Ethnography and qualitative interviews in International Political Economy (IPE)

This paper will critically assess why I have chosen ethnography and qualitative interviews to be central research methods in the proposed research I intend to conduct for my forthcoming MA dissertation. The research is based within the field of International Political Economy (IPE), and it considers a potential link between knowledge workers and political agency in the UK. This is a deductive enquiry, as it aims to critically assess a new theory in IPE which claims that immaterial labour or that which is involved in the production of knowledge, is the vanguard of a new emancipatory social subject (Hardt and Negri, 2000, 2004). However, underlying the research is a contention that studies in IPE are in need of new epistemological foundations, to catalyse ways in which to understand emerging socio-political struggles in an increasingly global political economy. Central to this hypothesis is a belief that qualitative research methods such as ethnography and interviews, which have been largely marginalised within the discipline, are now crucial methods to be used in trying to understand of the intricacies of resistance 'emerging from the experiences in work and production' (Davies and Ryner in Davies and Ryner, 2006, 4), as they will aid in the 'recovery and representation of alternative voices' which have been 'marginalised by the hegemonic discourses of the free market' (Inayatulla and Blaney, 2004, 183). I will begin by looking at each method separately, discussing how it is used and why it is important to my research whilst considering other similar studies which have successfully used these techniques. I will then critically evaluate the underlying philosophies behind qualitative research, and defend the theories which allude to the potential and legitimacy of their production of knowledge. In doing so, I will also discuss some of the practical and ethical issues that arise when conducting this kind of research.

In my research it is crucial to articulate the perceptions, experiences and practices of immaterial labourers regarding how they work, their understanding of the structures of power within the organisations in which they work, and to also tease out notions and strategies of resistance which are present against the conditions of their work. All of which are necessary, if I am to comprehend the existence or indeed potential of a transformative or emancipatory social subject. Therefore ethnography and qualitative interviews will allow me to gain subjective knowledge and first hand experience of immaterial work. I will begin by considering and discussing the potential of ethnographic fieldwork in this context before doing the same with qualitative interview techniques.

The tradition of ethnography is closely associated with anthropological studies which seek to describe the everyday routines adopted by a particular group or culture (Fetterman, 1998). Ethnographers are unique in their rigorous commitment to keeping an 'open mind about the group or culture they are studying' (1); avoiding generalisations, and remaining indifferent to the ideological biases that exist within the disciplinary field in which their research is focused. Most ethnographic data is collected from 'direct observations in fieldwork' and measured on the researcher's ability to give significant 'descriptive detail' (Thomas, 1993, 10) to the data that has been retrieved. Central to this has to be an intrinsic understanding and appreciation of difference and culture, and how the differences within cultures fundamentally articulate the prevailing structures of power, organisations and to a larger extent, the institutionalisation of that culture. This, as the anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1993) indicates, is an overtly political framework of research. By analysing the 'extremely

obscure' (Geertz, 1993, 311) elements of a society or civilisation, ethnography unearths the genealogy of ideology and the political meanings behind how and why a society functions as it does. Fundamentally, it gives a bottom up perspective to research, by prioritising the actions and experiences of individuals and the influence they have in forming the prevailing structures of power which ultimately govern over them; rather than looking at how structures of power work and endure. Historically, social science and particularly political science, have neglected ethnography as a tool of research, preferring instead to adhere to grand theories such as functionalism and positivism which have dominated the discipline since the 1960's (Thomas, 1993). Advocates of these approaches to political research argue that their emphasis on explaining the 'social world' through empiricism has 'determined what kinds of things existed in international relations' (Smith, 1996, 11) and subsequently have, and continue to, broaden our understanding of the political terrain. Yet increasingly, it has been in the nature of political researchers to contest the assumptions of grand theories, claiming that they have 'excluded the personal' (Burnier, 2006, 410) from the political and undermined our ability to see the significant intricacies of inter-subjective political relationships and more importantly the creation of the political self. I would now like to discuss some studies in political science which have used ethnography as a research tool, and evaluate the success of this method of social enquiry.

In labour studies, ethnography or 'participant observation' has increasingly been a method employed by political researchers. Burawoy's (1979, 1985) studies took a step towards showing the increasing corporatisation of production, whereby firms began to distance themselves from their traditional collective competitive functions

and move towards a separation of divisional enterprises, each with a distinct 'profit making' (Burawoy, 1979, 44) capacity. Not only did this increase the autonomous capabilities of the firm on an international basis, but it significantly changed the nature of work by placing individuals and divisions within the firm into competition with each other. Yet his methods were distinctly positivist whereby he acted as 'the 'expert fact finder' (Cassell, 2005, 169) in pursuit of a common understanding of the internal functions of firms, rather than deeply probing into the attitudes and perceptions of workers. Although Burawoy visited, observed and participated in the firm's day to day operations, he did so to measure and to record the types of production practises taking place. As Bryman contends, this is a typical labour study with a 'focus of considerable empirical research' (Bryman, 2001, 6) rather than with an overtly qualitative research agenda.

More recent studies however have moved away from positivist ethnographic practise to more active or 'autoethnography'. This type of ethnography in the workplace is increasingly common, as it allows for researchers to increase their rapport with observants by 'establishing oneself in a normal role in the social system' which in turn decreases their conspicuousness (Johnson, Avenarius and Weatherford, 2006, 114). Gusterson's (1996) study at a nuclear weapons laboratory, for example, enabled him to unearth an engaging spectrum of ethical values held by the workers there, whom who discovered to be 'heterogeneous' (Shapin, 1997, 711) in their views towards what he perceived to be a highly contentious and morally bankrupt business. Although some participants remained defensive of their occupation, others came to realise the potential catastrophic actions of their indifference. A more radical example of ethnographic research at work would be that conducted by Leung (2005),

who became employed within a multimedia company to carry out ethnographic research on its workers, where she uncovered practices of resistance which would have otherwise remained hidden. Neglecting this approach in labour studies has made it difficult for researchers to appoint blame to individuals in companies (Harrod, 1997); an ethnographical IPE can therefore help to reveal the 'disguises of power' (Harrod, 1997, 114) which in turn can potentially change organisational practises and attitudes at work. .

There has been a recent trend in IPE to emphasise the importance of individual experience as a way to understand the changes imposed by global restructuring. For example, Amoore and Langley (2001) urge lectures in IPE to encourage students to discuss their roles as either workers or consumers in society, as a way in which to engage with the idea of globalisation; because they 'increasingly experience and contribute' to the subject 'in the course of their daily lives' (Amoore and Langley, 2001, 18). Similarly, the methods used in my research intend to allow knowledge workers to imagine their situation, in that it may incite their agency rather than their passivity. I contend that the best way in which to do so would be through qualitative interviews. Qualitative interviews are distinctly different from survey interviews as they collect their data from conversation which seeks to 'derive interpretations, not facts or laws, from respondent talk' (Warren in Gubrium and Holstein, 2001, 83). This, as Welch et al (online) argue, can 'enrich the theoretical foundations' (Welch et al, online) of any research agenda because it allows for reflexivity and the development of subjective identities that help to change and guide the research as it is being conducted. Articulating the opinions of individuals in society can give a better understanding of how people engage in politics. As Fontana (2001) argues, in today's

‘interview society’ (Silverman cited by Fontana in Gubrium and Holstein 2001, 161) interviews have become the ‘stuff of life’ (Fontana in Gubrium and Holstein, 2001, 161) whereby people are perpetually ‘asking questions, being asked questions, or watching TV shows about people being asked questions’ (161) that they ‘have routine knowledge’ (161) of the rules of interaction in these circumstances. In regards to politics, this level of scrutiny, where humans ‘constitute their reality and organise their experience in terms of cognitive (or knowledge guiding) interests’ (Crotty, 1999, 142) can lead to a clearer and more intricate understanding of the creation of the political self.

This approach has developed from the work of academics such as Gadamer, (1975) and Barthes (2000). Their concern however, was not directly with politics, but with the role of language and image in society and how people use them to communicate. Barthes explains how every object contains a number of signifiers that enable the individual to understand the discourse of that object. In his words ‘every object in the world can pass for a closed, silent existence to an oral state, open to appropriation by society’ (Barthes, 2001, p. 109). It is natural for individuals therefore to scrutinise the factual justification of language and texts, emphasising that they are simply opinions and not certain truths. Gadamer (1975) for example, argues that when individuals engage in textual analysis there is ‘no logical limit to the complexity of the hypotheses that one can invent’ (Descombes in Silverman 1991, 249) as everything, when conceived from an individual perspective, is open to interpretation. This innate critical element which Gadamer, Barthes and other interpretive philosophers attribute to individuals has immediate implications within the study of societies and subjects. Societies do not simply criticise themselves, ‘social critics are individuals’ (Waltzer,

1993, 33) and it is the opinions and actions of individuals within societies that lead to collective criticism and ultimately alternative ways of comprehending how that society functions.

Again in labour studies it has been the case whereby interviews have significantly augmented research by bringing to light issues which would otherwise have remained hidden. Yeung (1995) interviewed business elites in Hong Kong Transnational Corporations and was able to 'delve deeply into the complicated web of business and personal relationships' (Yeung, 1995, 334) and discuss contentious management and structural issues regarding the outsourcing of operations and the effects they have workers, even probing into events that had been involved in media scrutiny. This helped to give an overwhelming overview of some of the dynamics of the internal restructuring that globalisation is causing in the business world. Similarly, De Peuter and Dyer Witheford (2005) interviewed video game workers in regards to the lack of protection they had within the organisation in which they worked. During this time an anonymous blog was circulated by an EA Games worker amongst his colleagues and media outlets in 2004, which resulted in a frenzy of discords being articulated throughout the industry, leading to game labourers re-assessing their strategic roles within game enterprises and bargaining for greater protection at work. Their study was able to capture first hand the subjective experiences of this period and the types of resistances that emerged during it.

My research will therefore emphasise the importance of ethnography and qualitative interviews as a way of accessing the actual experiences of knowledge workers, creating a commentary which will inform, rather than instruct the research process. As

Crotty (1998) explains, methods such as these allow us to 'put ourselves in the place of others' (Crotty, 1998, 8) to gain a detailed understanding of subjective perceptions. Through semi-structured interviews with individual workers, semi-structured debates with groups of workers and observations of worker activity and the various levels of control that may affect, or impose on their work and their wider social relations, it will be possible to articulate a better understanding of the dynamics of power; whilst giving power and autonomy to those who participate in the research. However, quantitative methods will not be completely ignored; some data will be needed to form a demographic of the workers who took part, in regards to their age, gender, salary, education and role. Punch (2000) is keen to suggest that using both methods can be beneficial. Using both qualitative and quantitative methods also compliments its originality by giving the research 'new data to shed light on established theories' (Bonnet, 89). I would now like to discuss some of the criticisms of this type of qualitative research and defend the epistemological validity of it, whilst touching upon some practical and ethical issues that I might face.

There are three key criticisms of the ethnographic and interview approaches that I would like to defend. Firstly, it is argued that the participant observation role integral to ethnographic studies 'reduces the chances of discovering evidence discrepant' with the assumptions of the observer (Hammersley, 1992, 11). Secondly, critics indicate that ethnography and interviews cannot produce scientific results as it undermines the role of a hypothesis in its framework of evaluation (Jordan and Dalal, 2006). Finally, observation of a set of social relations always involves looking at levels of inequality, which inevitably leads to the discovery of the accepted dichotomies of inequality,

such as weak/strong, white/black, rich/poor (Berard, 2006) and doesn't move beyond these frames of discourse.

The first criticism concerns ethnographies reliance upon participant observers and interviewers who may undermine the process of research through being personally active in the study. Qualitative methods such as semi-structured interviews, open debates and observations of people within a set of social relations are often lead by a desire to prove or highlight a particular concern or issues that may be present. Examples from IPE could be the role of women in social movements or surveillance practices within corporate enterprises, which indicate a certain hypothesis of inequality or malpractice. By emphasising a qualitative and reflexive epistemology to these hypothetical studies, it could allow the researcher to maintain that other than trying to construct a meaning to a perceived problem, the ethnographic/interview lead study is intended to deconstruct 'whatever remains silent, unthought or 'untruthed', so that presence can come into being' (Derrida in Hall, 1997, 41). The individuals or groups involved in the research therefore inform it throughout, instead of being subjected to scrutiny or misrepresentation. Nairn et al (2005) argue that whilst conducting this type of research it is important to recognise 'who we are in relation to who we study' (Nairn et al, 2005, 223) which in turn will help in the practicality of gaining access and 'informed consent' (227) to interview the right people.

In regards to the second criticism, the dominant theories of political economy such as realism and neoliberalism have successfully made political science into what is a largely a problem solving discipline that generalises the abilities of states and markets to organise social cohesion. To disrupt this tendency, and build transformative and

emancipatory knowledge that can challenge the prevailing structures of power, we should look to ethnography and qualitative interviews to 'demystify the experience of reality' (Crotty, 1998, 204) and appreciate the various realities that exist from multiple perspectives. In his study of the Bosnian war, Campbell (1998) looked at the competing narratives of significant events during the conflict. He argues that to uncover the 'inescapable politics of representation involved in the narration of events' (Campbell, 1998, 264) is fundamental to any study which seeks to create practical knowledge of a particular situation. Avoiding synthesis in this respect enables researchers to create a perpetual dialogue in which to develop theirs and other's enquiries. It will also be important when conducting my own research to avoid academic jargon (Welch et al, online) as a means to create a comfortable context to the interviews by showing 'a basic sympathy' (Green in Hobbs and May, 1993, 108) for the respondents and their positions if they at different to my own.

The tendency for ethnography and interviews to conform to certain dichotomies of inequality can also be contested through using the rhetoric of interpretive or postmodern philosophy. Instead of focusing on the types of inequality that may exist, qualitative methods can focus the enquiry into notions of power at the micro level of social relations within these contexts. Foucault (1976) contends that rather than being fixed or stable, power is 'exercised from innumerable points, in the interplay of nonegalitarian and mobile relations' (Foucault, 1976, 93). Qualitative researchers should be urged to look for the intricacies of power relations that exist within inter-subjective relationships or within a certain space or place of activity, as power is concerned with the 'management of multiplicity' (Lazzarato, 2005, online) and not collectivity. Yeung (1995) found that his research was perpetually changing to fit with

the types of interviews he conducted in Hong Kong. Moving from ‘dominant but also submissive questions of power and control’ (Yeung, 1995, 323) to tease out the answers he needed.

In this paper I have highlighted the potentials of using ethnography and qualitative interviews in my proposed research within the field of IPE. As a concluding remark I would argue that when focusing on subtle or covert resistance tendencies, ethnography and qualitative interviews will enable me to articulate a better understanding of the dynamics of power that exist within organisations; whilst giving power and autonomy to those who participate in the research.. Furthermore, the relationship between the researcher and the participants in this type of study will always create ‘lines of flight’ (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, 22) which will inform, develop and change the course of the research as it is being conducted. Deleuze and Guattari (1987) argue that this ‘rhizomatic’ (8) tendency which naturally flows from subjective interpretations of phenomena, ultimately leads to a rejection of method and hypothesis which simply create totalising principles from which to measure and instruct the nature of individuals and their relationships which each other. IPE should be concerned with how research can ‘resist structures of domination’ (8) and encourage subjective understanding whereby ‘everything is therefore open to doubt or question except for what is immediately experienced’ (Colebrook, 2002, 72).

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