
Reflections on the Ethnography of Fear

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Taken together, the seven essays in this collection offer a striking spectrum of approaches to ethnographic writing about fear. It is a difficult topic. The difficulty, if I can frame it boldly, is this: how do we link the *contours* of fear, that is, the political economic conditions that produce and shape it, to the *experience* of fear? And how can we begin to grasp that experience, when our usual tools—narrative, observation, discussion, inquiry—yield only fragments, silences, vague associations, evasions, banalities or bizarre events?

One approach to fear, proposed by Gavin Smith in his abstract for the colloquium, is to work with Raymond Williams' notion "structures of feeling." As Smith pointed out, Williams used this term "to refer to the shared 'sense' prevailing in a social formation at a certain historical period." Williams selected these words—structure, feeling—and juxtaposed them, in order to challenge orthodox Marxism's distinction between base and superstructure, and offer in its place a "cultural materialism" in which culture would be understood as something that "saturates all social activity, including productive activity." Smith also highlighted the methodological puzzle that engaged Williams, one centred on the "distinction between direct experiences and our subsequent study of them," since the "un-named moment of experience...cannot be captured at that moment, or in that un-named form." Experience, and the structures of feeling from which it is generated and to which it responds, can only be captured retrospectively and inadequately through a repertoire of terms that are always more fixed, and more solid, than the original.

Gavin Smith's essay explores the work of fear as a mode of social regulation in post-Franco Spain. During Franco's dictatorship, fear worked directly upon surviving supporters of the Republic, the losing side in the civil war, to silence them, divide them and force them into hiding. Post-Franco politicians subscribed to what Smith calls a "pact of silence," a version of democracy-as-neutrality

held together by imposing tight constraints on legitimate debate. The effect was to sustain the inverted, Franco-era narrative in which Republicans were held responsible for the murder and mayhem of which they were the principal victims. What interests Smith is the way the silence, shame, guilt, anxiety and acute social fragmentation generated by Franco's public narratives (together with his brutal and repressive actions) were sustained among the victims decades into the "democratic" era in which different narratives might have been expected to emerge, if not in public, then at least in the intimate sphere of family life. To catch a glimpse of how deeply "Franco's terror" had affected peoples' lives, he had to rely on the minute observation of fragments—fleeting encounters, glances, tensions—and stray sentences in discussions on unrelated topics. Most of all, he had to recognize absence as presence: the fact that 87 people who recounted their life histories said very little about the 1940s and 1950s, and certainly had no narrative about fear, neatly packaged for the listener to absorb. To understand fear as an absent presence takes a very patient ethnographer, patient not only in the fieldwork setting, but patient across decades of research as the utterly unspeakable of one epoch is tentatively voiced in another, and might still emerge forcefully in yet a third as the social forces realign.

Don Kalb's analysis calls for a different kind of patience as he sets out to disrupt readings that map globalization onto the (re)emergence of nationalist sensibilities in Europe in a hasty fashion, without a sufficiently grounded analysis. He disputes the claim that popular mobilization of an illiberal kind is the outcome of manipulation by illiberal politicians who know how to play on popular fears and insecurities. He is doubly skeptical when the subject is post-socialist Eastern Europe, where orientalist tropes and enduring nationalist tendencies are too often, and too quickly, invoked. Kalb's analysis proceeds much more carefully. His "quintessentially anthropological" task, as he sees it, is to explore the "various path dependent 'critical junctions' that link global processes via particular national arenas and histories to emergent local outcomes," since these are the loci where "the politics of fear get incubated." His exposition of these dynamics tracks Poland's Solidarity movement through several iterations, more and less liberal, more and less nationalist, more and less religious and socially conservative. He grounds his analysis in what he calls a "relational approach to hegemony," one that displaces a focus on ideas with a careful study of shifting class alliances in a complex field of force. Thus, Polish skilled workers welcomed the neoliberal emphasis on markets as a way to discipline their lazy co-workers, while rejecting the lib-

eral promotion of gay rights as incompatible with "the self-restraint that members of households on permanently insufficient incomes had to instil in each other in the face of booming consumer fascinations and market fetishisms in the mediatized public sphere." Their anger and fear were not conjured by politician's rhetoric—they were grounded in lessons learned through quite specific histories of struggle, triumph and defeat.

In a vastly different context, Leigh Binford and Nancy Churchill also make an argument against the culturalization of fear and violence. Examining lynching in Mexico, they note that the number of lynchings has risen sharply in the period of neoliberal ascendance suggesting, at the very least, a correlation worth investigating further. Yet media coverage of lynching fails to situate it in epochal terms. Nor does media coverage situate lynching socially by exploring the personal and collective histories and relations of the protagonists. Instead, the media focus on the gruesome details of the events, on the one hand, and the presumed cultural deficiencies of the crowd, driven by unfounded fears and primitive passions, on the other. As in the case Kalb discusses, the media ascribe leadership to demagogues who direct ignorant masses incapable of knowing or acting upon their own interest. The media recognize that the crowd may act out of fear but name their fears as irrational. Binford and Churchill offer the beginnings of an explanation of these fears, situating them in the fall-out from neoliberal restructuring: the insecurity of informal sector jobs, loss of union and community structures as organizing pivots of collective life, fragmentation of families, decline in state welfare provisions, an increase in crime, and a pervasive sense that "the government" cannot be trusted to protect "the people." As Binford and Churchill acknowledge, there is a gap in their analysis, since they cannot trace causal links between the condition of generalized, epochal anxiety and the specific, situated events they want to explain. Yet I suspect that uncovering these links—even from the base of a deep ethnographic engagement—would be a difficult task. The fears generated by losing control over one's life are inexpressible in the vocabularies available to our informants, and our social-scientific namings inadequate to the task—precisely the problem Raymond Williams pointed out.

It was in Lesley Gill's precise and relentless exposition of the social forces producing the extreme violence of Colombia's oil belt that I felt my flesh crawl with a visceral sense—however far removed—of how terrifying it would be to live in such a place. Her narrative does not dwell on individuals and their stories, nor does it discuss narratives about fear, or fear as such. Her scale of analy-

sis stretches beyond knowable communities. Yet I would still describe her writing as ethnographic, in the sense that it conveys, in a densely situated manner, the sets of social relations that produce this way of living in this time and place. As in the case of Mexico, the social forces at work in her account include neoliberal attacks on trade unions, self-organizing communities and the hard-won social protections of state welfare. To these are added narco-capitalists seeking to grab rural land as a means to launder drug money and sundry para-military organizations tasked by authoritarian forces inside and outside the state with conducting massacres, executions, extortion, intimidation and mass displacement. Gill's description extends—like Smith's—to the “uneasy calm” and “imposed silence” that continues after most of the overt violence has stopped, barring “selective assassinations” designed to “keep the opposition frightened and off balance.” The social dislocation she records runs very deep: people toil alone as non-unionized casual workers or itinerant traders and turn in desperation to their para-military oppressors as patrons, money-lenders and suppliers of “security.” If boundary crossing is a source of fear, as Mary Douglas proposes, then this one truly gave me the creeps: an NGO tied to the paramilitaries that goes under the name “Seeds of Peace” and offers counsel to the victims of the political violence in which it was—and still is—implicated. Gill enables the reader to sense both the extreme social isolation that results from these inversions, and the ways they could shape a popular desire for order: if not for an order based in the old solidarities, which are difficult to recover, then an order based in stable, if compromised, hierarchies and old-fashioned moralities rather like those in Franco's Spain.

Linda Green explores two kinds of terror among Guatemala's indigenous people. The first and more obvious source of terror is one that her informants can readily express: the fear of being murdered in Mexico or left to die in the desert in a failed attempt to cross the border into the U.S., and the certainty of being raped, robbed and attacked along the way. The more complex fear, and the one Green renders in her title, is the “fear of no future” among Guatemalans who fail in the crossing or do not attempt it, and suffer the slow death of a “surplus” population that no one—not American capitalists, not the Guatemalan state, not even neighbours and kin—have an interest in keeping alive. The link between these two fears is a thoroughly perverse one, as Green explains. To shift from being “surplus,” and hence disposable, “at home” in Guatemala, a person must travel to the U.S. where labour is in demand. But that demand hinges on being cheap—supercheap—a feat accomplished by the regime of ille-

gality and intimidation wrought by the bizarre mechanisms set up to guard the border, while rendering it porous. If they want us as workers, why kill us, why let us die, why send us back? This is a question Guatemalan migrants might well pose to themselves, but their attention is more often focused on immediate survival and another kind of death, more serious for them than administrative and political invisibility: the death of the dream of accomplished social personhood—respect within their own families, for the future they built through their sacrifice. As one migrant put it, “the loneliness is killing me. I still have a wife and children in Guatemala but I am no longer a part of that family, I only send back the money.”

Gaston Gordillo's essay revolves around a similar, somewhat overlapping conundrum. If the labour of the Indians of Argentina's Chaco was the source of Spanish colonial wealth, why did the Spaniards massacre them? This is not a question Gordillo ever heard expressed in such stark, analytical terms. What he encountered, instead, was a landscape littered with haunted ruins that hide treasure or the skeletons of dead Indians. The people living near these sites attributed their power to terrorize to the sites themselves—not to the questions they raised, or the histories they embodied. More troubling still, and equally inarticulate, was the question of identification. The criollo population of the contemporary Chaco descends from both sides—the Indians and the Spaniards. Where should they, or could they, stand in relation to this violent past? Were their ancestors its perpetrators or its victims? Or were they confused and reluctant witnesses, still traumatized, as were their descendants, two centuries after the fact? This is the immediate ethnographic puzzle that confronts Gordillo, as he tries to work out how ruins could terrify people who have no direct experience of these violent events; how places could embody memories for which people have no explicit narrative. The only public narrative of the past available to these criollos, as Gordillo points out, is the official, public one, that commemorates “the regional history as an epic struggle between civilization and barbarism,” leading them to “remember those ‘Indians’ as the epitome of savagery.” Here Gordillo returns us to the terrain laid out by Smith's essay, in which perpetrators of violence switch place with the victims, leaving behind an inexpressible doubt and anxiety about which side was right or, indeed, what the sides were and where one stood in relation to them.

August Carbonella's essay evinces a social terrain in which social boundaries are crossed but the outcome seems to be the overcoming of fear and triumph of hope—at least for some people. Carbonella figures as a participant in the scenario he describes, as a soldier in Vietnam

who learned two things: first, to give a black power salute, in defiance of military authority and in solidarity with his non-white comrades; and second, that the racial boundary he thought he had crossed was far from solid to begin with, as a friend pointed out: “Italians simply are not white. Never really have been. Never really will be.” In the war years, defiance of all kinds was risky, and crossing over to fight or fraternize with the Viet Cong was treason. The narrative of hope Carbonella describes emerged later, as the public narrative about the necessity and virtue of the war was challenged on many fronts. But part of that public narrative, Carbonella argues, had been fragile from the start: the part that sought to instill fear of communist “gooks” among soldiers whose own experiences of racialized oppression suggested a different rendering of where lines were drawn and who they should fear. By 1971, these

counter-narratives were both public and articulate—constituting “spaces of hope” with which many could identify. This observation, I would like to suggest, marks a crucial difference between the conjuncture Carbonella describes and the other essays in the collection: fears overcome, injustices named and refusals rendered visible constitute a space of hope one can applaud and support; solidarities fractured, betrayals hidden and the wrenching but unspoken shame of surviving, compromising and living a lie sustain the eerie presence of fears untold.

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