Ethnographies of Security: Pushing Security Studies Beyond the Bounds of International Relations

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Between 2012 and 2014 I lived in Caracas, Venezuela to study the implementation of a national police reform that was led by human rights activists. The reform occurred alongside a number of other initiatives that sought to improve *la seguridad ciudadana* [citizen security], a term that extends beyond concerns of crime and violence to include all “asocial acts that impede or problematize the normal development and enjoyment of the fundamental rights of persons” (Delgado Aguado and Guàrdia Maduell 1994, 20). This concept of citizen security shifts attention away from national security and public order (Bailey and Dammert 2006) to what we might refer to as an integral or a holistic approach to security (see Rico and Chinchilla 2002), assuming that a multiplicity of interconnected threats exist to human security—physical, emotional, social, and economic, among others.¹ Anthropologist Daniel Goldstein has defined *la inseguridad* [insecurity], the counterpart to *la seguridad*, as a “sense that the world is unpredictable, out of control, and inherently dangerous” (Goldstein 2012, 5). Thus, the concept of insecurity becomes accordingly inclusive, making room for all that produces sensations of fear.

In contrast to these inclusive concepts, in much of the Global North (in)security has taken on strictly circumscribed meanings. This is largely because the study of security has been heavily dominated by International Relations, a discipline born out of and heavily influenced by the Cold War and questions of conflict between nation-states. Traditionally, International Relations and its subfield of Security Studies have defined insecurity as any threat to state survival, and security as freedom from any objective military threat to that survival (Walt 1991). The study of security, from this perspective is *the study of the threat, use, and control of military force* (Brown 2013, 212, emphasis in original). The actors identified as appropriate objects of study include states, the military, NGOs, and multinational corporations (Mathews 1997).

¹The concept of citizen security has also been criticized for “demonizing a criminal element that pervades society and is responsible for myriad social ills” (Goldstein 2012, 25).

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Sociologists have largely avoided using terms like security and insecurity, perhaps due to their monopolization by other disciplines. Instead, sociologists tend to speak of crime, deviance, interpersonal violence, and the criminal justice system. For example, the American Sociological Association's section on Crime, Law, and Deviance—one out of 52 sections in the association—states that the section is dedicated to "the study and understanding of juvenile or adult-law violation behavior and the organization and operation of law enforcement, judicial, or correctional processes." As ethnographies of (in)security have become increasingly common (see Biondi 2016; Denyer Willis 2015; Duck 2015; Duran 2013; Fassin 2013; Glebbeek 2001; Goldstein 2012; Jauregui 2013; Lutz 2001; Moskos 2009), within the discipline of sociology (particularly in the US), ethnographies continue to be siloed into these areas of study. This is not to say that research on law enforcement and correctional processes is not important; it is, without a doubt. It *is* to say that much is left out of the study of criminality and justice systems when they are not embedded in broader and overlapping social fields.

International Relations' domination of security studies and sociology's partitioning of research topics has meant that researchers rarely take a step back to consider how security practices and logics span across institutions (the military but also prisons and schools, even families and communities) and social worlds—and the unintended consequences these practices and logics may have (but see Fader 2013; Goffman 2014; Rios 2017). Indeed, this separation tends to evade a fundamental and contradictory consequence of governance: how attempts to improve security generate insecurity. And sociologists rarely make the connections between the variety of threats to human safety and development highlighted by conceptualizations of security and insecurity in the Global South.

Ethnographic approaches address these shortcomings by 1) expanding what is considered to fall within the purview of studies of security and 2) allowing us to follow the ways in which the pursuit of security intersects with sources and sensations of insecurity. Furthermore, ethnographic work is uniquely positioned to trace the relationships that connect social practices and map the "internal logics of distinct but interconnected social worlds" (Desmond 2014, 557). Ethnographic work, in other words, moves us closer to the relational and inductive approaches that can break apart delineations and demarcations that limit how we study perceptions, sensations, and sources of (in)security. This relational, integral approach to security became essential in explaining why the police reform I studied in Venezuela not only failed to change policing actions and attitudes, but also ended up entrenching support for those practices—such as human rights violations and repressive policing—that reformers sought to dislodge.

Victor Rios' (2011) work is an exemplar here, showing how legislation like the Street Terrorism and Enforcement and Prevention Act and Proposition 21 in California criminalize young men of color and trap them in a "youth control complex," inflecting their lives with synchronized, systematic punishment. The punitive approach behind this legislation, Rios argues, has bled out of the state, saturating all institutions—families, neighbors, and school social services—in which poor young Black and Latino boys are embedded. As Rios (2017) has argued in more recent work, ethnographers must follow people across time spans and spaces. Following people across social worlds—in his case, young people criminalized across institutions—allows us to see them as "shape-shifters," adapting to changing backdrops and scenery of "securitization."

Additionally, the search for *la seguridad* is a fragmented, illusive, incoherent, and contradictory process and, thus, demands ethnography's attention to detail, practice, and

improvisation. Indeed, the value of ethnography in studies of violence, law, and legality “lies in its reticence to adopt a transcendent approach that attempts to impress a logical diagram upon actual circumstances and real relations. Instead, ethnography proceeds by way of a dogged embrace of the detail in the cluttered movements and inertias of everyday life” (Kernaghan 2009, 18).

As scholars in the Copenhagen school have argued, security can be thought of as the pursuit of freedom from threats (Buzan 1991, 18), but neither security nor threats are objective concepts (Buzan et al. 1997). Rather, they are intersubjective, the product of collective understandings on danger, risk, and threat (Buzan et al. 1997). And ethnographic methods are key to capturing the slippery, messy, overdetermined, and contradictory processes of collective meaning making. Indeed, ethnography, at its best, is attuned to the incomplete and the incoherent.

Though articles in this issue span research from the US, Latin America, Africa, and India and address distinct questions, it is this attunement that connects them all. Approaching security with a dogged embrace of detail allows contributors in this issue to move beyond the restrictions demanded by International Relations and traditional Security Studies and the circumscribed sociological view of crime. For example, by following young men who are not gang members but who must navigate spaces dominated by gangs, in this issue Contreras provides a vivid account of these men's experiences with insecurity, an account that might be overlooked by a specific focus on those who violate laws. Verweijen, Barrett & Walsh, and Gibson-Light explore how attempts to secure society create vulnerability, violence, and precarity for many, a contradiction often overlooked by traditional Security Studies. Articles by Johnson & Densely and Contreras demonstrate the need to move outside of the state to map security actors and logics. Patricia Macías-Rojas' article shows how constructions of threat shift over time, transforming how state security forces operate. And Beatrice Jauregui's article challenges taken for granted assumptions about the police's relationships to the state and society. Over the following pages, I discuss in detail the contributions made by these articles through an analysis of the ways in which ethnographic research can expand and enrich our studies of security. I end with some concluding remarks on how ethnographies of security can move forward and some potential pitfalls we must navigate as we push beyond traditional security studies.

From Policy to Practice

While scholars in Security Studies tend to focus on policy and legislation (particularly at national and international scales), ethnographic work describes how people breathe life into policies and law. As Patrisia Macías-Rojas observes in this issue, ethnographic work excels at examining the “interplay of forces” that “interact, clash, contradict and build on each other” as policy is implemented on the ground.

Original intentions behind policy often slip through the cracks that emerge during the translation from planning to practice, as people interpret and respond to policies in ways unforeseen by policymakers. It is the slippage that occurs from paper to practice, as plans to seek out security move from the halls of power to homes and street corners, which ethnographic research excels at exploring.

Like political ethnographers (see Baiocchi & Connor 2008; Joseph et al. 2007) ethnographers who study security often move outside of state institutions to focus on those whom security policies target. In their article on “quality of life” policing in New York City in this issue, Barrett

and Welsh carefully document a key problematic of policing: How initiatives that seek to make people feel safer actually end up producing vulnerability and fear within Black communities. As they show, community residents understand “quality of life” policing as targeted harassment, an understanding that erodes police legitimacy in neighborhoods where relationships between communities and the police are already deteriorated. Though not an ethnography in the traditional sense, Barrett and Welsh’s use of focus groups allows them to follow alongside community residents as they make sense and meaning out of “quality of life” policing.

In her article on police unionization movements in India, Jauregui shows how legislation banning the formation of police unions in India—with the intention of enforcing an “orderly system” of rank-and-file police—generates demoralization and dissident rage within the police force. Rather than integrating low ranking officers into the force, this law excludes them from exercising rights commonly associated with the democratic state.² Legislation that denies police officers’ positions as citizens and workers operates to catalyze social movements that foreground those same identities.

Following the transformation of law to lived realities positions ethnographers to document how everyday people interpret, rework, and resist policy maker’s best laid plans. As Foucault (2013) noted: “People know what they do; frequently they know why they do what they do; but what they don’t know is what they do does.” Ethnographic studies are essential to tracing what people do “does” in the search for security.

Exploring Contradictions

Part of tracing the translation of policy to practice is documenting the contradictions that arise during this process, like those that Barrett and Welsh observe in their article on policing in New York. Ethnographic approaches are useful for getting inside of what, at first glance, may appear to be contradictory and nonsensical. Take, for example, the support for punitive and militarized policing across Latin America by populations targeted by the state violence sanctioned by these initiatives. While both scholars and journalists have explained support for *mano dura* policies by characterizing its supporters as irrational and hysterical, when we embed this support in specific historical contexts we begin to see the logic underlying it.

Anjuli Fahlberg analyzes community residents’ opinions of militarized policing initiatives against histories of insecurity and state violence to do precisely this. In her article in this issue, Fahlberg draws on ethnographic and interview data from the City of God, a favela in Rio de Janeiro, to explain why residents of poor communities, who bear the brunt of state violence, may support punitive—even lethal—policing. By paying attention to the heterogeneity that exists within poor communities—heterogeneity often flattened by other methods—she demonstrates the variability between militarized security initiatives as well as the diversity of opinions on these initiatives. She shows that support for these kinds of policies is not the result of hysterical or irrational publics, or ill-placed romanticism of dictatorship. Instead, it is the result of a variety of interlocking factors, including residents’ assessment of “pacification” against historically brutal and ineffective military interventions, increased state investment, and the intersection of race, class, and gender.

While others have written on the tension between security and rights (see Goldstein 2012; Denyer Willis 2015), Beatrice Jauregui’s article in this issue intervenes in this debate from a novel point of entry: from the perspective of low-level police officers in state of Uttar Pradesh, in northern

² The Police Forces (Restriction of Rights) Act of 1966

India. Though not the first to explore democratic security as a paradox, Jauregui does so by introducing police officers—assumed to inhabit empowered locations within the state—into the discussion on the violation of rights in the name of security. Previous ethnographic work has focused on police officers as subject to non-state violence (Denyer Willis 2015), but Jauregui shows how officers are dehumanized by other state actors and the hierarchy of policing itself. By focusing on rank-and-file officers, she adds a new dimension to the paradox of democratic security: How do we guard the guardians of the state while protecting their rights as workers and citizens?

Mapping Relationships of (In)security

As mentioned above, Security Studies have historically fetishized the state as the principle actor in providing (or at least seeking to provide) security. This focus is shared by those scholars engaged in critical studies of security, who also center the state in their analyses. For these scholars, security is “the master narrative through which the state shapes our lives and imagination,” a logic that allows authority to “inscribe itself into human experience”, that “neutralizes political action” and encourages “us to surrender ourselves to the state” (Neocleous 2008, 4).

Taking a cue from political ethnography, however, we need not see the national state as the privileged locus of political action (Hanson and Lapegna 2018). This is not to say that the state does not fit into the purview of ethnographies of security, but that we must pay attention to the ways in which the national (as well as transnational and global) links up with local historical, institutional, and cultural traditions. Jauregui’s article connects these scales, showing that police institutions in northern India are molded by caste and religious identification; nevertheless, the conflicts and cleavages within police forces cannot be understood without situating the police within European colonialism, American imperialism, and transnational conceptualizations of democracy.

Furthermore, the provision of security, and the power this entails, has increasingly seeped out of state institutions. The narrow focus of Security Studies on the military, states, and legal international entities ignores the fact that these actors are no longer the only, or even the most important actors, in offering security services. In fact, state institutions themselves have participated in the “democratization” of violence by making communities and individuals responsible for their own security.

In some cases, state power itself is constituted by relationships between state actors and criminal organizations. While these relationships may be flexible, shifting, clandestine, and “loose,” they connect illiberal actors to the polity. State power, then, builds and reproduces illiberal power (Arias 2006; Arias and Goldstein 2010; Auyero 2007). In other places, criminal organizations have fractured state sovereignty. Take, for example, the case of São Paulo, Brazil, where Denyer Willis’ (2015, 9) ethnographic work demonstrates that organized crime groups can no longer be considered marginal, but are “now at the center of social control.”

Andrew Reine Johnson and James Densley’s article, documenting survival in prisons in Rio de Janeiro, shifts the analysis of power within the carceral system away from the state and onto the two institutions that reproduce order in these spaces. While much literature on prisons in Brazil (and much of Latin America) focuses on one of these institutions—gangs—Johnson and Densley’s article explores another powerful institution that has arisen in the carceral order: the Pentecostal church. The authors demonstrate how prisoners signal that they have disengaged from one (the gang) and become integrated in another (the church). They show how prisoners can fashion a new identity for themselves within the prison because of the dual institutional power that structures the prison.

In the case of eastern DR Congo, in her article Judith Verweijen argues that it is the porous boundaries between citizens and the military which allow citizens to engage in small forms of resistance against state forces. The slippage between categories of citizens and military officers is key to understanding how people carve out agentic moments in everyday life. As Verweijen writes, “The multifaceted entanglement of civilian and military lives renders the boundaries between public vs. private, civilian vs. military and state vs. non-state very elastic and occasionally irrelevant.” Public manifestations “against” the military are “often performed in co-presence of members of the military.” While the overlapping worlds of civilian and military create spaces of resistance, Verweijen argues that long-standing social structures render defiance fragmented and unstable, thereby reducing its potential to undermine the armed forces’ dominance.

Perhaps one of the most important contributions made by ethnographies of security is to map the relationships between distinct purveyors of security, evidencing the necessity of moving beyond the state to study (in)security. Though, even this notion of moving “beyond” the state elides clandestine and inconsistent relationships between state and non-state actors—lines that are increasingly blurred and that ethnography is indispensable in mapping. Ethnographic research is arguable the best (and perhaps the only) methodology that can get at the clandestine relationships between criminal, civil, and state actors, and describe the fuzzy boundaries between these categories.

Embodiment and Navigation

The search for security and fear of insecurity is embodied (Morgen et al. 2008), kinetic, and emotional. One of the strengths of ethnography is the ability to get close to those who navigate insecurity, deeply embedding ourselves in and thickly describing their worlds. However, ethnographic research is not only important because it can get us to the “center of things,” but because ethnographic methods are uniquely equipped to stay “at the surface,” relaying the affective quality of everyday life. Ethnographies of security can absorb and relay affect: the sensation, the experience of insecurity, the “sensorial atmosphere felt by some(one’s) body” (Kernaghan 2009, 5) as they navigate living “in harm’s way” (Auyero and Berti 2015).

Randol Contreras’ contribution to this issue is a powerful ethnography of embodied experiences of young Black and Latino men in Southern California. Contreras writes about how it feels to traverse spaces dominated by gangs, how young men’s bodies react by tightening up, slowing down, or rushing away. His article conveys the atmosphere, the sensations of living in gang territory as a young man of color. Contreras’ contribution moves away from analyzing young men’s involvement in gang activities as they search for security³ to considering how this search generates insecurity for other young men. His ethnography is not one of gangs, but the responses, reactions, and movements of the young men who must navigate their spaces.

Contributions by Judith Verweijen, Michael Gibson-Light, Patrisia Macías-Rojas are attuned to how subjects of surveillance navigate, and in some cases resist, the military, border security, and carceral systems.

In her article written from spaces contested by military forces and other armed actors, Judith Verweijen shows how citizens navigate continuously fluctuating social dynamics. She describes multiple strategies citizens use to survive in these places, and even resist military

³ See Philippe Bourgois’ (2003) now classic study of Puerto Rican men in the Bronx, Veronica Zubillaga’s (2009) work on gang members in Caracas as well as Adam Baird’s (2015) work on gang members in Medellín.

domination. Despite the fluidity produced by dynamics of conflict, however, Verweijen shows how durable certain social structures, like patronage and socio-political imaginaries, continue to imprint on social practices, constraining the potential of these “weapons of the weak.”

Michael Gibson-Light’s article investigates everyday survival and resistance in contexts unquestionably controlled by the state. Unlike the prisons examined by Johnson and Densley, the state maintains systematic control over prison spaces in the US Sunbelt. Nevertheless, state retrenchment remains key in understanding insecurity inside the prison, specifically the food insecurity that has resulted from neoliberal penology. Prisoners in this context seek to resist this insecurity by exploring new “foodways” that defy the state’s slow starvation of prisoners. Thus, Gibson-Light also shows how those subjected to total institutions can carve out small degrees of agency by resisting hunger. Gibson-Light demonstrates how, in the new era of neoliberal penology, a new logic of resistance is born as prisoners express autonomy through food activities and consumption practices.

In her article on the prison and the border, Patrisia Macías-Rojas engages in an analysis of border politics that is often ignored at the national level, taking into account the materiality and experience of the border (see also Shapira 2013). Using ethnographic methods informed by historical analysis, Macías-Rojas documents how migrants understand and have navigated changes in security at the border since the 1990s. She shows that in everyday practice, border controls have become a form of crime control extended to an immigration and border context. The spectacle of the wall and border agents’ role in deflecting “external threats” obscures the actual practices on the ground, as well as their outcomes—the shift from border patrol operating as a form of labor management to engaging in crime control and domestic policing. New migrants respond to this shift by drawing on criminal and non-criminal classifications, rather than the traditional distinctions of legal and illegal. First-time border crossers, she finds, often can navigate these shifting border logics by engaging in subtle actions in an attempt to distinguish themselves as workers rather than “criminals.”

Moving Forward

In closing, I would like to suggest some avenues that ethnographers of security might pursue as we move forward. I end with a cautionary note on the potential pitfalls of these ethnographies.

According to security studies scholar Stephen M. Walt, expanding security to include things like poverty and environmental hazards “runs the risk of expanding ‘security studies’ excessively...Defining the field in this way would destroy its intellectual coherence and make it more difficult to devise solutions to any of these important problems” (1991, 213).

However, researchers in the Global North have much to learn from broader, more inclusive terms like *la seguridad* and *la inseguridad*. This is precisely why ethnographic approaches to security are so sorely needed in response to traditional security studies, to push boundaries and expand conceptualizations of what counts as security. From an ethnographic perspective, security would take into account not only people’s ability to go about their lives with relative predictability regarding expectations of physical safety (i.e. not being killed or injured, Etzioni 2007, 2), but also an ability to live with relative certainty regarding access to healthcare, housing, and food.⁴

Gibson-Light’s article in this issue gestures towards these linkages, showing how food insecurity has become part of the state’s approach to “secure” populations (securing “clean” people from prisoners by securing inmates within the prison). As Gibson-Light shows, a central budget-cutting strategy within prisons has been the reduction of quality and quantity of food

⁴ Ethnographies of security, then, can be thought of as a key node for connecting studies of inequality.

served. This budget cutting is directly associated with the privatization of the prison system in the US. Food insecurity here is connected to security institutions and those who run them.

Jooyoung Lee's (2012) work on the relationship between gun violence and physical and mental health as well as Auyero and Swistun (2009) ethnography of the effects of state violence manifest in environmentally toxic landscapes are significant moves in this direction. Much more attention should be paid to these linkages.

Indeed, though not explored explicitly in this special issue, relationships between food, health, and environmental insecurity are intertwined with crime, violence, and policing. Climate change and food deserts contour motivations and opportunities for engaging in illicit economies; they enhance unpredictability and sensations of vulnerability, detracting from advances made in crime reduction; and attempts to reduce these forms of insecurity are undermined by crime and physical violence. Given that much of sociological research is already attuned to precarity, marginality, and inequality, ethnographic work within sociology is particularly well situated to make these connections.

Furthermore, beyond sharing terminology, ethnographers of security should work to connect experiences with security apparatuses and insecurity in the Global North and the Global South. Despite the fact that issues like urbanization, militarized security, mass incarceration, and crimmigration cross state lines and nation borders, ethnographers working in the US rarely engage with research from Latin America and Africa. Perhaps this is one of the reasons why ethnographic research has yet to inform the theorization of security (Goldstein 2010), as disciplinary expectations silo research not only into specializations but also regions.

Finally, I would like to close by mentioning just a few of the dangers and potential pitfalls of ethnographic work on security and insecurity. The glorification of danger runs throughout ethnographic work (Hanson and Richards 2017). However, this is perhaps particularly true of ethnographic work on these issues. Ethnographies can border on the pornographic in their portrayals of violence and insecurity—weaving in representations that objectify and “other.” There is significant temptation to prove one’s mettle by describing in graphic detail what one saw, lived through, and witnessed (Baird 2017), which results in yet another form of exoticizing those we study. Conducting research on crime and violence, but inequality and suffering more generally, requires a deeply reflexive practice. We must maintain, as Rios (2017 178, 180) writes, “a consistent, overzealous reflexivity...One question to ask ourselves as we conduct our research and writing is, am I participating in the process of making myself look better than the subjects I have studied?”⁵ More specifically, Rios writes about the need to decolonize ethnography and move beyond the “white space” that has long celebrated Othering as a characteristic of ethnographic inquiry.

Neither should we sanitize the lives of those we study in an effort to counter “traditional moralistic biases and middle-class hostility toward the poor” (Bourgeois 2003, 11). The focus on resistance and defiance of domination when we study oppressed groups covers over the ways in which violence and insecurity are engendered by raced, classed, gendered, colonial, and heterosexual systems. In contrast to these “humanist” or “pathologizing” explanations, feminist scholars like Villalon (2010, 122) have argued that we must embed actions in particular sociohistorical moments and intersecting structures of oppression if we are to accurately understand and portray agency. By embedding agency in the “multiplicity of experiences and the actual views of the oppressed” we must accept that “agency does not always equal resistance...instead, agency may be compliant” and even reproduce power hierarchies (123).

⁵ On the dilemmas of conducting ethnographic research see also Contreras 2012.

While everyday people are essential to our studies of security, we must also “study up,” incorporating studying and high-ranking members of organizations and institutions (both licit and illicit) in our studies of security. As important as it is to move outside of the halls of power, we must also turn an eye to those who occupy these privileged spaces. Acknowledging the importance of what happens after policy is implemented should not preclude studying those who construct policy, or those who wield significant power in shaping it.

Finally, ethnography must do a better job of training researchers to care for their own safety while conducting research, and this is true across ethnographic research. Collecting data on (in)security should not be prioritized over researchers’ security. The idealization of the “courageous” and “hardy” researcher (Scheper-Hughes 1983) not only places researchers at risk, but also reproduces androcentric, colonial, and racist fixations that structure the production of ethnographic knowledge (Hanson and Richards 2017). Rejecting the “nineteenth-century positivistic notions that undergird the glorification of an intrepid, isolated researcher” is key to decolonizing ethnographic research as well as challenging the expectation that researchers must stoically deal with whatever threats they face to their own security while in the field (Hanson and Richards 2017, 606).

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