed, *inter alia*, to instill a craftsman's ethic in students. Yet Sennett notes (2006: 105) that craftsmanship sits uneasily in the institutions of «flexible capitalism», and the neoliberal academia is no exception. Nowadays the fieldwork course is one of the many courses to be chosen from online course catalogs, and is not necessarily meant to be challenging, especially in an academic system increasingly focused on training (as opposed to education) and favoring facility at the expense of digging deep (Sennett 2006: 194).

At a time when an increasing number of individuals work in and deal with institutions based on short-term transactions and constantly shifting tasks, commitment to craftsmanship is not necessarily rewarded or deemed useful. After all, deepening one's skills in any pursuits takes time, and in a neoliberal organization time is money. In this sense, in organizations in which goals and objectives are constantly shifting and projects end as abruptly as they begin, the capacity to solve problems quickly is highly rewarded, whereas an employee's commitment to the pursuit of detailed knowledge may be frowned upon. Interestingly, in academic institutions committed to producing employable subjects the capacity to solve problems often looms larger than that to identify them or make a research topic problematic. It is not purely coincidence that one of the slogans of a university in which I have been working was «Are you a problem solver?». Likewise, because students have to balance work and study in order to be able to pay their tuition fees, they have to move from one menial, dead-end job to another, and time anxiety does not foster craftsmanship. Rather, students prioritize the completion of a research paper by the deadline, and for good reasons: in order to avoid mark deductions, to start studying for another test as soon as possible, or to turn up at the workplace without delay (Stacul 2018: 6-7).

### *Conclusion*

These reflections on fieldwork in the Alps and on teaching fieldwork courses bring us back to the issues raised at the outset, namely, how far the fieldwork style pioneered by Malinowski remains a valuable tool, and how far the fieldwork techniques of which generations of anthropologists have

availed themselves can be communicated to students nowadays. Reference to Malinowski's work is in order: in championing interaction with informants on a regular basis and the study of the local language, Malinowski did not simply make participant observation an integral part of the discipline: he also pushed researchers "off the verandah". Since Malinowski's time participating in the lives of the "natives" has been central to ethnographic practice.

Most anthropologists probably agree that the move from the "verandah" to forms of participant observation has been a significant achievement in the discipline. Yet its significance does not simply derive from participant observation's worth as a heuristic device: rather, practicing and teaching participant observation promote encounters with difference in the public sphere, and foster participatory models of civic and political life, as well as a politically interested citizenry. However, the universities' concern about "ethics" and "safety" and the fact that informality has become a "scarce resource" mean that engaging in participant observation is getting harder and harder, and even discouraged. As a result of these developments, students withdraw into private concerns (one of which is the increase of tuition fees) and turn to old friends or the "virtual verandahs" of the Internet and the social media as sources of information, just as more anthropologists undertake research projects involving limited participant observation. Obviously, I am not suggesting that this is not anthropology. This line of reasoning suggests that besides asking whether Malinowski's fieldwork techniques remain valuable tools (they certainly do), we might also ask how we can successfully promote participant observation as a practice fostering both craftsmanship and participatory models of citizenship at a time when everything (including research and social interaction) is being bureaucratized. Perhaps it is time to take informality (broadly defined) more seriously.

## REFERENCES

- Abrams, Philip, 1988, Notes on the Difficulty of Studying the State, *Journal of Historical Sociology*, 1, 1:58-89.
- Brown, Wendy, 2006, *Regulating aversion. Tolerance in the age of identity and empire*, Princeton, Princeton University Press.
- Canadian Institutes of Health Research, Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada, Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, 2014, *Tri-Council policy statement: Ethical conduct for research involving humans*, Ottawa, Government of Canada.
- Ferguson, James, Akhil Gupta, 2002, Spatializing States. Toward an Ethnography of Neoliberal Governmentality, *American Ethnologist*, 29, 4: 981-1002.
- Habermas, Jürgen, 1991, *The structural transformation of the public sphere. An inquiry into a category of bourgeois society*, Cambridge, MA, MIT Press.
- Harvey, David, 2003, *The new imperialism*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- Heady, Patrick, 1999, *The hard people. Rivalry, sympathy and social structure in an Alpine valley*, Amsterdam, Harwood Academic Publishers.
- Herzfeld, Michael, 1997, *Cultural intimacy. Social poetics in the nation-state*, New York, Routledge.
- Kohn, Tamara, Cris Shore, 2017, The ethics of university ethics committees. Risk management and the research imagination, in *Death of the public university? Uncertain futures for higher education in the knowledge economy*, Susan Wright, Cris Shore, eds, Oxford, Berghahn: 229-249.
- Kuper, Adam, 2015, *Anthropology and anthropologists. The British school in the twentieth century*, London, Routledge.
- Ledeneva, Alena, 2018, Preface, in *The Global Encyclopaedia of Informality*, Alena Ledeneva, ed, London, UCL Press, vol. 2: vii-x.
- Malinowski, Bronisław, 1922, *Argonauts of the western Pacific. An account of native enterprise and adventure in the archipelagoes of Melanesian New Guinea*, London, Routledge.
- Malinowski, Bronisław, 1929, *The sexual life of the savages of north-western Melanesia. An ethnographic account of courtship, marriage, and family life among the natives of the Trobriand Islands, British New Guinea*, London, Routledge.
- Rabinow, Paul, 1977, *Reflections on fieldwork in Morocco*, Berkeley, University of California Press.
- Scott, James, 1998, *Seeing like a state. How certain schemes to improve the human condition have failed*, New Haven, Yale University Press.
- Sennett, Richard, 2006, *The culture of the new capitalism*, New Haven, Yale University Press.
- Shore, Cris, 2000, *Building Europe. The cultural policy of European integration*, London, Routledge.

- Singer, André, Bruce Dakowski, 1986, *Off the verandah. Bronisław Malinowski (1884-1942)*, London, Royal Anthropological Institute (video recording).
- Stacul, Jaro, 2016, From the Mayor's Viewpoint. Political Speech and the "Spatialization of the State" in Northern Italy, *Anthropological Quarterly*, 89, 1: 221-246.
- Stacul, Jaro, 2018, Study and Work. A Balancing Act? *Sociology on the Rock*, 16: 6-8.
- Strathern, Marilyn, 2000, Accountability... and ethnography, in *Audit cultures. Anthropological studies in accountability, ethics, and the academy*, Marilyn Strathern, ed, London, Routledge: 279-304.
- Sutton, David, 1997, Local Names, Foreign Claims. Family Inheritance and National Heritage on a Greek Island, *American Ethnologist*, 24, 2: 415-437.
- Trouillot, Michel-Rolph, 2001, The Anthropology of the State in the Age of Globalization. Close Encounters of the Deceptive Kind, *Current Anthropology*, 42, 1: 125-138.
- Wright, Susan, 1994, "Culture" in anthropology and organisational studies, in *Anthropology of organisations*, Susan Wright, ed, London, Routledge: 1-31.

**Jaro STACUL** holds a PhD in Social Anthropology from the University of Cambridge. He has worked in various academic institutions in Britain and Canada, and currently is Assistant Teaching Professor at the Department of Anthropology of the University of Victoria. He has published extensively on issues of nationalism, the environment, and the state in Europe (Poland and Italy), and has recently undertaken a research project on working students in Newfoundland. His publications include the book *The bounded field. Localism and local identity in an Italian Alpine valley* (2003) and the volume, co-edited with Christina Moutsou and Helen Kopnina, *Crossing European boundaries. Beyond conventional geographical categories* (2005), both published by Berghahn Books.

[jstacul@uvic.ca](mailto:jstacul@uvic.ca)

---

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons © Jaro Stacul

*The end of informality? A few thoughts on Malinowski's legacy and craftsmanship*

2018 | ANUAC. VOL. 7, N° 2, DICEMBRE 2018: 95-117.

ISSN: 2239-625X - DOI: 10.7340/anuac2239-625X-3522

