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Contents

Introductory Note by the Editors-in-Chief
Sten Hagberg and Jörgen Hellman................................................................. 5

Varia

A Window onto Capitol Hill: Cunning Conservatism and Shadow Politics
Christina Garsten......................................................................................... 9

Jocular Ethnography: The Productive Work of Humour in Fieldwork on Migration
Anja K. Franck............................................................................................. 25

A Critical Ethnography of Political Activism: Challenges Arising from Practical, Emotional and Theoretical Closeness to the Field
Christina Hansen....................................................................................... 41

Modernism is the New Radical Alterity: Exploring the Dialectics of Anthropological Critique in Modernity
Torbjörn Friberg......................................................................................... 57

Bricolage

Two John Eri(e)(k)sions Make One Anthropologist
William Arens............................................................................................ 77

In memoriam: William Arens
Ulla-Britt Engelbrektsson........................................................................ 87
Introductory Note by the Editors-in-Chief

Sten Hagberg | Professor of Cultural Anthropology, Uppsala University
Jörgen Hellman | Professor of Social Anthropology, University of Gothenburg

This issue of *kritisk etnografi – Swedish Journal of Anthropology* is a *Varia*, that is, an open invitation to scholars from all disciplines to contribute with papers “that use ethnography critically to discuss topics that have a potential to bring broad audiences into engagement with anthropological perspectives”. We are now happy to present a selection of papers that in different ways make use of ethnography and ethnographic analysis to address a range of different topics in a variety of regions of the world. Through a systematic and creative use of data the authors address theoretical problems, epistemological challenges, and empirical issues.

In her paper, Christina Garsten takes us on a “tour” into the intricacies of think tanks in the USA. In a characteristic anthropological mode, we are introduced to the higher echelons of politics and the systemisation of politics, through personal encounters and participant observations. As readers we get the feeling of how personal aptitude, speeches, texts, and even furniture and architecture, are all brought together to convey, in this case conservative, political messages.

For a long period of over a decade, Anja Karlsson Franck has been following the lives of Burmese labour migrants in the city of George Town (Malaysia). In her paper, she explores the role of humour in the relations she established between herself and the migrants. In their conversations jokes were used to highlight their exposed situation, or to just let off steam and to mock the authorities, as well as to establish and negotiate their relations with the researcher and her research; in this manner, humour and jokes came to be epistemologically “productive” as they brought in nerve and energy into the conversation. As Anja remarks, though humour and jokes are often constitutive in ethnographic fieldwork, yet remain surprisingly undertheorized.

Christina Hansen has a long experience of being an activist and a researcher simultaneously, also working in the same town as she lives. Drawing on these experiences she completed her dissertation “Solidarity in Diversity: Activism as a Pathway of Migrant Emplacement”. In the paper published here, she makes use of the same long-term fieldwork and develops further on ethical and epistemological challenges (and promises), that come with her different roles, and of doing fieldwork “at home”. By reflecting upon how her own and others’ positionality is negotiated, the paper provides transparency on how ethical concerns have impact on research.

In a way Torbjörn Friberg’s paper is the most conceptual piece amongst the papers in this issue, as it starts out with the tension between modernism and primitivism. The paper takes its point of departure in Ghassan Hage’s dialectics of anthropological critique in which he argues that modern ethnographers who encounter ‘primitivist’ worlds become equipped
with potential critical thinking about matters of modernity. Friberg makes the case that today many modern projects are also inspired by (the creativity of) primitivism. How can Anthropology then keep a critical gaze on modernity if we are unable to step outside it into a ‘primitive’ sphere from where we can contemplate modernity? With the help of ethnography from his work with innovation politics in the Öresund Region, Friberg thoroughly explores these questions and offers some tentative solutions.

Taken together, the papers point to the strength of critical ethnographic analysis where authors reflect upon the production of the material as well as the ethnography, both as a means for analysis and as a method. They also show the potential breadth and depth of ethnography. The approach is not bound to any place, time, or any specific theoretical framework. It is a tool equally apt to describe and explore specific settings as well as theorize these settings in relation to broader contexts, be they socio-political, epistemological, ethical, and/or theoretical.

The Bricolage section is used to give room to texts, papers, and reports that fall slightly outside the theme of a special issue. This time the space is allotted to an article by William (Bill) Arens who passed away in 2019. Bill was an honorary doctor at Gothenburg University and worked closely for several years along with the Department of Anthropology. The text published in the Bricolage section was discovered after his demise and graciously offered to us by his wife Diana Antos Arens. The text has not been published before. It is written in Bill’s characteristic way of being professional, serious, and humoristic at the same time. He talks about his experiences of being an American in Sweden in the paper, but more importantly the paper discusses images of Sweden that have circulated for decades, even centuries. As Sweden has once again surfaced during the Covid-19 pandemic, in international (and especially North American) press as either a worst-case scenario, or for others, the only sane voice in crazy times, we found Bill’s article profoundly and surprisingly relevant and timely in its scope. Associate Professor Ulla-Britt Engelbrektsson who was a dear friend of Bill, has been kind enough to write an introductory text note in memory of Bill.

Since the journal was launched in August 2018 with the inaugural issue that dealt with “The Public Presence of Anthropology” (Vol 1, No 1, 2018) and developed around Didier Fassin’s Vega Symposium in 2016, we have worked hard to consolidate the journal’s publication and dissemination. The second issue, which was also a double issue, was themed “Comparative Municipal Ethnographies” (Vol 2, No 1-2, 2019) focused on the anthropology of local politics across the world. The first issue of 2020 inquired into “The Anthropology of Wellbeing in Troubled Times” (Vol 3, No 1, 2020), and was developed around Paul Stoller’s 2013 Vega Symposium. The issue before this one focused on ethnographic practices in applied contexts, “Putting Swedish Anthropology to Work” (Vol 3, No 2, 2020). Two issues will be published in 2021; the first one being this, the Varia issue, and the second, currently in press, explores “The Social Life of Water” with Professor Karsten Pearregaard and Professor Paula Uimonen as guest editors.

As Editors-in-Chief of kritisk etnografi — Swedish Journal of Anthropology we would like to emphasise that we welcome suggestions and proposals, papers, and shorter pieces from colleagues at Swedish universities and beyond.

Spread the word! Aux plumes! Fatta pennan!
Varia
A Window onto Capitol Hill: Cunning Conservatism and Shadow Politics

Christina Garsten | Professor of Social Anthropology, Stockholm University and Swedish Collegium for Advanced Study

ABSTRACT
In times of political urgency, we should look carefully at the influencers behind political ideas. The “battle for ideas” is increasingly played out among backstage political actors, such as think tanks and policy professionals, who aim to influence the perception of social and political problems. Based on ethnographic fieldwork in the United States, the article aims to shed light on how one of the major think tanks in the US, the Heritage Foundation, works to advocate and amplify the political positions taken by the conservatives in government. These are woven together by partly shared political visions and through the “economy of connections” made up by a web of personal and professional links. It is argued that understanding the modus operandi of policy professionals in think tanks is key to understanding how contemporary political influence works to promote contemporary versions of “cunning conservatism”.

Keywords: Think tanks, conservatism, networks, economy of connections, power

Introduction: Hopes and Battles for a New Era
With the new Presidential administration of Joseph Biden and Kamala Harris sworn in, hopes have been set high in the United States (US). Although pundits warn against expecting miracles from the new President, there are hopes, not least from the democratic wing, that Biden will seek to restore a rules-based international order, which has been badly shaken by his predecessor Donald Trump; that he will work to bring the US back into the international community’s pursuit of peace and security, pushing development goals, and fighting climate change. From the conservative side, challenges ahead are perceived differently, including pushing back against an agenda of socialist policies and job-crushing laws and regulations, protecting “fundamental American rights”, such as limited federal interference, the right to life, and the right to bear arms. The battle for what constitutes “American values” and what restoring unity, tolerance, and respect for democratic procedures would imply is thus highly conflictual and played out in diverse social and political arenas.

In this battle, not just politicians and policy makers, but also journalists, pundits, and the general public, play a role. As new political ideas and policies are beginning to be articulated, and old ones scrutinised and challenged, we should stop and think about the influencers and architects behind some of these; who they are, what platform they operate from, and what are the ideologies and funding sources that propel them. We should look critically at the oracles and architects of ideas in times of political urgency. To a large extent, the “battle for ideas” is played out among the backstage political actors wanting to influence the perception of social and political problems, of financial priorities, and urgent domestic as
well as international policy. Think tanks, lobby firms, and other such organisations, and the “policy professionals” who work there are vital here (Garsten, Rothstein and Svallfors 2015). Conservative think tanks and other policy-focused nonprofit organisations have long been a fixture on Washington’s political scene. They are essential in shaping political discourse and are the drivers behind the crafting of policy agendas. For instance, the Trump White House had adopted many of their proposals. In January 2018, the Heritage Foundation claimed that the administration had enacted nearly two-thirds of its policy recommendations till that date (https://projects.propublica.org/trump-town/organization_categories/think-tanks?page=1).

My research trajectory over the past ten years in the field of think tanks, has given me insights into how nestled and competitive the political landscape is; how much of it that is hidden from view, shadowed by curtains of formality, protocol, and diplomacy; and how imbricated it is with social relations and connections of trust. My aim here is to shed light on how one of the major think tanks in the US, the Heritage Foundation, works to advocate and amplify the political positions taken by the conservatives in government; how it works to polish and brush up conservative policy; and how it does so by making use of social network and friendship ties in an “economy of connections”. With Michael Billig’s (1995) notion of “banal nationalism” – the routine and often unnoticed ways that established nation-states reproduce from day to day – we might analogously think of “banal conservatism” as the habitual everyday practices of reproducing a conservative political position. This is done in seemingly mundane and guileless ways, by way of discourse and practice, the choice of topics and the display of symbols, that serve to direct attention and fashion perspectives. Furthermore, in the context of this particular case, it does so whilst polishing political positions that are often divisive and exclusionary, and that lately have amplified the brute politics of the Trump administration. Also, banal conservatism sheds engagement with a number of questions vital for democracy, such as violent racism, the unequal access to basic welfare provisions, and the violation of human rights standards in migration, thus producing political absences. However, we would need to take this even further, because the overall intellectual agenda informing the agendas of conservative think tanks are anything but banal. Such ideas are more cunning than banal, since together they make up a long-term conservative political agenda. Moreover, they are not to be mistaken for recent. They are part of a lineage of ideas that stretches back to the birth and formation

1 For almost a hundred years now, Washington D.C. has been the center of gravity in the “market for ideas” made up by think tanks, within the United States, as well as worldwide. According to a survey by the University of Pennsylvania (McGann 2021), there are just over 2,000 think tanks in the United States, the number of think tanks having more than doubled since 1980. D.C. itself is home to about eight per cent of these. The top ten US think tanks in the survey all have offices in Washington D.C. With D.C. being the center of the think tank universe, the 1700 block of Massachusetts Avenue, just off Dupont Circle, is at the heart of this universe. Whilst a common divide amongst think tanks is along partisan lines; this is often talked about in terms of “conservative” and “progressive”. On the conservative, or right, are organisations such as the Heritage Foundation, which works primarily “to formulate and promote public policies based on the principles of free enterprise, limited government, individual freedom, traditional American values, and a strong national defense” (https://www.heritage.org/about-heritage/mission). On the progressive, or the left, side are organisations such as The Progressive Policy Institute. Their mission is “to create radically pragmatic ideas for moving America beyond ideological and partisan deadlock” (https://www.progressivepolicy.org/). There are also a number of “nonpartisan” think tanks, such as the Center for American Progress, who present themselves on the website as “an independent nonpartisan policy institute that is dedicated to improving the lives of all Americans, through bold, progressive ideas, as well as strong leadership and concerted action” (https://americanprogress.org/).
2 Research for this article has been funded by Riksbankens Jubileumsfond and the Swedish Research Council.
of neoliberalism in the 1920s, and that manifests itself in the more recent interlinkages of conservative, right-wing political movements with business, lobby firms, political action committees, and think tanks, skillfully described by Slobodian (2018). Thus, this type of conservatism is more of a coherent intellectual project – one that is woven together by at least partly shared political visions and a web of personal and professional links. Hence, we may instead conceive of this movement as “cunning conservatism”.3

Let me first discuss the beginning of my fieldwork in Washington D.C. with think-tank leaders overlooking Capitol Hill, the center of political gravity, and the symbol of power in the US.

**Facing the Hill, Washington D.C., May 2011**

As I enter the grandiose building of the Heritage Foundation, I am sweating from the brisk walk on the melting asphalt in the cityscape of central Washington D.C. As anyone having spent time in D.C. in the springtime knows, the weather can get very hot and humid at this time of the year. To match the weather, I am wearing a light blue cotton summer dress, short to the knees, and a pair of comfortably worn leather sandals, ignoring the otherwise customary, classic, and formal dress code of the social world of D.C. policy wonks.

The reception area of the think tank bears all the insignia of seriousness; massive, dark wooden panels, tall windows decorated with heavy soft curtains, and 19th century-style brown leather armchairs and coffee tables. Recent publications by the think-tank experts are discreetly yet visibly spread out in the room, the topical titles adding a sense of contemporaneity and urgency to the solemnity of the space.

At the reception desk, I am told to wait a few minutes, since the person I am to meet, the President of the think tank, is still busy in a meeting. Relieved by this slight delay, I take the chance to refresh myself from the brisk and sweaty walk, in the ladies’ room. Back in the reception area, I spot a neatly dressed man well over retirement age in suit and tie standing next to the reception, chatting with the groomed, yet timeworn reception lady. I approach the man with assertive steps, and greet him smilingly, thinking this must be the President. A sudden outburst of laughter fills the room, and chuckling, the reception lady explains that the neat man is in fact not the President, but the janitor. The President will be ready for me in a minute. "Damned", I say to myself, working my hardest to regain composure and face. Well, ethnography is supposed to be about learning, and acting the child, right?

I had been referred to the President and founding father of the Heritage Foundation, Edwin Feulner, by a chain of referrals, starting out with a fellow anthropologist, who for a long period had been working as a leadership consultant to political and business leaders in the D.C. area. Having spent a month in D.C. trying to approach think tanks in every possible way I could think of, without much success, I had realised that the policy world of D.C. was one made up of an “economy of connections” (Garsten 2013), an economy in which friendships, family connections, connections made up of social club memberships, alumni associations, church affiliations, or other types of connections, were key resources. I had eventually gained a few entry points by ways of personal referrals from people I was acquainted with, and who were somehow involved in the policy networks of D.C. My fellow anthropologist had referred me to a leading conservative thinker and author of policy books,  

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3 On this point, moving beyond the “banal” and recognising the longer trajectory of conservative ideas, I am grateful to my reviewers for constructive comments.
deeply imbricated in the conservative think-tank world, who in turn had given me the mandate
to use his name to get in touch with the President of the Heritage Foundation and one of their
key experts. I was now to meet with the President himself, Ed Feulner, as well as one of his
most senior associates, Lee Edwards, a distinguished Heritage Fellow in Conservative Thought.

A sense of gravity falls on the reception area once more, and after a few more minutes,
another friendly-looking elderly man in an impeccable grey suit and tie approaches me. This
time, it is indeed Mr. Edwards that I get to shake hands with. He takes me upstairs by the
lift, all the way up to the top floor, where I am shown into the spacious office of Mr. Feulner.

“Welcome”, Mr. Feulner exclaims, with a warm professional tone of voice. “Please have
a seat”. Mr. Edwards then brings three lightweight chairs from different places in the room,
positions them in a triangle in the middle of the large room, on an oriental carpet, and we
are invited to take our seats. “What”, I wonder silently, “may be the purpose of this seating
arrangement?” It appears as though we are about to enter into an interrogation, without
being clear on who is to interrogate whom. There is no rush. The grandfather clock fills
the room with its ticking sound, and the buzz of the city outside of the window is hardly
audible. The lavish office appears like a bubble, from a different time and space, far removed
from the hectic pace of the capitol cityscape. I think to myself that this is a particular version
of the veritable think “tank”; as a container of thoughts.

As my eyes scan the office, I register a massive wooden work desk, heavy bookshelves
with colorful hardcover book spines, framed photos of what I assume to be the President’s
family, and of himself, posing with insignia. The office connotes both a sense of personality
and even intimacy, I note, as well as a sense of distinction and professionalism. Stars and
Stripes has its place on a chest of drawers. There is a comfortable couch in front of one of
the many tall windows that overlook The Mall and Capitol Hill. “From here”, Mr. Feulner
exclaims, “we have perfect vision of what goes on up on the Hill”. Indeed, the Dome is close
enough to fill up one of the windows almost entirely, with the Statue of Liberty on top. If I
was to look more carefully, I could almost catch a glimpse of the Apotheosis fresco in the eye
of the Capitol Building’s Dome, depicting George Washington rising to the heavens in glory,
flanked by female figures representing Liberty and Victory/Fame and surrounded by six groups
of figures, lining the perimeter of the canopy: War, Science, Marine, Commerce, Mechanics,
Agriculture. There was the symbol, the glorification, of American ideals and values.

I start the conversation by thanking them for taking the time to see me, and explaining the
purpose of my visit and the brief rationale of my research project. As I speak, I am increasingly
made aware of the improper attire I am wearing. In these environs, a simple cotton dress
and sandals are plain amiss. Nothing less than formal skirt and jacket suit and scarf would
have been appropriate here. The policy world of D.C., as I had started to understand it, was
clearly a male-dominated one, in terms of numbers as well as with respect to dress code,
mannerisms, and social networks. Part of the “ease of interactional privilege” (Khan 2011) that
was associated with this social world, comprises knowing what the appropriate business attire
consists of. This, I should have anticipated, and I blame myself. After all, it is not the first time
I am interviewing top organisational leaders under formal, or formatted, circumstances.

To some degree, Mr. Feulner appears to be interested and flattered by the attention
shown himself and his organisation. “Over the years, we have always strived to keep a close
relation to Congress”, he proudly declares, pointing out the window towards the Dome,
“and we have a good track record of gaining the attention of the Administration for our
ideas and policy proposals”. He then starts narrating the history of the think tank, and of its role in contemporary US-politics and policymaking. As Feulner recalls, it was during a discussion with fellow congressional aide Paul Weyrich, that the idea for creating the Heritage Foundation surfaced. Being a congressional aide to Republican Philip Crane in the early 1970s, he had come to realise the need for timely, useable policy analysis that people working on the Hill could use, and that would be usable before the debate and the vote. He talks vividly about the basic set of values that form the baseline of the positions taken by the think tank, and why is it that they embrace them. “Since its start in 1974, the mission of the Heritage Foundation has been to formulate and promote conservative public policies based on the principles of free enterprise, limited government, individual freedom, traditional American values, and a strong national defense. We have grown with it”, he tells me.

I later realised the extent to which Feulner was known and respected in the Washington D.C. policymaking community, and more specifically how closely associated he was with calibrating the conservative movement. The Heritage Foundation prides itself of being the most successful think tank in terms of impact on public policy, and to have led the way for reforms in every policy area – from taxes and regulation to crime and national defense. At this point in time (May 2011), the top priority on the political agenda, and hence on the agenda of the think tank, was the massive federal budget deficit. Other top political concerns were the US-China contest for supremacy on global markets, and the question of “American exceptionalism”. Mr Feulner declares it to be the role of the Heritage Foundation to specialise in quick-response public policy research and marketing. “In this process, defining the idea is not enough”, he emphasises, “you have to ensure the idea reaches the right target audience. You want the product to reflect what our institution believes, and to get attention. You need timely, effective delivery into the system. You need to factor in receptivity at the other end. How will they receive our goods? You want to be sufficiently provocative for people to want to read it”.

A couple of minutes later into our conversation, he steps out of the thought-world of the tank, as it were, underlines the value of understanding the reality outside of Congress. “We live half our lives in the world of policy. We need to have our feet on the ground, to understand reality outside of the Capital Beltway. We have some high-level thinkers, in terms of ideas, in our organisation. But they have their feet grounded in reality. They see the impact of ideas. We are the prototypical example of a think-and-do-tank”.

By referring the world outside Capital Beltway he invokes the symbolic meaning of the expression. “Inside the Beltway” is essentially an American idiom used to characterise matters that are, or seem to be, important primarily to officials of the U.S. federal government, to its contractors and lobbyists, and to the corporate media who cover them – as opposed to the interests and priorities of the general US population. In crude terms, populists on both sides of the political spectrum share an imagined geography of the US. based on the Capital Beltway, the highway that loops around Washington, D.C. Everything “outside the Beltway” is perceived to be the genuine America, while everything “inside the Beltway” is viewed with suspicion as part of the political establishment. Mr. Feulner thus links to the general population, implying that the Heritage Foundation may perceive and translate the ideas and priorities of the general population to the political establishment. The organisation thus positions itself as a transmitter, or perhaps an oracle, of the general population, purporting to grasp what goes on at the ground level, as it were. The notion of a “think-and-do tank”
is one commonly used by think tanks aiming to achieve impact and measurable results based on their research and knowledge-seeking activities. It is often associated with a more pragmatist and actionable approach, as well as a more partisan position than think tanks with a more academic and nonpartisan bent.

Mr. Feulner continues to talk passionately about the values that provide the base for what they do. He tells me about the book he recently co-authored, *Getting America Right: The True Conservative Values America Needs Today* (Feulner and Wilson 2007). In essence, he recounts, the message of the book is that what will rescue America now are the things that have always made the nation great: free enterprise, limited government, individual freedom, traditional American values, a strong national defense, and the rule of law. "American values are central to anything we do", he continues. "We believe in traditional family values, in social order, and in individual responsibility. Traditional values impact everything we talk about, our country, our future. We have seen entities rise and fall, and disappear. We plan on being around for a long time". As he speaks, he swings his arm comfortably in the direction of the Stars and Stripes. His words come across with an unmistaken degree of certitude and conviction. Mr. Edwards nods silently in agreement.

I leave the Heritage Foundation, the two gentlemen, and the premises with a creeping feeling of having learnt little more than the glossy, official PR image of the organisation. Yet, besides the words exchanged and the documents I got to carry with me, I leave the premises of the Heritage Foundation with the view of the Capitol Dome imprinted on my mind. Whatever activities the foundation is involved in, they are all motivated by the aspiration to get the attention of the people on the Hill. The continuous and relentless observation of ongoing political discussions; the ceaseless efforts to produce topical knowledge; and the endeavour to put this into the hands of decision makers before the actual decision, are all geared to provide members of Congress and the ruling political administration with actionable insights for decision making. Capitol Hill, the meeting place of the United States Congress and the seat of the legislative branch of the US government, appears not only as a massive and tangible manifestation of political power, but also as a symbol of impact and influence for those who operate around it. “Making one’s voice heard” among members of Congress means that one has managed to garner enough attraction and credibility for the work of the organisation to merit being heard at the highest level of political authority. During the early phases of my fieldwork in D.C. this had already become clear to me, as I had participated in seminars and other events organised by think tanks, during interviews, and by following media coverage. Whatever the ideological bent of the think tank that was articulated, or the particular version of “American values” that was propagated, the aim is always to get that view across to Congress. But nowhere was it stamped as clear as it was during my visit to the Heritage Foundation. At its premises, from within the office of its president, the omnipresent Capitol Hill also manifested itself through the window glass.

"Part gatekeeper, part brain trust and part boots on the ground"

At the root of all activities undertaken at the Heritage Foundation, we find what Ed Feulner calls “a long-term philosophy”, based on “American values”. This set of values is then flexibly attuned to the political administration and the currency of policy action. During an interview with Feulner’s co-author Doug Wilson a week earlier, I had been told that Heritage had built a strong liaison with the Reagan administration early on in its existence:
They started in the late 1970s. They saw that Reagan was going to probably become president, and when they realised he was – they were very entrepreneurial, with Ed Feulner and Phil Truluck and a handful of others – they took the initiative and went to all the conservative think tanks and began getting consensus on what America’s priorities needed to be for Ronald Reagan’s term in office, and they turned that into a book called *Mandate for America*. They got Ed Meese, who was, at that time, the chief policy advisor for Reagan. He and his cabinet as governor in California, so he’d come to D.C. Meese really liked what they put together, and, on the first day, Reagan had his cabinet meeting, Meese had gotten to Reagan, and Reagan read this *Mandate for America*, liked it, embraced it. He asked Meese to put a copy of that mandate in front of every cabinet member, at the first cabinet meeting, and said, ‘This is going to be our blueprint for what we want to change in America’, and that it became. And so, Heritage, suddenly, was huge in its influence, and the policies, basically, that Reagan advanced had come from these consensuses of the think tanks that had been aggregated by the Heritage Foundation. So, there you see the entrepreneurial quality. Heritage is an entrepreneurial think tank that picks key issues around conservative principles, but they do not allow for individual rock stars. They march as an organisation with an agreed-upon mandate, and everyone lines up.

The book, later published as *Mandate for Leadership*, was published by The Heritage Foundation (Heatherly, ed. 1981). In essence, it provides conservative solutions to issues ranging from free trade to Social Security reform to reducing federal spending. President Ronald Reagan, the organisation claims, used the book to develop many of his policies from the early 1980s and onwards. In fact, he used it so much it became a kind of handbook for the new administration.

The Heritage Foundation has in general had considerable influence over Republican politicians and has nurtured close relations to party representatives. For a long time, and with Feulner in charge, the foundation has maintained liaisons, courting House and Senate staff members to inform them about the costs and benefits of supporting or opposing proposed legislation.

Under the later leadership of Jim DeMint, former South Carolina Republican Senator who became Heritage Foundation president in 2013, the foundation turned away from being seen as an embodiment of the Republican party establishment, to became more of a political organisation feeding off the rising populism of the Tea Party movement. Following a period of turmoil, De Mint was discharged from his position in 2017, to be succeeded by Kay Coles James. James has deep ties to the Republican party’s social conservative and evangelical Christian wing and served in the administrations of Ronald Reagan, George Bush and George W. Bush. Under her leadership, the organisation has taken a more moderate position, generally supporting the Republican party, but also being criticised by donors to the foundation and by Trump supporters for wasting its opportunity to lead at a time when Republicans controlled the House, Senate, and White House (https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/19/us/politics/heritage-foundation-kay-cole-james.html).

During the presidential election of last year, the Heritage Foundation organised a series of events focused on the United States Constitution and what lies ahead. The general position of the organisation is that conservative solutions which have always been at the core of the organisation, will continue to be their long-term strategy. This involves a continued support for upholding the rights and freedoms of the individual, of family, and of local communities, as grounded in the Constitution. The basic “values” referred to may be seen as a form of “cultural celebrationism” (Hannerz 2019: 218), embracing and providing interpretation of what is perceived to be key elements of “being American”. The strong connections to, and
support for, the Republican party manifested themselves clearly, as they intensified their social networking with party representatives and potential future members of the incoming political administration, and through events geared to support for Republican politics.

The Heritage Foundation is known to have been one of the most influential forces shaping then President-elect Donald Trump's transition team, as stated in Politico (Glueck 2016): “Part gatekeeper, part brain trust and part boots on the ground, Heritage is both a major presence on the transition team itself and a crucial conduit between Trump's orbit and the once-skeptical conservative leaders who ultimately helped get him elected”. The Heritage Foundation is perceived to have been essential to staffing the administration with people who reflect Trump's commitments across the board. Several people formerly compensated or employed by the organisation went to work at different state agencies. Heritage also played a significant role in the push for Amy Coney Barrett to be elected to the Supreme Court. Several commentaries on the Heritage website confirm their wide and strong support for her candidacy and for her conservative positions, not least with regards to her position on the First and Second Amendments (Freedom of Religion, Speech, Press, Assembly, and Petition; and the Right to Bear Arms, respectively) (https://www.heritage.org/courts/commentary/the-importance-justice-amy-coney-barrett; https://www.heritage.org/courts/commentary/amy-coney-barrett-the-first-amendment).

Thus, whilst it may be pushing it too far to say that the organisation works as a gatekeeper to the political administration; their role in the revolving door process, i.e., the movement of individuals from government positions to jobs with interest groups, think tanks, or lobbying firms, and vice versa, should not be underestimated. By way of connections, network constellations, and advocacy, Heritage has played a role in casting, and defending, the Republican administration. The political scene thus extends far beyond the direct actions of the state administration and the elected politicians and their administrative staff. Also influential are networks of influential individuals and organisations, such as The Heritage Foundation and their leadership.

A Political Amplifier

One of my early interlocutors at another most important think tank in Washington D.C., the Woodrow Wilson Institute, told me that “Credibility is key, you need to build up credibility to be let into the policy circles of D.C.” Just like most think tanks, The Heritage Foundation claims to have in their orbit access to expertise and analytical prowess with which to build credibility. They claim to “provide timely, accurate research on key policy issues” (https://www.heritage.org/about-heritage/mission). This research is undertaken by inhouse “experts” and their staff, who work on chosen topics and agendas. The experts are key resources in the “battle of ideas”, and may be seen as the brain trust of the organisation. According to Mr. Wilson, The Heritage Foundation has good data, “they get good statistics”. Over the past few years, the policy areas in which the organisation has been engaged have to a large extent mirrored the priorities of the Trump Presidency. During the Trump era, The Heritage Foundation has been a fervent opponent of the Kyoto Protocol, and its online database of “policy experts” includes many climate change skeptics. A large number of the seminars and events hosted by the organisation during the Trump presidency have given space for a skeptical view on climate change and regulations. Also, statements on the organisation's website have supported Trump's response to COVID-19, arguing that contrary to critics'
views as too little, too late. “But Trump has imposed travel restrictions, convened a national response strategy, and demanded cooperation from both the public and private sectors. That's substantially more than Washington, Jackson, or Wilson did in the hour of health crisis” (https://www.heritage.org/public-health/commentary/jackson-and-wilson-had-nothing-trump-epidemic, visited January 11, 2021). Overall, the Trump administration has been supported by way of the topics chosen for debate as well as the speakers and panel members invited to participate in the events.

As most other think tanks, The Heritage Foundation also organises events to which they invite speakers from the ruling political administration to air their views on topical issues, acting as a hosting arena for the sharing of ideas and for discussion. For example, in October 2020, Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo gave a speech at the Heritage Foundation President’s Club Meeting, under the title “Trump Administration Diplomacy: The Untold Story”. He started his speech with the following remarks:

I want to thank Kay [the president of Heritage, author’s comment] and the entire leadership team at Heritage for having me here this morning. We were talking backstage about the gala tonight, and I reminded them that I’d been to the gala a number of times when I was a member of Congress. This is an important institution here in Washington, D.C., delivering on behalf of America, and I value it, and this administration values it, and I know so many leaders all across the United States Government value it as well.

And it’s also great to be here. Everybody remembers the Bob Dylan song, ‘Shelter from the Storm’. It’s good to be with you all. [Laughter, author’s comment] And I know there are a bunch of friends here, too, that – people that I’ve known an awfully long time who are here with us this morning, too. I want to thank you all for supporting this really important institution. Heritage has indeed schooled many generations of free market believers in free societies. I was a trustee on a think tank back in Kansas called the Kansas Public Policy Institute. We would read Heritage reports all the time to try to make sure we were getting it right, and trying to get it right for the state of Kansas in the same way you all here are doing that for Washington.


Of interest here is the reference to Heritage as place to which one may turn for “getting it right”, and the recognition provided by the ruling political administration. The introductory remarks, as well as the talk in its entirety, echoed a sense of mutual understanding; of reciprocal support for the guiding conservative principles; as well as for “Trump diplomacy” at the international level.

Think tanks generally aim to provide an arena for discussions across sectors of society, with the general aim to increase involvement in, and influence on, policy-related topics (see for e.g. Abelson 2006; McGann 2007; Medvetz 2012a, 2012b; Rich 2004; Smith 1991; Stone 1996, 2001; Weidenbaum 20008). Whilst some of them strive to strike a balance between ideological positions, or to be non-partisan, others more clearly push for a particular ideological position and support a specific political view. Overall, the Heritage Foundation stands behind
and supports a conservative position in general, and more specifically the Republican party. During the Trump era, it has acted as a political amplifier of the kind of politics pushed by the Trump administration. Following the recent storming of the Capitol Hill on 6 January 2021 however, the President of the Heritage Foundation explicitly condemned the actions of the organised mob that violently forced their way into the building, shattering windows and destroying furniture, ravaging offices and swarming the House chamber (https://www.heritage.org/civil-society/commentary/amid-chaos-our-resilient-republic-endures, visited January 12, 2021). However, Trump’s role in creating the political climate in which “alternative facts”, his consistent lies about the election being rigged, encouraging and inciting violence, and an attempted coup, were not mentioned.

Choosing to highlight key policy areas pushed by Trump’s administration, also means that the foundation has avoided other topical policy areas of importance. Crucial absences, or voids, have been created by staying clear of critical societal discussions, for e.g. racial discrimination, migration, basic welfare provisions, and other significant policy areas. But, as Apthorpe (1997) reminds us, “… these gaps are not voids. They are crowded spaces already filled with moral values and preconceptions” (Shore and Wright 1997: 16). By not addressing critical and contested events, and by not engaging in critical social questions, Heritage has taken the role as a political amplifier of Republican politics.

**Polished Renderings**

Not only does The Heritage Foundation offer a place for “getting things right”, as Pompeo enunciated it, providing evidence and explaining positions and actions taken by the Republican Party and Trump himself; over the past few years, Heritage has hosted several events focused more avidly on polishing and glazing the actions of Trump. The blunt, often racist, and anti-democratic speech acts and actions of Trump have been followed by the hosting of events that serve to embellish and legitimise them. For example, Heritage hosted a virtual event organised on November 3, 2020, under the title “Is the President Trumping Constitutional Norms?” The introductory passage read:

Since taking office, President Trump has been derided by the mainstream media and his critics as running roughshod over constitutional norms, fueling the conviction of liberals and some moderate conservatives that the 45th President poses an ongoing threat to the Constitution. In *Defender in Chief*, constitutional scholar John Yoo argues that Trump’s adversaries have things exactly backwards. Far from considering Trump an inherent danger to our nation’s founding principles, Yoo contends that the Framers would have seen Trump as restoring their vision of presidential power. It is instead, the liberal opponents who would overthrow existing constitutional norms to unseat Trump, thereby inflicting permanent damage on the presidency.

Join us for a lively and timely discussion on presidential power and constitutional norms in the Trump era, with the book’s author, John Yoo, and well-known legal scholar David Rivkin.

The Heritage Foundation’s extensive ties to the Republican party have led scholars to refer to it as “the de facto research arm of the GOP” (Callahan 1999), or “an adjunct” to the party (Medvetz 2012b). Its Republican ties notwithstanding, it is also worth noting that Heritage walks a thin line between keeping a healthy distance from the party in order to remain a standard bearer of American conservatism, and to pay tribute to their Republican
clients and stakeholders (cf. Medvetz 2012b). In many instances though, it clearly appears that Heritage has rather taken the role of translating party policies into euphemisms, by embellishing or polishing them.

**Friends and Trusted Parties**

Power has always been heavily reliant on personal associations, interlocking networks and intimate linkages. Politicians, policy makers, and corporate leaders carefully nurture relationships with people they judge to be strategically positioned, in a field of diffused and nomadic power (cf. Wedel 2009; Svalfors 2020). Early on, I learnt that the policy world of Washington D.C. is made up of social ties of varying intensity and depth. Figuring out the network, finding my way into it and experimenting with new ways of engaging with people, was not only a methodological enterprise; it provided some insights into the role of friendship and social ties in the seemingly impersonal and bureaucratic world of think tanks.

Elsewhere, I have stated that the dense network of “policy professionals” – think-tank experts, policy makers, politicians, multilateral experts, and corporate leaders – works like “an economy of connections”, in which connections, referrals, and references, become valuable capital in a competitive and politicised form of exchange (Garsten 2013, see also Steege 2007). It constitutes an “economy”, in the sense that social connections and referrals are provided as gifts between trusted parties. The connection may provide access to yet other valuable resources, like funding, information, media attention, or a job opportunity, which may, in the long run, translate into financial resources and political impact. Introductions and referrals to high-ranking, influential people are given as gifts, in the sense that they are tokens of a relationship that is seen as valuable enough to invest in and in which there may be an anticipation of reciprocity. The recipient of the gift is, in return, expected to recognise the value in the act of the giver, to provide the giver with information about the unfolding and implication of the contact and, most importantly, to be ready to assist with a useful connection in the future. Ideally, recurrent giving serves to circulate and redistribute valuables, in the form of connections, within the community of policy professionals, contributing, over time, to the development of a dense network of connections around specific policy areas.

The reference to a “bunch of friends” in the quote above is not a singular event. In introductions to panels and other events, there is often a reference to “friends”, signifying that the relation goes back in time and that it is a trusted one. The open confirmation of relations and friendships also inform listeners that there is a network out there, formed around common perspectives, job experiences, and a degree of reciprocity.

This economy of connections is intertwined with the organisational structures of society, erecting “pillars of social capital” (Bourdieu 1986) that attach to key positions in organisational hierarchies. The social capital that derives from resources linked to a durable network of relationships of mutual recognition provides the members with credentials which, in Bourdieu’s (1986: 51) words, “entitles them to credit, in the various sense of the word”. The networks of connections within and among organisations are thus the product of relational investment strategies aimed at establishing or maintaining social connections that can be used in the short- or long term and that imply durable obligations (Bourdieu 1986: 52).

Establishing close ties to Capitol Hill, to various government agencies and departments, and to the media, contribute to creating the kind of infrastructure of relations which think-tank leaders and experts need, to ensure that their voices are heard in “the battle for ideas”.
Unlike institutional, formal relations, these informal ties depend for their functioning on continuous nurturing and creation of trust. And importantly, as Derrida (1992) reminds us, gifts have an ambivalent dimension, since they may be both beneficial and poisonous at the same time. The “good” of the gift can easily be reversed, putting the donor in debt. This is also why too close relations and associations between politicians and think tanks leaders may become counter-productive.

Concluding Notes: Cunning Conservatism and Shadow Politics

Think tanks straddle the porous line of being formally excluded from political influence yet are mandated to educate, inform, and advocate. They are, in a sense, boundary-spanning organisations, deriving their influence from their strategic locations within and among organisations (Medvetz 2012b). They need to be inventive and entrepreneurial in order to make an imprint on political decision-makers and to achieve impact. The constant references to the Hill; the provision of policy briefs to political insiders; the striving to be invited to testify before Congress in the House of Senate; and the wish to influence the further trajectory of a bill to a potential legal action, are all part and parcel of the fight to cross the invisible boundary and to achieve impact.

Think tanks often provide the political administration with a platform from which they may spread their perspectives and engage with other experts, with academics, and with media. By way of seminars and panel debates, they also work to interpret, debate, and provide legitimisation for a particular political standpoint. They generally spend considerable resources on public relations and take pains to hire skilled professionals to work on the timely and topical production of a variety of documents: reports, press releases, policy briefs, position papers, annual reports, and the like (cf. Riles 2006). Depending on the ideological bent, they may also work as a political amplifier to the ruling administration, reinforcing their policies and standpoints; and, they may serve to polish and euphemise contested political positions, thereby glossing over problematic stances. By their choice of topics, their choices of invitees, their liaisons with politicians, and their choices of media outlets, they not only contribute to the broadening of knowledge and development of insights into certain political issues, but also engage in creating and maintaining critical absences. Urgent societal problems may in this way be left unattended to.

In one way or the other, and to varying degrees, every nation-state maintains a distinction between the people who are authorised to formally participate in the political process, and those who are not. As Brubaker (2010) reminds us, all polities create barriers to membership. The Heritage Foundation, like many other think tanks in the US, functions in some instances as gatekeeper, funneling connections between the political administration, corporations, media houses, and the citizenry. They also indirectly work to influence who moves into the political powerhouses, and who does not.

My experiences with think tanks also led me to reflect on the small and largely unnoticed details in the ways that ideological positions are routinely reproduced. The insignias of power may differ between organisations, as do the modes of social interaction, the mannerisms, and

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4 In fact, the bulk of my fieldwork in Washington D.C. was undertaken in the public relations department of a progressive think tank. From this vantage point, I got to see the production of and diffusion of information of various kinds, from podcasts, to policy briefs and hardcover books, and the daily negotiations around priority, format, and timing.
the dress codes. In one way or other, the polished habitats of think-tank policy professionals also convey a sense of community for insiders, and a sense of distance and barrier to those who are not members of these networks. The interactional ease of privilege (Khan 2011) that insiders experience and express, is matched by the awkwardness and discomfort experienced by the outsiders. An invisible boundary is clear in its very absence. We may think of The Heritage Foundation as a place where “cunning conservatism”, far from being just “banal”, is being reproduced. By way of constant references to “American values”, the Constitution, free enterprise, limited government, individual freedom, and a strong national defense, their role in the conservative movement is emphasised. The unremarkable little words that flag conservative values; the casual reference to insiders and outsiders, friends and antagonists; the routine framing and templating of events; and the presence of material objects of value; all signal the inclusivist and exclusivist visions of the nation, and what “being American” should entail. Whilst Billig’s work has encouraged scholars to expand the scope of the notion of banal nationalism and push it into new terrains, giving rise to a wide range of conceptual innovations (Koch and Passi 2016), there is much more to be said for the apparently trivial, indeed the more cunning and guileful, in the making of policy and striving for power.

Is it fair to say think tanks like The Heritage Foundation play a role in cultivating the kind of political climate that we experience today, and that its darker side has manifested itself in the form of the riots and insurgencies we have just witnessed? Could they in some sense be seen as accountable for the political unrest and undemocratic tendencies that are visible today? Well, on the surface, it may seem like there would be a mammoth distance between the civilised, groomed, and scripted environs and mannerisms of think tanks like The Heritage Foundation, and the crude, unpolished violence of the rioters. I doubt that any of the leaders I met would in any way endorse the actions of the crowd that stormed the Capitol. Nevertheless, to the extent that The Heritage Foundation claims to have had an impact on Trump’s transition into power, and on influencing several of the policies that have been implemented under the Trump administration, they cannot escape the doubts cast. The economy of connections that has been established between the think tank and the Trump administration has become poisonous. The problem with think-tank organisations is that they are not set up for taking responsibility for the impact they may have. They are not designed to be accountable; instead they are purportedly meant only to educate, inform, and advocate. Their responsibility ends right there, with the ideas and propositions they are able to push. The trouble begins when we realise that the US political system is essentially designed to be dependent on organisations like think tanks and lobby firms, that “help government think”, as it were (cf. Pautz 2020).

Seen in a broader context, the conservative think tank as a political force, has grown steadily since the 1970s. As pointed out by Stahl (2016), the conservative think tank has been able to advance as a site of political and cultural power, and to engage in policy-making and ideological promotion on a wide scale, both inside and outside the state. In the long run, the liaison between conservative think tanks and the political administration, may undermine established democratic institutions and procedures, as aptly demonstrated by MacLean (2017) in her study of right-wing political power in the US. Yet, despite recent studies examining conservative and right-wing political movements in the US, little attention has been paid to the study of think tanks as some of the central institutions of conservative political thinking.

For ethnography, the nested character of contemporary political power implies that
our anthropological training in tracing connections, networks, friendships, kinship, and organisational links comes in very handy. Our methodological toolkit should be well equipped to trace how “discreet power” operates (Garsten and Sörbom 2018); the configurations of power that fly under the radar; and how the exclusionary circles of influence are made up. With Trouillot (2001), we should think of the state, and other influential organisations, as a multiplicity of fields, boundaries, and institutions. Ethnographic research then becomes the study of ongoing events and processes that reflect the dynamics of transnational power relations and the circulation and concentration of economic power. Understanding the modus operandi of policy professionals in think tanks is key to understanding how contemporary political influence and democratic accountability function, and brings to the fore fundamental questions about the current state and future of democracy.

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Jocular Ethnography:
The Productive Work of Humour in Fieldwork on Migration

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ABSTRACT This article makes the case for why the jocular is both methodologically and analytically important in ethnographic work on migration. More precisely, it argues that we need to pay explicit attention to the productive work that the humorous does in our ethnographic encounters—and analyse what it means for the types of knowledge that we (re)produce around migrants’ experiences, subjectivities and struggles. Drawing on ethnographic work conducted in the Burmese migrant community in George Town, Malaysia, the article first illustrates how the jocular can open up space for approaching issues that may otherwise be out of reach, including the power dynamics involved in the ethnographic encounter itself. Second, through explicit attention to the ways that migrants use laughter, jokes and comic displays to narrate their own experiences and comment on their collective precariousness, the article shows how the humorous does distinct political work in migrants’ agentic claims and in speaking truth to power.

Keywords: Humour, laughter, migration, ethnography, refusal, agency

On “Sharing Humour”

For around a decade I have been following the everyday lives of Burmese labour migrants in the city of George Town, on the island of Penang off the northwestern coast of Peninsular Malaysia.1 Through recurring field visits, I have tried to document and understand the everyday tactics that they employ in order to secure their livelihoods and navigate an increasingly securitised enforcement landscape, which has criminalised illegal migrants and simultaneously made all migrants prime targets of everyday policing, roadblocks, raids, and nationwide crackdowns (Nah 2011). One of the most striking aspects of this work has been the strong presence of humour in my ethnographic encounters. In our conversations and interviews, the migrants often used jokes when addressing the precarity of their situation, they mocked the greed of the police officers who were constantly extorting money from them, and used laughter to ease narratives about difficult experiences. Similarly, I often used humour as a way to get a conversation going or to approach more sensitive topics. I would also laugh at myself as a means to cover up mistakes I made (pronouncing things in the wrong way, not understanding what was being said) or in an attempt to mitigate my privileged position as a white Swedish researcher. In this article I, therefore, want to think

1 While Myanmar is the official name of the country formerly known as Burma, the use of the term “Burmese (labour) migrants” in this article reflects that the interlocutors themselves used this terminology but also the vast majority of the interlocutors belong to the Burmese majority population, also known as the Bamar (with one notable exception being Sam who features later in this article).
further about the productive work that the humorous does in ethnographic fieldwork.

While humour has gained traction as a research topic across social sciences, limited attention has been directed towards humour as a methodological tool for conducting and representing research (Watson 2015: 407), particularly in unstable and precarious social settings (Trnkka 2011; Goldstein 2003). This marginalisation of humour in ethnographic work is somewhat puzzling considering that it “seems at odds with the intuitive significance of the funny in fieldwork” – and the ways in which “[l]earning the laughing lines, getting the jokes” is often presented as the “high-water mark” of becoming embedded within the fieldwork setting (Carty and Musharbash 2008: 209-210). Most of us can likely recall humorous instances from the field. These may even be the moments that stand out in our memory afterwards. They become anecdotes through which we “spice up” our writing and form part of the stories we tell our students. Many of us, perhaps without thinking more seriously about it, also use the humorous in observational work as well as during interviews. As described above, we may smile or laugh to diffuse tense situations. We crack jokes as a means to “break the ice” when meeting new people. We laugh in response to circumstances we do not understand. This intuitive usage of humour speaks to the way that sharing humour is very much like “sharing food or music” (Morreal 1991 in Kmita and Mawhinney 2016: 95): a dynamic, spontaneous, and enriching way that we engage with and learn from our research environment (ibid).

The basic argument posed in this article is that we need to take humour seriously in our ethnographic work. More precisely, I am suggesting that we need to pay explicit attention to the productive work that the humorous does in/for our ethnographic encounters – and analyse what it means for the types of knowledge that we uncover. This argument is not merely a methodological one. Rather, it relates to the broader politics of knowledge production – and, in particular, to questions around what comes to matter in our research and why (Aparna et al., 2020: 111). While such questions are certainly relevant for ethnographic work more broadly, in the context of migration research they are also inevitably bound up with long-standing discussions around migrant subjectivity, agency, and victimisation (see for example Augustín 2003; Squire 2017; Mainwaring 2016). Within such scholarship, humour has however thus far gained very limited attention. In fact, migration literature has largely depicted, particularly irregular, border crossings as “completely serious endeavors devoid of humor or irony” (de León 2015: 93). The problem with this is, of course, that while the focus on hardship and precarity has been helpful for highlighting the violence and injustice of contemporary border regimes, it has simultaneously obscured how migratory journeys are not only punctuated “by brutality and violence but also by play and laughter” (Van Ramshorst 2019: 897). Attention to the humorous, I here propose, allows us to “de-exceptionalise” the migratory subject (Schapendonk et al. 2021): offering a crucial window into the complex ways that migrants comprehend and navigate their own circumstances as well as the more masked and subtle ways through which they challenge power (Goldstein 2003: 3).

In the following sections of this article, I will draw on my experiences of conducting fieldwork in the Burmese migrant community in George Town. Following an introduction to the key ingredients of humour, the first empirical section of this article centers on the presence and different functions of humour in the ethnographic encounter. Here, the analytical focus is placed on how laughter and jokes offer an entry point to topics that may otherwise be out of reach – including the power dynamics involved in the interview situation itself. In the second empirical section, attention is rather directed towards how
migrants use humour to address their collective precarity (van Ramshorst 2019). Here, the discussion focuses on the use of humour as a means of refusal and “truth telling”.

The Key Ingredients of Humour
Humour has been described as an “anthropological constant” (Berger 1997: x): found in every society and present in most human interaction. While social scientists have been rather late to the party, theorisation of humour as a philosophical and psychological conundrum are far from new. For example, it seems more or less obligatory in humour studies to point out that Plato and Aristotle reasoned around humour – and that Sigmund Freud in 1905 wrote a book on jokes and the unconscious (and look! I just did it as well!). The main theories of humour, which can partially be traced back to the work of these men, are often grouped under the headings of 

**superiority theory** (associated with the use of humour as a form of victory or triumph),

**relief theory** (focusing on the release of tensions) and

**incongruity theory** (focusing on humour as a form of disruption). While often presented as separate in origin and focus, contemporary humour scholarship, much like this very article, tends to draw on different aspects of all of the above theories – and they can thus be read as complementary rather than competing (Raskin 1985).

Throughout this text, I read humour as an inevitably social and context-bound activity that can perform a range of different functions (Kuipers 2008). As such, humour can work to build community and transgress social boundaries, but it can also be used to draw these boundaries and reinforce hierarchical social orders (Billig 2005). The arguments posed in this article are therefore not necessarily tied up with an understanding of humour as “good” or “bad”. Rather, and as spelt out above, my proposal is that we need to pay attention to the work that humour (and laughter) performs in the social context of fieldwork. In order to do this, Giselinde Kuipers’ (2009) work on humour is helpful. In her article *Humor Styles and Symbolic Boundaries*, Kuipers presents an overview of the key ingredients of humour, which may not necessarily be present in all forms of humour, but that are “important to understand how humor works in social life” (Kuipers 2009: 220). As such, these ingredients are not “building blocks for a theory of humor … but rather a theory about humor, which tries to understand how humor works” (ibid.: 220-221). In the everyday usage of humour these different ingredients clearly overlap, which is also why I will not use them as separate in the empirical sections of this article, but they are nonetheless useful when seeking to unpack more closely what humour does in human interaction.

Before turning to these ingredients, I would however like to point out that although the main analytical focus in this section is placed on humour, *laughter* is also central to my analysis. While humour and laughter are often connected, they are not the same phenomenon: laughter can therefore not be reduced to humour and, conversely, humour does not necessarily result in laughter (Emmerson 2017). Dittmer (2013: 499) suggests that one way to approach their difference is to think about humour as “the discursive” and laughter as the “affective”. This does not mean that the latter is not socially regulated, which is visible in our expectation that laughter should remain under control: in order to stay within the realm of the “normal” it should not be “mad” or “hysterical” (Coser 1959: 171).

The first two ingredients of humour in Kuipers’ overview are *non-seriousness* and *ambiguity* (or *incongruity* as it is often referred to in humour theory). While incongruity is not necessarily “funny”, it permits humour to perform the function of “breaks” in conversations as well as broader discourses, which is also why the humorous is generally believed to offer a
potential for transgressing social norms (Kuipers 2009: 221). Non-seriousness, on the other hand, can be thought of as ensuring “a pleasurable state of mind resembling playfulness” (Chafe 2007 in Kuipers 2009: 221). Michael Mulkay’s (1988) sociological formulation of humour captures how the incongruous and non-serious intersect in what he terms the “humorous mode”. In the “humorous mode” we can play with misunderstandings, absurdity or contrast — and there is no demand for coherence or even truth. Even when dealing with very serious topics such as oppression or violence, speaking in the “humorous mode” is associated with a degree “innocence” (Jul Sorensen 2008) — because framing something as a joke allows us the possibility of taking it all back (I was, after all, only joking!). This ability to use humour as a means “to say without saying” (Hernann 2016: 59), is of course important when thinking about its function in the context of ethnographic fieldwork. As previous work has illustrated, the humorous framing is particularly effective for approaching themes that may be difficult, controversial, or even taboo (Goldstein 2003). In this way, humour can come to function as a “hidden transcript” (Scott 1990), where interlocutors are able to offer “alternative, sometimes subversive, versions of dominant narratives and official history” in a manner perceived as less threatening (Hernann 2016: 59).

When we assume that ethically viable fieldwork builds on principles of producing “negotiated spaces” and upon “practices of reflexivity” (Sultana 2007: 375), then the possibility of using humorous forms of communication as a hidden transcript is clearly important — as it allows room to address topics that may otherwise be out of reach. But scholars have also pointed towards how humour holds the potential for an “emotional reflexivity” that aids the researcher in understanding the power relations between the researcher and the researched (Van Ramshorst 2019: 902; see also Kmita and Mawhinney 2016). Sharing jokes and laughter makes it possible for the researcher and the interlocutors to step outside of their assigned roles — momentarily rupturing the power-dynamics of the ethnographic encounter (Browne 2016; Hernann 2016). As we will see further on, framing something as a joke, interlocutors are able to momentarily “take charge” of the conversation — and to approach the privileged position of the researcher in a way that would be very difficult (if not impossible) in a more serious framing. One reason for this, scholars suggest, is that humour allows us to relate on a more personal level — and studies of humour in healthcare have for example shown that patients and family members perceive a humorous approach as a sign that they were seen “as persons and not just part of the job to be done” (Dean and Gregory 2004: 144). Jokes and other humorous expressions then operate as a form of “appreciation” that can mitigate the potential feeling of being “used” by researchers (Kmita and Mawhinney 2016: 101).

Kuipers’ third ingredient of humour is pleasure. This is perhaps one of the most underestimated aspect of fieldwork, which cannot be separated from knowledge ideals that view fun and laughter as inappropriate or less valid for unravelling “truth” (Bakhtin 1984; Watson 2015). This is likely also why researchers have often shied away from the use of humour — for fear of damaging the credibility of their research (Sagi and Yechiam 2008; Watson 2015) and out of concern for being perceived as “making light” of the topic under scrutiny or the precariousness of their interlocutors (Fluri 2019). The idea that pleasure has no place in serious research endeavours, clearly creates a tension in the context of ethnographic work, given its importance for creating both an agreeable and trusting atmosphere during interviews and observational work. In turn, this is intimately connected to Kuiper’s fourth ingredient of humour: namely sociability (Kuiper 2009: 222). In the words of Rose Coser
(1959: 172): “To laugh … is to invite those present to come closer”. While there are certainly moments when humour does the opposite, typically associated with laughing at rather than with someone (Meyer 2000, see below), humour has a recognised ability to foster community between those that share in the joke (Kuiper 2006). The potentiality of jocular interaction for building interpersonal bonds is thus important here, not just at the individual but also collective level (Hernann 2016: 65).

The final two ingredients of humour in Kuipers framework are transgression and aggression. The former (how humour often touches upon and allows us to approach “taboos and sensitive topics”) has been dealt with above, but the latter warrants some further scrutiny. Theoretically, the association between aggression and humour can largely be traced back to various versions of superiority theory but has also more recently been addressed in the important work of Micheal Billig (2005) in relation to the power of ridicule. At the most basic level, the very act of not taking something seriously can be an act of aggression (Kuipers 2009). In the fieldwork situations described in this paper, this is important for the ways that migrants’ laughter and mockery of, for example, police officers can be seen as a way to refuse their authority (Bhungalia 2020). However, the ingredient of aggression is also significant for understanding the productive work of humour in defining what is “outside of the normal” (Kuipers 2008: 365) – as anyone who has pulled a joke that was not laughed at, can likely attest to.

While the coming sections of this paper will place emphasis on the presence and function of humour in my own ethnographic work, I do (like so many humour scholars before me) feel the need to underline that the reader may not find the stories particularly funny at all. While this is in many ways as natural as not being frightened by articles on fear or disheartened by texts on depression (Oring 2003), there are also aspects of humour that are hard to capture (at least for me) in writing. One part of this has to do with the fact that much of “the humorous” that goes on in conversations is not verbal – rather, it is present in the form of facial expressions, intonations, timing, or body language. What makes something funny is therefore not necessarily what is being said but how it is said. The “funnier” aspects of the migrants’ stories may also be missed due to the “you had to be there” type problem, but also because their jokes, comments, or even gestures may only be legible to the “insider” (Kuipers 2008). While this provides the perfect illustration to the way humour is a socially and spatially specific form of social interaction (ibid), it is nonetheless a challenge in academic writings on humour. Now, with this caveat in place, we will take a trip to Komtar shopping center, downtown George Town.

**Ibrahimovic, Human Trafficking, and How to Make Ladies Happy**

The best place to cross the street to access the Komtar building is to use the massive x-shaped zebra crossing at the junction of Jalan Ria and Lebuh Tek Soon. However, to cross here does come with a degree of difficulty – as there simply is not enough time to make it across before the pedestrian traffic light starts counting down with an aggressive beeping sound. Having made it across the junction, you can follow the narrow sidewalk, past the Maybank office, and turn left up the escalators that take you to the first floor. You then walk through the open hall, where vendors display bright-coloured Malay clothing, batik sarongs, and various gadgets for mobile phones, and continue left down a corridor with smaller clothing shops that play loud (or rather: very loud!) Chinese music. Take the short flight of stairs down one floor and you enter a space that – if you pay attention – looks, smells, and feels different to
the other parts of this shopping complex: the so-called “Burma shops”. Here, the signs are in Burmese, shops feature newspapers from Myanmar, the TVs inside the restaurants play Burmese music videos (that always seem to end in tears), mobile stalls sell the kun-ya (betel nut, lime, and catechu wrapped up in a betel leaf that will turn your teeth red) and posters of Aung San Suu Kyi hang in some of the shop windows.

During my fieldwork in George Town, I have spent a lot of time in the Burma shop area of Komtar, engaging in the ethnographic method that Sandhu et al. (2007) have dubbed “serial hanging out”; repeatedly, but over short periods, spending time in the same place with the intent of removing one or several layers of “outsiderness,” making me more approachable, engendering informal interactions (Lundquist 2021). In more practical terms, this has entailed walking around the hallways talking to people, writing or reading on my own in the cafés and restaurants, socialising over dinner with friends and colleagues, and buying my groceries in the Burmese shops. Together with Lin, the very patient and knowledgeable man who inspired and helped me design my study from the outset, and who now works along with me as a research assistant in my project, I have also conducted a number of recorded interviews here; sometimes because I was interested in the particular activities taking place here, or simply because interlocutors suggested Komtar as a convenient place to meet.

On this one particular afternoon we have agreed to meet Sam outside the Hundi office that his brother owns. The office is tucked away at the end of one of Komtar’s many winding corridors and when we get there, Sam is already seated at the table outside with some friends. “So...” I say jokingly, “we have some moooore questions for you”. Everyone around the table laughs. They know that Sam has already answered questions for close to two hours earlier this week, and my colleague now cracks a joke about the fact that Sam will soon be having nightmares about Swedish people that come to ask an endless number of questions. In our defense, the last interview came to an abrupt end when someone at the table got a phone call of warning that the police were heading in our direction. On that particular occasion, rumour had it that the police had been playing cards for money, and the officers that had lost the game were now roaming in Komtar for migrants without passports that they could extort money from (see also Franck 2019). While there was no way for us to verify if there was any truth to this particular story, the migrants in our company acted as if it presented a viable threat and quickly dispersed.

We now hope to hear more of Sam’s story, interesting for its rich detail on the journey to and from Myanmar. Aged 22 and ethnic Kachin, Sam left Myanmar to find employment overseas a little over a year ago. He did, however, return to Myanmar a while back to get married, and he was in the midst of taking us through this journey when we were interrupted the last time. Just as we get ready to (re)start the interview, a familiar face approaches the table. “Hey, remember me?” the man smilingly exclaims, “I am Ibrahimović”? Everyone starts laughing again. Zlatan Ibrahimović is likely Sweden’s most famous soccer player, and it is not uncommon that he is the face that people associate with our small country (well, apart from Abba, of course). We chat with “Ibrahimović” for a moment about my latest trip to Yangon, and then try to – yet again – proceed with our interview. I turn to Sam: “So, when we stopped the last time, you were just about to cross the border in Thailand”? Sam nods and starts telling us about the human smuggler he had paid to get him across the

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2 Hundi is the term that the Burmese migrants use for the informal agencies that secure the wiring of remittances back home.
border. However, he is soon interrupted by Ibrahimović and the others around the table, who start lecturing him on the importance of telling us the truth. It seems they fear that Sam is holding back, giving us a more “sugar coated” version of the human smuggling experience. This leads to a longer conversation within the group about the difference between human smugglers and traffickers, and the conditions in the detention camps where those who get arrested along the border often end up. Ibrahimović tells us that he is sometimes called in to negotiate for migrants who are arrested. He works as a consultant for an agency that has been contracted by the Myanmar embassy to help out in the identification process in these detention camps. “It is really, really painful for me to go inside there. It is really, really painful”, he says. He describes the camps as pure horror, “like, you know, in the movie Schindler’s list by Stephen Spielberg”. The inmates in these camps, he says, “are not able to do anything” about their situation. They simply have to obey the orders of the guards.

The conversation makes it clear that Ibrahimović is really taken by the fate of the people that he meets in these camps, and he is particularly outraged by the way that the increasing number of Rohingya refugees are treated. He speaks in excruciating detail about the way these refugees are treated by human traffickers as well as the guards in the detention camps. “They are humans!” he exclaims. “It is really terrible! You guys are only listening to the stories now but when you see it in real life that is really, really …” He doesn’t finish the sentence, and there is a moment of silence around the table.

Ibrahimović explains that he feels a sense of responsibility for those who have arrived from Myanmar more recently, because he has been in Malaysia for 20 years. “Have you been here for 20 years”? I ask, somewhat surprised. Most migrant workers from Myanmar stay much shorter periods, a few years, and then return home. He smiles, leans back in his chair, and says, not without a degree of sarcasm, “You missed me!” – meaning that despite the many interviews I have conducted, I have missed the most important person to talk to, namely him. “You guess, you guess how old I am”? he suddenly demands with a big smile. A bit taken aback with this sudden turn in the conversation, my answer is slow. “Ok… so you have stayed here for 20 years…” But Ibrahimović has no patience with this. “No, la!” he exclaims. “You should not think about it! Just look at my face!” “Okay”, I respond, “so 40…?” He seems content that I managed to get it right. I retaliate. “And me, how old am I”? I glare at him to make sure he doesn’t avoid the question. Ibrahimović takes a long look at me with his arms crossed over his chest. “Okay, so I give you … 27”? The whole table erupts in laughter, and he is scolded in Burmese by the others. They think his answer is stupid. How can I be 27 when I am a university teacher with several children? Ibrahimović desperately tries to rescue the situation. “No, no, no!” he exclaims. “But Western people look different! Sometimes when they look 28 or 27, they are actually older … and Asian people, when they hit 40 or 50, they look older, older, older than Western people. Am I right?” Some of the others nod, but one of the older men is not willing to let Ibrahimović off the hook that easily. He pokes him again about his poor judgement. Ibrahimović jokingly scolds the man back:

You don’t understand! All over the world, all the ladies hate if you say that they look older [than they are]. When you tell the ladies that they look younger, they are really happy. This is part of the entertainer’s job! This is why you are single, and nobody got married to you, you know!

As the table erupts in laughter again Ibrahimović leans forward, as if to let us in on a secret.
“Actually, I am not married either”, he says. “None of us are”. He points to several of the men around the table and continues:

For us it has been the wrong timing. This is the reason … When I was of marrying age, I was really struggling here in Malaysia, you know. … At the time, if I wanted to find a Burmese girl here it was very hard. Now, there are a lot, but back then there were no Burmese girls here. There were Malaysian girls but we, the Burmese, are Buddhist and Malaysia is a Muslim country. The Chinese [Malaysians] are Buddhist too, but they are a little bit different, so we could not find someone to be a wife. And we were not going back to our country for some time, so we didn’t get the chance to marry.

The conversation proceeds for a while about all sorts of matters and in the end, following several follow-up visits, we even manage to record Sam’s narrative without too many interruptions (well… sort of).

**Breaking Expectations, Levelling the Ethnographic Encounter**

Apart from capturing the general messiness of ethnographic fieldwork, the above story is illustrative of how serious and humorous themes would often be present in my encounters with migrants in George Town and how the more precise function of humour could vary over the course of the conversation. Much like we used humour as a means to (re)open our interview with Sam (smiling apologetically, cracking a disarming joke about his coming nightmares of nosy Swedes), Ibrahimović used a joke to insert himself into the conversation. Obviously curious of what was going on, and eager to participate, the Ibrahimović joke represented “a break with expectation” (Kuipers 2009: 221) that allowed him to invite/insert himself into the conversation – something that would likely have been much harder for him to do through a serious question like: “Can I join you?”. But while Ibrahimović initially used humour in a way that signalled confidence, or perhaps even a degree of superiority (calling himself Ibrahimović to start with, but also through ridiculing us subtly for “missing him” as the most important interlocutor), his use of humour later in the exchange exposed a greater degree of vulnerability (the bad timing of marriage).

As relief theory would hold, laughter is about the release of nervous energy – and in the many humorous twists and turns seen in the above conversation, this certainly holds merit. The quick shift from the depiction of the horrid conditions in the detention camps to the discussion of age is one example. As was often the case, these “moments of shared embodied release through laughter” (Fluri 2019: 127) were not necessarily related to migration at all. Rather, “universal” and light topics, such as age and marital status or food cultures and clothing styles, would often be jokingly inserted into the conversation to “lighten up” the atmosphere following accounts of serious issues. My sentiment was that, at times, these humorous breaks were made for my benefit – to offer me a way out of the depressing path that we were walking down. What is interesting about this here is that this use of humour was linked to my perceived “fragility” as a “Westerner” with less expected experience of hardship. While sometimes stated in a more serious mode (“I will spare you the rest of this horrible story” type comments), the jocular framing offered the migrants a more discreet way to exert their judgement regarding how much more I “could handle”. Through these jokes, the migrants then, took charge of the conversation – which also opened up space for a somewhat different – albeit temporary – power dynamic in the interview situation.
While humour can certainly operate to draw social boundaries, ethnographers have shown how humour can also offer a unique opportunity to build stronger social bonds (Hermann 2016: 65). In my case, sharing in the laughter around the table in Komtar, making all of us the objects of “fun making”, while also exposing my vulnerabilities, clearly engendered not only a pleasurable atmosphere but also a trusting one. Such trust-building is clearly invaluable to a researcher – as it allows us to gather information that may otherwise be out of reach. The jocular framing of the conversation around age in the story above, for example, led to the conversation about the marital status of the older men around the table. While this started as a form of mockery against the unmarried man who did not understand how one should talk to “the ladies”, the outcome was an opening of a discussion around the difficulties of building a family during the migration process. Here, as Alison Browne (2016) has also noted, the humorous framing allowed for a conversation around more intimate and “awkward” topics – that would have been much more difficult (or even impossible) to approach in a more serious framing.

However, the jokes around age also fulfilled another function: the possibility to, if ever so subtly, address my obvious national and class privilege. Implicit in the jokes around Asian people looking much older than “Westerners” are issues of global inequality – and the fact that Myanmar nationals face much harsher living conditions and have a much lower average life expectancy. In fact, jokes that addressed our different living conditions and choices would often reoccur in the interviews. Some evolved around the fact my husband stayed at home with our children while I was conducting fieldwork. As did humorous remarks about the fact that I was “keeping my husband thin” (in all fairness, he is a very slender man). Such “critique” of my privileged, puzzling life choices and culture would not have been voiced in a serious mode of conversation – but were here made possible behind the shield of humour. The “joking relationship” thus allowed the migrants to depart from the “respectful distance” that our relationship would normally include (Hernann 2016: 65) and making me the target of jokes also allowed for momentary shifts in the power dynamics involved in the researcher-informant relationship (Browne 2016). But the jokes of “where my children were” is also an illustration of how humour involves aggression. While comments around my family were never made in an aggressive fashion – they did nonetheless convey that my behaviour was “outside of the normal” (Kuipers 2008: 365).

While the above sections have set out to illustrate the productive work that humour can do in the ethnographic encounter, the coming section will focus on how migrants used humour in narrating their migratory experiences – and what this means for our reading of these experiences. We will therefore return to George Town, and the apartment of the three cousins Ann, Li and Sofie.

Fears, Tears and an Umbrella
The air is really warm and humid. Just one hour ago, heavy rains poured down over George Town, forcing us to hastily seek shelter in one of the nearby food courts before we can continue on the motorbike. While Lin mockingly assures me that there is no problem, I am still a bit concerned about the fact that we are now showing up late to Ann’s apartment. But he is right, of course. Ann does not seem the least bothered when she invites us in and serves us some tea on a mat laid out on the living room floor. A few moments later Ann’s cousins, the twin sisters Li and Sofie, also join us. All three of them are from Tavoy in
Southern Myanmar and have travelled illegally to Malaysia to find employment. “I wanted to support my family”, Ann says, and explains how she would not be able to do that with the wages earned in Myanmar. Like so many other Burmese migrants that we have spoken to in Penang, these three women work in George Town’s vibrant street food sector. While Ann seems quite happy with the work she has got, the twin sisters describe how their boss treats them “like slaves”. Ann smiles, and adds in a sarcastic voice that, actually, “my boss only treats me nicely because he is afraid that I will run away”. We all laugh in recognition at this remark. Ann is certainly not the only migrant worker in Malaysia whose employer is scared that she will abscond from the workplace; in fact, for migrant workers, both with and without the required legal documentation, “running away” from employers is one of the only means available to avoid exploitation, and it is therefore a commonly used tactic in migrant communities (Franck and Vigneswaran 2021). Our conversation soon turns to the everyday challenges of living as an “illegal” migrant in George Town, and the difficulties they face when moving about in public without a valid passport. The penalties facing those that stay and work in the country illegally include arrests, hefty fines, imprisonment, deportation, and even whipping (Nah 2011). Not surprisingly then, migrants actively seek to avoid these punishments. “I don’t feel safe here”, Ann says. “I am scared that a policeman will catch me. The thing I am the most afraid of is the police. Every time I see the police, I am frightened”. Asked if she has ever been arrested, the three women look at each other and start giggling. Finally, when looking at my puzzled face, Ann confesses:

I was caught one time, but I cried so much that the policeman got scared and ran away! Ha, ha, ha! They didn’t want to ask me any more questions and I even didn’t have to pay [a bribe]. I had been shopping and I had bought an umbrella. The policemen approached me, and they wanted to get me into the car, and they used the umbrella to push me.

She uses exaggerated body language to re-enact how this comic scene played out – and how she was left behind on the sidewalk, umbrella in hand, as the police officers left the scene frightened by her strong display of emotion.

**Refusal, Truth-Telling, and the Absurdity of Violence**

The above story serves as an interesting point of departure for thinking about the productive work of humour in more precarious social settings. For example, it is worth considering more precisely what humour *does* in Ann’s narrative of being stopped by the police in the street. While such encounters typically involve a great deal of fear on the part of the migrant, Ann’s comical re-enactment here effectively locates the behaviour of the police officer within the realm of ridicule (Bahktin 1984; Mbembe 2001). In this humorous narrative, focus is placed on *his* fear of her emotions, which sets him up as a ridiculous, rather than an almighty powerful figure. This is analytically important because in situations of protracted precarity, the use of humour can function as a tool to reclaim time and space in ways that also install a provisional sense of safety (Fluri 2019: 126; see also Mayo 2010). While Ann’s mockery of the police officers’ behaviour clearly does not do much in terms of providing her with any physical safety, it can still offer a momentary feeling of “mastery” over a situation that is otherwise beyond her control (Trinka 2011: 340). In that particular moment, when humorously narrating her story, she becomes the [author](#) of the situation; authoring “an emotional sensibility” that momentarily replaces her fear (ibid). This reminds us that
although humorous framings of frightening or humiliating experiences can certainly be interpreted as a coping mechanism, the use of humour can also be read as “a product of agency and struggle” (Bernal 2013: 301). In fact, Lisa Bhungalia (2020) proposes that in the context of oppression we can think about the use of humour, laughter, or even the simple act of smiling, as a “politics of disavowal”. This politics is not necessarily confrontational in the sense that it overtly opposes power, but it is disruptive in the sense that it refuses to recognise and normalise the conditions of subjugation it relies on. This suggests that the political potentiality of humour in the context of oppression lay precisely with the way that it deprives power of the necessary recognition from the subjugated (Bhungalia 2020; see also Fanon 2001). Laughing at the police officers’ behaviour, Ann is thus putting the authority of the police officers temporarily out of place (Bhungalia 2020).

While the migrants in George Town often used humour when narrating their encounters with the police – the most common topic in this genre was certainly the issue of corruption. For migrants who lack the required legal documents to stay in Malaysia, police corruption constitutes a double-edged sword. On the one hand, their precarious legal status makes them easy targets for extortion (Aziz 2016; Hoffstedter 2014). On the other hand, the possibility of paying the patrolling officers some duit kopi (literally: coffee money) is often the only possible way to avoid an arrest (Franck 2019). While most people would just hand over the amount asked for, migrants who had stayed longer periods in Malaysia – and who thus possessed the required language skills and familiarity with the social codes – often attempted to bargain with the police. In such negotiations, humour played a role in creating a less threatening atmosphere. Ibrahimović, for example, laughingly shared a story of how he had handed a police officer a one-ringgit bill when he was recently asked to pay some duit kopi. The – very surprised – police officer had objected. The going rate for a bribe was, after all, rarely below 50 ringgits, and few migrants would come up with the idea of offering just one ringgit. ‘Bla bla bla, he wanted more money, la!’ Ibrahimović says in a demeaning voice. But rather than giving the officer more money, Ibrahimović had told him to just go down the street to get his coffee (where the running price is closer to one ringgit). “I told him: You don’t have to go to Starbucks to get it!”

Ibrahimović’s jocular – and literal – reading of duit kopi here illustrates how humour can function as a shield when speaking truth to power. The incongruity of the Starbucks joke (as an unexpected “break” combined with the possibility to instantly take it all back (I was only joking!)), meant that Ibrahimović was able to overtly challenge the police officer’s attempted extortion – something that would have been very difficult in a more serious framing. For the most part, however, humour and jokes around the corrupt practices of the police would rather fit the description of a more “hidden transcript” (Scott 1990): a way for migrants to share information as well as voice their discontent with the police officers’ behaviour within their own community (Hernann 2016). There were, for example, a range of running gags about police officers’ greed – as well as the fluctuating rates of bribes. On one occasion during my fieldwork, I ran into one of my interlocutors at a friend’s house. This interlocutor is a young man with a propensity to get into trouble with the police for driving a motorbike without a driving license. Happy to see him and eager to catch up, I therefore initiated the conversation by jokingly asking him if he had recently been arrested. His face lit up and he happily exclaimed: “No! It’s election time! So, the police do not disturb the foreigners”. His cheerful comment reflected the belief that during the Malaysian
national elections, the police rather focused their attention on checking for “alcohol and drugs at the road-blocks” rather than the documents of migrants.

Police corruption is a notoriously difficult issue to approach in research, given that interlocutors may be both fearful and have a strong incentive not to provide accurate information (Ivkovic 2003). While the migrants in my study would certainly provide serious accounts of having to pay the police money, it was the many jokes around bribery that alerted my attention towards the everyday tactics that migrants employed in relation to police corruption. One night, Lin’s friend, for example, wanted to accompany us to an interview in a nearby building. When she was met with objections and questions regarding the risk of moving about late at night without a passport, she simply reached into her pocket and waved a 50-ringgit bill in front of her face, while happily exclaiming “Insurance!” These insurance jokes were not uncommon, and they provided an important gateway for me into new knowledge and conversations around the intricacies of dealing with a corrupt police force – including precisely how much money a migrant should carry in public space (to always have some cash to present to the police but decrease the risk of being charged too much). This speaks to the way that jokes and humorous remarks around contentious issues can operate as a form of (ironic) truth-telling (Trnka 2011), that allows marginalised groups the space to voice social concerns and critique power in a manner perceived as more “innocent” (Jul Sörensen 2008). But, as the comments around the decreasing interest in migrants during election time reveals, a jocular framing also allowed me as a researcher the ability to approach the contentious issue of police behaviour in a more “pleasurable” and thus perceived “safer” manner.

The many jokes around police corruption, the exploitative practices of employers, and the precarious legal and social position of the migrant workforce expose the incongruous nature of the Malaysian migration regime, and how it places migrants in precarious as well as bizarre situations. In fact, humour has been found particularly effective for identifying the very “absurdity of violence” and the many ambiguities and insecurities that it fosters in everyday life (Fluri 2019: 127; see also Goldstein 2003). One reason for this is that humour tends to “develop out of situations of disjuncture [my emphasis]”, and laughter often becomes “a means of giving voice to a situation that strikes one as radically irregular” (Trnka 2011: 338). In other words, when the surreal has become the norm, humour emerges as an important “tactic” of survival (de Genova 2005: 169). An illustration of this phenomenon is that on many occasions during my fieldwork, horrid stories of exploitation or violence would end in laughter. At times (and as illustrated in the previous section), this was the result of someone deliberately using humour as a “break” from the serious topics of conversation. Such as when one interlocutor commented on the “nice colour” of someone’s t-shirt – directly following a gruesome account of having been sold by the guards in a Malaysian detention center to the Thai mafia. At other times, laughter however erupted as a direct response to the utterly bizarre nature of what was detailed in the migrants’ stories. During an interview with a man working in a fancy restaurant in central George Town, we for example asked about his experiences of violence in the workplace. His response was that although “yes” his boss, the European man who owned the restaurant, had a “really bad temper”, “no”, he had never experienced violence. Just a few moments later he however started telling a story of how he, only last week, had made a mistake in the kitchen that had resulted in his boss throwing a full-sized watermelon at him. “Did you get hurt?” we asked with big eyes. “No, no, no!” he exclaimed triumphantly. “I am super-fast!” — meaning that he
managed to quickly jump out of the way. Rather than hitting him, the melon had therefore smashed on the floor. When we started giggling nervously, mostly at the absurdity of the scene he was describing but also at the fact that he did not perceive this as violence, his face lit up and all of us could not control our laughter for several minutes thereafter. Following this, watermelons ("oh, no problem, it was only a watermelon!") became a running gag between us. Beyond the obvious release involved here, this incident is illustrative of how laughter was sometime the only possible response: the “only grammar” available, to borrow a phrase from Lisa Bhungalia (2020: 396), to capture “the absurdity of the moment”. Finally, these instances of shared laughter also presented an opportunity for me to show solidarity with the interlocutors. While my own laughter was sometimes spontaneous (as in the case just outlined above), I also used jokes as a means to “save the face” of someone speaking about difficult issues (i.e., to try to avoid embarrassment on the part of the interlocutors) or as explicit confirmation that I too, found the treatment of migrants unacceptable and utterly bizarre.

Concluding Remarks

This article has made the case for why the jocular is both methodologically and analytically important in ethnographic work on migration. First, paying attention to the various functions of humour in the ethnographic encounter, it has sought to illustrate how the jocular can be helpful in laying bare the power dynamics involved in the actual interview situation – and how this opens up the space for speaking about issues that may otherwise be out of reach. Allowing space for the humorous, participating in the jokes, making the researched and the researcher the objects of fun and ridicule allows the vulnerabilities, privileges and shortcomings of both parties to become part of the conversation – something that can also engender a more trusting attitude in sharing information about other difficult issues. Second, through explicit attention to the way migrants use humor to describe their own experiences and for interpreting and commenting on their social and political surroundings (Hernann 2016), this article has suggested that the jocular does distinct work in migrants’ agentic claims and in speaking truth to power. As such, it has suggested that attention to the humorous is helpful for uncovering different as well as more detailed understandings of both new and familiar issues.

In his recent work on humour, theologian Ola Sigurdsson (2021) proposes that the recognition of someone as a humorous individual – in essence: a person who is able to find something funny – is inevitably connected to more fundamental questions of what it means to be a human being at all. For the purposes of this article, Sigurdsson’s proposition is important because it opens the window to conversations about humour as a fundamental aspect of the human condition – and even more importantly, the consequences of overlooking the humorous in our research. Indeed, if as Lisa Bhungalia (2020: 398) suggests, the humour of the subjugated “is as much about ‘turning away from power’ as it is about asserting humanity”, then the almost singular focus on “the serious” in ethnographic work on migration has severe implications for the types of knowledge we (re)produce around migrants’ experiences, struggles and subjectivities. Failing to recognise migrants as humorous individuals, overlooking their use of humour in navigating their life circumstances, is therefore not merely a methodological omission. Instead, it risks exceptionalising migratory subjects (Schapendonk et al. 2021) in ways that deprive them of agency and humanity.
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References


A Critical Ethnography of Political Activism: Challenges Arising from Practical, Emotional and Theoretical Closeness to the Field

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ABSTRACT This article presents a reflective account of the research process related to my long-term ethnographic fieldwork on activism in Malmö—an important site of pro-migrant and anti-racist activism in Sweden—between 2013 and 2016. Employing ethnographic methods in the field of political activism raises questions about positionality, impact, possible overidentification with the people or groups studied, and distinctions between theory and action and epistemology. Being an insider to the field geographically (as a resident of the city and neighbourhood in focus) and ideologically (leftist politics), was highly advantageous for gaining access to the field and in building trust and close communication with radical activists. At the same time, my closeness raised challenges. Examples discussed in the article are related to the academic-activist relationship with a specific focus on negotiating positions in the field, and the ethical concerns related to studying a politically charged field. These reflections aim to offer transparency in terms of the impact these aspects have had on my research, while at the same time being aware of the limitations of reflexivity.

Keywords: activist ethnography; activist-academic relationship; emotions; insider position; reflexivity

Introduction
This article presents a reflective account of the research process related to my long-term ethnographic fieldwork on activism as a PhD student in Malmö, Sweden, between 2013 and 2016. I engaged in fieldwork as an “insider” in two respects: in terms of my history in relation to Möllevången and Malmö, where I had lived for ten years, and in relation to the leftist, extra-parliamentarian activist scene in the city that I had, to some extent, become a part of. These reflections aim to offer transparency in terms of the impact these aspects have had on my research results. The long-term ethnographic fieldwork I conducted generated close social relationships and I believe it was possible to sustain friendships and acquaintances that both constituted and transcended my fieldwork engagements without jeopardising the quality of the research.

Karl Marx (1843) described shame as a revolutionary emotion, an emotion that leads one to do good. In the same way, during my fieldwork I learnt that in ethnographic method and writing emotions play a critical role in helping us analyse lived experiences of all those involved in the research process. Emotions in general and anxiety and insecurity in particular can contribute to an in-depth and ethically responsible account of our experiences and the people we have met along the way. An emotional engagement with the topic of research contributes to critical thinking and ethical decision making while at the same time requiring
more reflexivity and transparency on the part of the researcher. Reflexivity is important for all forms of research. It refers to the ways in which the outcomes of research are affected by the people and processes involved, which naturally includes the researcher. Moral and ethical decisions arise at all stages of the research process, from the selection of the research topic to the final writing-up and presentation of the results (Akeroyd 1984: 137). Reflexivity is nevertheless particularly central to the practice of ethnographic research. The relationship between the researcher and the participants is long-term and more intimate, especially in ethnographic research.

Employing ethnographic methods in the field of political activism raises additional questions about positionality, impact, possible overidentification with the people or groups studied, and distinctions between theory, action, and epistemology. The boundaries between research, advocacy, and everyday life were blurred when I became involved in the social setting of the activist groups (Davis 2003; Petray 2012). Since my sympathies lie with the activists – some of whom I lived with, were my neighbours, or were people I met on the “barricades” – I make special effort in this article to reflect on the relations between research and activism and my role as a researcher.

Having said this, I want to clarify that I don’t think we can “escape from the consequences of our positions by talking about them endlessly” (Patai 1994: 70). Self-reflexivity does not produce better research per se but is dependent on how we go about talking about our positions: “how we practice reflexivity, how these practices impact, open up, or limit the possibilities for critical representations” (Pillow 2003: 177). Pillow (2003) argues for “reflexivities of discomfort”: a reflexivity that seeks to know while at the same time situates this knowing as tenuous, which I have tried to highlight in this article.

The argument I make here is that my position as a partial insider enabled easy access to the field and close communication with radical activists, and my partial outsider position enabled critical examination on the social processes being studied. Two examples of such critical examinations are the boundary-making and hierarchies between different activist groups in the city and the activist scene’s contribution to the gentrification of the neighbourhood. My emotional engagement throughout the fieldwork repeatedly forced me to reflect on my study’s possible implications for activists, and the impact my close relations with some of the activists might have on my research results.

In the following sections, I present the research project followed by a detailed description of the methods that I applied. I then offer a reflective discussion on the challenges I encountered resulting from my practical, emotional, and theoretical closeness to the field. In the concluding section, I summarise the main points of the article and lessons learnt from the challenges of conducting an ethnography of political activism.

Presentation of Research Project

The research project1 (completed in 2019) was theoretically founded in the intersection of migration studies, urban studies, and social movement studies. I examined the interactions between place, power, and resistance by describing and analysing the activism carried out by left-wing, extra-parliamentarian activists in Malmö from 2013 to 2016. The aim was to analyse how solidarity was created and enacted and the impacts the activists had on 1) the

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1 The study was approved by the Regional Ethical Review Board in Lund (Etikprövningsnämnden Lund) on 4 March 2015 (with registration number DNR 2014/782). Matters concerning anonymity and potential harm to the participants have been carefully considered in this study.
place (Malmö/Möllevången) and 2) social relations (between activists as well as between activists and non-activists). Solidarity here means a relationship forged between actors in unequal power relations that aims towards a more equal order. Particular attention was paid to how activism enabled social relationships and even close friendships across the divides of class, ethnicity, legal status, and gender and between Swedish citizens and people with a precarious legal status, such as undocumented migrants or Roma migrants who hold citizenship in another European country.

Activism in Malmö included Swedish citizens, some of whom were born abroad or have foreign backgrounds, as well as people with experiences of forced migration living in precarious conditions in Malmö. The “activist lens” (Hansen 2019) thus enabled me to capture a broad range of their experiences and move “away from treating the migrant population as the unit of analysis and investigation and instead direct the focus on parts of the whole population, which obviously includes migrants” (Dahinden 2016: 2217).

The research project thus included the experiences and views of people in relative positions of power (economic, cultural, legal, and social) who inhabit the same city that was founded on the exploitation of the many by the few (Harvey 1976). The precarity effected by neoliberalism is not confined to those at the bottom of the class structure, since the antagonism between capital and labour is no longer concentrated in specific places of work, but traverses the whole of society (Tyler 2015). I demonstrated how activist sociabilities in Malmö, established by people who, despite their differences, constructed locally embedded solidarities and shared experiences and narratives, enabled the transformation of dispossession into political struggles against the growing disparities and displacements of global capitalism.

During the time of my fieldwork, I specifically focused on the actions carried out by five different activist groups, selected for their prominent presence in Malmö: Aktion mot deportation (Action Against Deportation); Allt åt alla (Everything for Everyone); Asylgruppen (The Asylum Group); Kontrapunkt (Counterpoint, a social centre); and Skåne mot rasism (Scania Against Racism)2. Most of the activists connected to these groups had middle-class backgrounds and experiences of attending university. Their activism concerned migrants’ and asylum seekers’ rights, anti-deportation, anti-racism, anti-fascism, and ‘right-to-the-city’ struggles (e.g. against gentrification and welfare retrenchment), which they addressed with strategies ranging from solidarity-based work and advocacy to more radical forms of direct action like blockades and sit-ins. These different strands of struggles were interrelated not only through the individuals and groups of activists who participated and built alliances across these struggles, but also structurally: the different struggles emerged as reactions to, and at the intersections of, racism, commercialisation, and restrictive migration policies in Sweden. They formed part of a larger network of leftist, extra-parliamentarian activists, who strived towards urban and social equality in Malmö, apart from other cities in Sweden, as well as abroad.

With regards to the context of the activism studied, a decisive aspect was the particularity of the city of Malmö, a city with a high density and diversity of activist groups. Their actions were concentrated mainly within the Möllevången neighbourhood, which, in the period of its transition from industrial to financial capitalism (neoliberalism) and due to its central location and affordable housing, has attracted politically engaged people to live there.

2 For more details see Hansen (2019: 54-66).
As an ethnographer studying activism, I aimed to analyse the locally embedded emergence of social relations, values, and categories while teasing out the activists’ tacit, underlying assumptions concerning their activities and subject positions as well as the challenges, ambivalences, and conflicts found within this specific socio-political practice. By examining the challenges, ambivalences, and conflicts, I intended to de-romanticise activism by showing how it is a contentious and demanding process for those involved. As a migration scholar, I aimed at identifying how activism affects social relations between different people in hierarchies of power in a particular urban context. I also situated the personal experiences and aspirations of the people featured in the study within global processes of accumulation and dispossession (Koch 2018). Lastly, with the help of perspectives from urban studies, I analysed activism as a place-making practice that opens new spaces of politics and pathways of emplacement in Malmö.

The key theories that I used to analyse the empirical material drew on Jacque Rancière’s (1999, 2001, 2010) thoughts on ‘the police’, which refers to the consensual hierarchical order of the status quo, and ‘the political’, which refers to any act that disrupts this unequal order. Rancière thus theorises one specific type of participatory politics that he defines as ‘the political’, which is written from a certain position that assumes an emancipatory struggle with equality as its end-goal. In other words, ‘true’ politics, according to Rancière (2011), is an event that challenges, questions, resists, and disrupts the established order by opening up spaces for the verification and enactment of equality. The activists who have been featured in my research are working towards creating spaces that include people irrespective of their legal status, demanding access to the city’s resources for everyone based on sharing and inhabiting a common urban place, including Roma and undocumented migrants. Their activism can thus be seen as “acts on the police” (Rancière 1999: 33). Furthermore, I used Hannah Arendt’s (1998) ‘politics of presence’ and joint action. Both Arendt’s and Rancière’s understanding of what constitutes politics, similar to more recent theorists such as Simon Critchley (2007) and David Graeber (2009; 2013), concerns spatial practices that are disruptive and prefigurative. With prefigurative, I mean practices that create spaces for counter-hegemonic politics. The geographical concept of ‘space’, understood in rather simple terms as an abstract place that is socially and structurally produced, enabled me to better understand social relations and the people who have access to and appropriate a particular place, in this case Möllevången. It also enabled a critical examination of how activists fight, and contribute to its gentrification at the same time.

A central concept in left-wing activism is solidarity, which I conceptualise as a relation forged through political struggle that seeks to challenge forms of oppression (Scholtz 2008; Featherstone 2012; Stjernø 2018). I used this understanding of solidarity to analyse the impact of activism on social relations, particularly on how activists collaborate and build alliances within unequal power relations such as between migrants and non-migrants, or between citizens and those with precarious legal status. This led to interesting findings with regards to the manner in which these activists negotiated differences in positions, identities, and histories, and created new ways of relating (for details on the results, see Hansen 2019).
Studying Radical Activism through Ethnographic Fieldwork

Ethnographic fieldwork played a crucial role in my study which was primarily directed towards exploring the locally embedded emergence of social relations and the processes that enabled them. While ethnographic fieldwork implies using a variety of qualitative methods, it always includes engagement with the lives of those being studied within the context of their daily lives and over an extended period. Ethnographies therefore permit detailed, local, contextual analysis and the portrayal of global economic forces simultaneously (Clifford 1986: 22). Methods such as participant observation, formal interviews, and informal conversations are "close to the way we all make sense of the world around us, and yet can be scientifically rigorous and systematic at the same time" (O’Reilly 2005: 1).

Before I delve into the challenges of being an ethnographer in the field of activism (and what I learnt from it), I will present the methods applied in more detail. I do this to focus on the ethnographic context within which the challenges connected to my closeness to the field arose.

I applied three main methods for data collection: participant observation, informal conversations, and in-depth interviews. I also used complementary sources of data to gain a deeper contextual understanding of the neighbourhood and of activism as a phenomenon, including previous research on Malmö, print media articles, official city documents, statistics, tourist adverts, websites, video clips (mostly from YouTube), documentaries, and photos to broaden the range of representations available for analysis.

I chose Malmö as the place of study because the city had gained the reputation of being an important activist city in contemporary Sweden, and I wanted to explore the reasons for this. In the initial phase of my research, I “followed” (Marcus 1995: 97) collective actions wherever they appeared in the city. By following the actions of the activists, it soon became clear that most collective actions and practical solidarity work took place in Möllevången, while some, for instance demonstrations and marches, took place in or moved through other parts of the city.

I undertook participant observation in various collective actions (demonstrations, social gatherings, book fairs, and cultural events, among others) during the period of 2013–2016. I observed and took notes on any left-wing extra-parliamentarian protest situation in Malmö that I was aware of, successfully documenting most of the protests occurring during that three-year period. The purpose of the participant observation was initially to map the field of activism in Malmö, and later, to gain a more detailed account of the activists’ aims, motivations, and intersecting group memberships along with their activities. Participant observation allowed me to gain an understanding of how the activists used urban space, which strategies were employed by them, and how different activist groups interacted with each other, and with the public at large. I therefore took notes on what I saw and heard, noting descriptions of my meetings with the activists in the field, anecdotes, verbal exchanges, and on the places where we met. I used a mobile phone and sometimes a digital camera both to take still pictures and record videos. These were used to support my memory and complement my fieldnotes. Through this process, a ‘natural’ selection of activist groups grew out of my material.

Following activists’ actions also lead me to online sources, where I found a great deal of activist doing. Digital sites complement the physical sites of activists’ activities. In a 2009 paper, Garcia, Standlee, Bechkoff, and Cui argued that the distinction between online and offline worlds are becoming increasingly merged with the two spaces interacting with and transforming one another. This overlap, which has progressed even further in the present
day, was clearly observable in my research in 2013-2016. Facebook became a significant part of my research field, since much of activist mobilisation, organisation, and communication happens in and through this social network. I made observations of the activists’ online communications and interactions. To document my observations, I made screenshots of the quotes, pictures, and news feed updates.

A major part of my fieldwork included the dozens of informal conversations I engaged in with both activist and non-activist Malmö residents of various class backgrounds, migrant statuses, ages, genders, sexualities, and professions, and brief interviews conducted with passers-by (non-activists) at political events such as demonstrations. I also attended the meetings of three different activist groups which was important to better understand the organisational and networking aspects of their work. I was directly involved in the work of Aktion mot deportation for some three months in 2013 and in Allt åt alla for the same time in 2015.

I collected formal interview material with a total of 35 research participants, of which 25 were activists and ten were non-activist individuals residing or working in Möllevången. I selected the activist interviewees in this study based on their then-current or recent involvement in major, organised political actions or campaigns, and their affiliation with certain political activist groups in Malmö. However, as shown in the course of the interviews, they did not necessarily call themselves ‘activists’ (Hansen 2019; Povrzanović Frykman and Mäkelä 2019).

I conducted in-depth interviews with 18 activists: nine women and nine men. I moderated a panel debate on activism (in which I posed the questions) between seven local activists: four men and three women. This was recorded with the activists’ consent and then transcribed. In addition, I conducted formal (short) interviews with ten non-activists who lived and/or worked in or around Möllevången and who had witnessed collective actions or experienced the activist presence, in order to learn about their perceptions of activists, activism, and the neighbourhood of Möllevången. This was to explore how the activists and their actions in the public space are perceived by non-activists against the background of a shared urban place.

Closely following social relations through practices of solidarity at the local scale allowed me to examine complex relationships of power concerning ethnicity, gender, class, and sexuality. I observed conflicts and contradictions as well as the emergence of domains of commonality and mutual practices.

The Researcher’s Position in the Field of Activism

For a detailed study of radical activism ethnographically, I found it necessary to employ a kind of “activist research” methodology. Charles R. Hale (2008: 20-21) has developed a framework for activist research, wherein he states that “activist research methods regularly yield special insight, insider knowledge, and experience-based understanding [...] that otherwise would be impossible to achieve”. Inspired by standpoint-feminists, he argues that the validity of results produced by activist researchers is potentially stronger as their work is under scrutiny from both an academic audience and from the activists and participants they engage with. Since many of the activists within the extra-parliamentarian left (wing) in Sweden are interested in the research focused on them and are generally very knowledgeable of and literate in academic and theoretical topics, I knew from the beginning that my research results would eventually be read, in the critical sense, by some of my key research participants.

Hale (2008: 3) does not distinguish the concept of “activist research” from more well-
known concepts such as “action research” and “participatory action research”. Hale does not construct a radically new methodological approach, but instead argues that “activist research is a way to conceptualise the problems and potentials of doing research in settings where the researcher has an active engagement in a politicised issue on a personal level with a goal to achieve social change” (Lind 2017: 106).

Concerning my own involvement, since my late teenage years, I have regularly participated in political mobilisations such as demonstrations; albeit more as a ‘political consumer’ (a term used by activists to distinguish activists from non-activists) than as an activist, if ‘activist’ is to be defined as an organiser of what is revealed in the streets. Nevertheless, I do have experiences of large protest events, including the EU summit in Gothenburg 2001; the Stop the War (in Iraq) demonstration in Malmö on 15 February 2003; the anti-Bush protest in London in 2003; the G8 summit in Heiligendam in 2007; Blockupy Frankfurt in 2011; the European Social Forum (ESF) in Malmö in 2008; the Climate Change Conference (COP15) in Copenhagen in 2009 and in Paris in 2015 (COP21). The experiences of political protests listed above create an ‘insider’ position for my research on activism. During fieldwork, I was interested in participating in demonstrations in Malmö on a professional as well as personal level, since I sympathised with the activists’ aims of antiracism, feminism, and equality.

Activist research acknowledges this ambivalent dual positionality, and potentially enables more reflexivity about issues of objectivity, transparency, and power inequalities (ibid). The question is how to move between these two positionalities. Duncan Fuller (1999) considers the potential role of the “researcher as activist” and attempts to illustrate how the maintenance of a critical, multi-positioned (and repositioned) identity can be seen as a beneficial, reflexive learning experience for researchers within ethnography and in terms of the research itself. He argues that:

In our daily lives, we are constantly repositioning and renegotiating our identities and personalities in line with different situations, different spaces, and different people, and we seem to do so relatively unproblematically; we are different people in different circumstances, we have different identities or roles in different spaces or places. When confronted with the seemingly straightforward task of moving between academic and activist identities or activities, however, a range of concerns seems to come to the fore. (Fuller 1999: 223)

These concerns are partly due to the fact that shared physical experiences are likely to develop emotions that are collectively shared but individually constituted, between the researcher (me, in this case) and the research participants (Petray 2012). Placing myself bodily in the same situations as those on whom I based my research (e.g. in demonstrations and sit-ins) gave me a deeper understanding of their world. This would not have been possible had I just restricted myself to verbal inquiry (Savage 2000: 331). My experiences confirm that affects and emotions have a revelatory potential in fieldwork (Frykman and Povrzanović Frykman 2016; Henry 2012; Trigger, Forsey, and Meurk 2012).

Throughout the fieldwork, I was stunned by the activists’ passion for politics and action. In all my interview encounters, I felt a kind of affinity with the interviewees (like the one described by Wasshede 2010: 59). These feelings and affinities forced me to continuously reflect on their possible implications for my fieldwork and writing. Proximity and shared experiences were of great advantage since distance from the field would have prevented interviews with core activists. Trust was crucial for gaining access, particularly when it came
to approaching activists who use civil disobedience or unlawful modes of action; they are in a precarious situation as they sometimes operate in legal grey zones and generally face repression from police and state authorities (McCurdy and Uldam 2013). Proximity and shared experiences also meant that I was relatively acquainted with the language, codes, and central problematics existing in the activist milieu that I set out to study (Wasshede 2010: 59).

Going beyond ideological sympathies and protest experiences, I further shared a national citizenship with most of my research participants; and by living in Malmö, I also held an insider position within the fieldwork site. Shared nationality and local experiences are considered to be aspects of an insider position (McCurdy and Uldam 2013). In my case, the abovementioned aspects together with my personal relations with some of the activists (which further accentuated my “insider” position) were important when accessing the field. However, there are no clear-cut insider and outsider positions in terms of being a participant observer: these roles were negotiated on a continuum that shifted between field sites and were related to the varying degrees that I either shared or did not share the abovementioned aspects with my research participants. The question of where I found myself on the insider/outside continuum demanded critical reflection throughout the fieldwork and research period. These reflections made my research endeavour indeed a “messy” process, where I encountered multiple uncomfortable situations and also, as I experienced it, failures in fieldwork (Pillow 2003). It was a never-ending struggle to strive for academic insights beyond and despite my ideological biases and personal experiences of the political and practical issues that activists work with on the ground.

Another relevant methodological approach I used for my study was Helen Owton and Jacquelyn Allen-Collinson’s (2013) “friendship as method” within ethnographic research encounters. The friendship approach seeks to reduce the hierarchical separation between the researcher and participant: it encourages a dialogical relationship and an ethic of caring that invites expressiveness, emotion, and empathy between the two actors (ibid.: 285). Yet it is important to acknowledge that however much of the research field I share with my participants, our experiences of activism are never quite the same. Everybody has unique histories and experiences of being gendered and racialised; and, as many of those featuring in my research including myself have experienced, of being physically violated, policed, and even imprisoned, all of which has formed and affected us in specific political ways. I have therefore been wary of assuming the commonality of experience (ibid.: 297), which led me for instance, to examining the theoretical roots of certain boundary-making between different activists in Malmö, an examination that I come back to under ‘Challenges and Concerns’ below.

At the same time, my proximity to the field raised challenges. Being an insider geographically (to the place) and ideologically (leftist politics), I owed myself, my research participants, and the reader particular transparency concerning the challenges related to this complex positionality. However, I am not claiming that by trying to make my positions transparent, they become less problematic (Spivak 2010), but simply trying to highlight some of “the uncomfortable realities of doing engaged qualitative research” (Pillow 2003: 193). The remainder of this article explains the challenges and concerns in conducting ethnographic research on activism in my own socio-cultural environment.
Challenges and Concerns

From the beginning, I felt insecure about acting as a researcher among the activists, not knowing what they would think of me doing research on them and their work, and whether I would face opposition towards my dual roles as an academic and an activist. As already stated, trust is crucial in the process of gaining access. If the activists thought I was doing something that might harm them or their work, they would not talk to me. My insecurity was based on a desire to be seen as a useful activist, as well as a useful researcher in front of my activist peers (Hansen 2017). I had to remind myself that whatever “good intentions” I had with the research, such as generating academic insights on the impact activism had on the place that is to be studied and on a larger societal scale, it might not generate the same level of excitement among the activists in Malmö.

My research topic was mostly met with positive reactions and encouragement among my research participants. One female activist shared her views and said that she thought my research seemed “interesting”, an ambivalent term with multiple interpretations. She further commented, “those topics are valuable for us to know more about. We don’t have time to think about them ourselves”. Another activist said my work was important because “no one is writing about the autonomous movement and its history”, and that their work in Malmö was not being documented or recorded academically. These statements were also a reminder of the possibilities of misunderstandings and even disappointments on the part of the activists – that I was writing on topics that they did not see as directly relevant to their work – and I was aware that informed consent would not prevent those issues from happening. There was also the risk that my research findings would result in insights the activists may not be happy with and writing activists’ history in Malmö was not my primary goal. As of today, I am not aware of any criticism on my research from the activists. However, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, I have not yet conducted the seminars for activists in Malmö that I had planned for. I have a pending invitation to present my research at Allt åt alla’s venue in Malmö – once such events are realisable again – an occasion that can open up spaces for critical discussions on my research.

I also realised I was not going to do what many critical activist scholars suggest, namely “to make strategic interventions collectively with the social movements we belong to” (Autonomous Geographies Collective 2010: 247), in order to achieve social change, in line with Participatory Action Research (PAR)-approaches. Since PAR emphasises participation and action from the people affected by the research, such an approach would most probably point the research in another direction and prevent me from exploring activism ethnographically with certain research questions grounded in critical migration and urban studies theories. I was also worried about whether the activists would consider me as “operating in a parasitical relationship to those who are doing the real work and have made financial/lifestyle sacrifices” (ibid.: 252), while I had a full salary, and in addition, was using this very research to become “an expert” on the subject in the eyes of academia. Even though I have not faced or been personally criticised with such comments, they do contain elements of truth in my case too, and this has made me think and re-think about the motives, ethics, and intentions of my research. I did not want to be another one in the mass of academics who would happily build their careers on the backs of researching the oppressed but rarely join them in their “struggle” (ibid.: 247).

However, I noticed discontent towards academics from two of my research participants.
One of them mentioned how dozens of under- and postgraduates and senior scholars had gotten in touch with them, conducted interviews, and then never contacted them again. This made her unwilling to collaborate with academics. With such experiences, I am not surprised that activists have the idea of academics as capitalising on activists’ activity for their own career development. She still decided to talk to me because she already knew me and had some level of trust in what I was doing, and because I was doing a PhD rather than an undergraduate thesis. She said that she prioritised and participated according to the academic level and relevance of the study.

My initial insecurity was also an outcome of a central ethical concern with this study: the risk that the ethnographic material could be used by the police in their surveillance of activists. Upon raising this doubt with a core activist with vast experience in the extra-parliamentarian milieu in Sweden, he said to me calmly: “you won’t really be able to write anything that the police don’t already know about us”. Still, I could not accept his statement as fact. Interestingly, during the time of my fieldwork, a vivid internal debate in the activist scene in Malmö took place concerning research projects conducted on activists. This was after it was made clear that an activist had taken a job as a research assistant in a project financed by the same government ministry that leads the project on identifying and counteracting “violence-promoting extremism” (våldsbejakande extremism) (SOU 2013), in which the group that the research assistant was a member of, had been defined as “extremist” by the government. The situation provoked a debate on the activists’ relationship with, and perception of, the state. This debate and the fact that parts of the activist scene perceived it as legitimate to take this kind of job, could be a sign of a recent pragmatic turn in today’s generation of activists who do not dismiss the state entirely (Piotrowski and Wennerhag 2015), even when it comes to collaborating in state-financed research on themselves.

The concern that my research could contribute to the surveillance of activists was nevertheless real and required me to attempt to the fullest of my abilities not to write anything, or reveal any information, that could be used by state or police officials in a way that may harm or hinder the activists’ work. One way to prevent this was to not include detailed presentation of my interviewees in the dissertation. However, since the study was limited to Malmö and Möllevången, and people in activist networks are mostly aware of each other, there was a risk that activists reading the dissertation would be able to relate some information (age, profession, experience) to certain activists, although this would only be guesswork. As one interviewee said, “If you write ‘an activist of X-country-descent’, all of Malmö will know who it is, because there is only one or perhaps two”. Therefore, I not only changed the names of the research participants but also removed details concerning some (but not all) of the interviewees that might permit easy identification, such as country of origin or citizenship.

During the interviews, I raised the ethical issue of internal identification with my research participants. They expressed an understanding of the risk but no real concerns about being identified by friends and “political comrades”. Presenting many activists’ stories when discussing emerging themes, rather than using a smaller sample size, helped to obscure the identities of individual activists and reduced the risk of identification.

My experience confirms Lind’s (2017) argument that discussing ethical issues with the research participants can become a knowledge process in its own right. It was important for me not to shy away from the ambivalences I felt in conducting ethnographic research among
radical activists, but to discuss them, make the interviewees aware of these ambivalences, and incorporate their own concerns into the study.

An analytical and theoretical challenge that I encountered was that many of the activists I interviewed were well read in, and sometimes referred to, the same theories and concepts that I used to analyse my empirical material. This could present a risk of circular reasoning: that I analyse their statements partly based on the same analytical frameworks that their statements are based on; my theories confirm their statements and vice versa (Wasshede 2010: 61). Apart from the risk of circular reasoning, there was also a risk of making my own analysis redundant. In case an interviewee analyses his/her own actions from, for example, a Marxist perspective, there would be little to gain from an academic point of view if I apply a Marxist perspective to his/her actions as recounted in the interview.

To avoid circular reasoning, I had to continuously remind myself of the academic purposes of my research project (as presented in the second section of this article) and to uncover tensions and contradictions in their statements, for example between ideals and practices. In this way I departed from analysing the interviewees’ own logic, and critically examined the statements themselves in line with the research questions and theoretical perspectives of my research project (Wasshede 2010: 64). One example of a contradiction I found was the inconsistency where some class struggle-oriented activists, in their interviews, favoured larger cross-ideological collaborations, but sometimes avoided those same collaborations in practice. Or how some class struggle-oriented activists expressed an appreciation of the plethora of activist groups and struggles existing in Malmö in theory, but at the same time revealed judgemental attitudes toward some of those same groups, framing themselves as being the “true radicals” in comparison to pro-asylum activists (Hansen 2020). Even in the most well-intended spaces of solidarity such as the one the activists intend to create in Möllevången, the challenges of boundary making must be dealt with. In these cases, the boundary making was primarily found between different political clusters rather than along divisions of class, gender, ethnicity, or sexuality. Instead, each activist’s positioning of themselves and “the other activists” takes place on a continuum of political positionalities from “radical” to “liberal” (or “radical” versus “liberal”) and on a continuum of perceptions of what constitutes “the true struggle”. I suggest that this tension between inclusion and exclusion is an illustration of many activists’ awareness of the need to overcome current material and divisive divisions within the ‘working class’ or ‘the multitude’, at least in theory if not more (Hardt and Negri 2004). This needs to be done in order to achieve social change, while at the same time having to deal with their different internal ideological and theoretical roots, in actual practice.

Another contradiction that I identified was how the activists simultaneously resist and contribute to the gentrification of Möllevången, and how this simultaneous resistance and compliance to power (Hollander and Einwohner 2004), is a frustrating contradiction for the activists who want to live and act in Möllevången. My critical examination of the activists also concerned their experimenting and building of relationships among people in unequal power relations (e.g. activists with citizenship and Roma migrants or undocumented refugees).

3 In leftist circles, the term “liberal” has taken on a negative connotation and refers to the liberal political ideology with an individual’s freedom at its core. It can describe a person or an idea that supports free market and limited government intervention concerning redistribution of wealth through taxes. A “liberal”, in leftist circles, thus usually refers to a person who upholds the current hegemonic relation of power, implicitly or explicitly.
which was anything but straightforward. Speaking on behalf of migrants without legal status, as was done by the activists in Malmö, brings about issues of paternalism (Cappiali 2017). What I found in my research was that the unequal power dynamics in activists’ solidarity with migrants in precarious legal conditions made it difficult, although not impossible, to establish personal relationships, deep friendships, and romantic relationships.

My position of a partial insider as presented in the previous section required me to develop the courage and skills to critically assess the activists and their actions, and to accept the risk of my research results being criticised by the activists, or of myself being rejected by parts of the activist scene in the city. As my fieldwork progressed, I became more skilled in balancing the academic requirement to critically examine the contradictions and conflictual aspects inherent to their activism, while maintaining friendly and professional relations with the activists themselves.

The final challenge was regarding the ethical questions that normally arise from online research. On the Internet, the researcher is not “around” but rather observing from a distant computer screen, which can be interpreted as “lurking” (Garcia et al. 2009). Although conversations on Facebook are publicly accessible to any user, the blurring of public and private in such online spaces means that observing or recording those conversations may be interpreted as unpermitted or invasive by those observed. The blurred nature of the online world raises many such ethical issues around access to data and techniques for the protection of privacy and confidentiality, and since a large part of activism and political discussion happens online, it was crucial for me to include online observations. My response is to interpret social media platforms such as Facebook as “virtual squares”, thus public spaces where unannounced ethnographic observations are made. Consequently, I was not a member of any closed groups on Facebook for the purpose of the study.

In the end, the most important ethical consideration is how the researcher eventually writes and publishes the material, as representing one’s research participants ethically is perhaps the most complex problem faced by ethnographic writers (Kahn 2011). Hence, the writing-up process required critical reflexivity on my part. A way to compensate on my initial concerns was to ask two activists to read an early draft of the entire dissertation and incorporate their feedback into the revision process, including adjusting the work based on their reactions and removing certain details where requested. This enabled me to revise my dissertation constructively by using the insights of the people involved to create a more nuanced and informed picture of the achievements of activist movements.

Conclusions

This article primarily highlighted many of the practical, theoretical, and ethical challenges encountered in the field while conducting research among radical activists in Malmö. It showed some of the complexities involved in gaining access to this field, and in cases where the researcher shares theoretical and analytical vantage points with some of the activists. It is partly the contentious character of activism that requires the researcher to align with the activists’ struggle to gain access, and my previous experiences and knowledge of this kind of activism made it possible for me to observe the activist scene in Malmö.

Applying the approaches of “researcher as activist” and “friendship as method” allowed me to gain deep insights into the field of activism. My proximity also raised challenges, the main one being developing the ability to engage in an ethical, respectful, yet critical ethnography of the people and the social process studied, despite my ideological and
emotional affinity with the activists.

The critical engagement I pursued in my ethnographic research involved a continual questioning of my positioning in the research process (in terms of class, gender, ethnicity, activist experiences and acquaintances, and experiences of living in the neighbourhood) in addition to the physical location of my research and my political position. Put simply, as a researcher, I had to continuously learn and re-learn how to move between my various identities and to be aware of (and try to read) the impacts these movements had on my research. I developed these skills throughout the research process, which I see as an integral part of the learning and documentation of the ethnographic method.

Through this reflective account of how I encountered and approached dilemmas in conducting an ethnography of political activism, I have tried to demonstrate the value and benefits of raising potential ethical concerns with research participants, both as a way to learn with the activists, and to understand the activists’ concerns regarding my research.

The risk of criticism and even rejection by the activists was the cause of great ambivalence from my part initially, but at the same time served as an invitation to reflect and gain a deeper understanding about the field of study (Lind 2017), especially concerning the critical examination of the contradictions found in activist practice. What I interpreted as challenges in the beginning often turned out to be opportunities to gain even deeper insights of the field. For e.g. when a core activist appeared calm and was not worried about me being able to reveal anything that could harm the activists from the perspective of police surveillance, nor of the fact that some research participants may potentially be recognised by activist-peers, challenges turned into opportunities. Nevertheless, the emotional stress that I have described in this article is not only part and parcel of a morally grounded ethnographic fieldwork, but serves as an entry point to a deeper understanding of the field of research.

One major challenge in activist research concerns the aspect of following up with research results and the “giving back” to the activists, as critically mentioned by one of my research participants. It is important to not leave it at only publishing the results as articles in academic journals—which most of the time will certainly not be read by the activists due to its generally inaccessible format and language. I intend to organise workshops on my research results with the activists and raise the critical aspects together with them. With the activists’ consent, I hope to be able to record these discussions and use them to analyse the actual impacts of my research on the activist scene and whether my results may be useful for them in their activism ahead. For example, how they can use my results concerning boundary making between different activist groups in a way to work together despite differences for the purpose of mobilising larger and inclusive disruptive protests.

One important factor that explains why researchers fail on the part of giving back to the field of study itself, can be found in the nature of academic research projects, their organisation in time and how they are financially conditioned by the research institutes – that prioritise research outputs in terms of published articles. Researchers are commonly not given the paid and scheduled time for “going back” to the people and the field where all the empirical data once was collected. When this task depends on individual researcher’s good will and free time, they slip away.
References


Modernism is the New Radical Althery: 
Exploring the Dialectics of Anthropological 
Critique in Modernity 

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ABSTRACT | This article is concerned with Ghassan Hage’s dialectics of anthropological critique— 
constituted by the tension between modernism and primitivism. Hage argues that modern 
ethnographers who encounter other primitivist worlds become equipped with potential critical 
thinking about politico-organisational matters of modernity. So far, so good. However, what 
if there is a crisis of modernity, in the sense that “modern” political projects are inspired by 
primitivism? As Strathern emphasises today, there seems to be a problem of pursuing the dialectics 
of anthropological critique concerning the new imperialistic tendencies “at home”. Such a problem, 
I argue, can be observed by the emergence of the world of innovation politics that is constituted 
by a form of primitivism. This leads to the question, How can we maintain the dialectics of 
anthropological critique in the context of innovation politics? This article aims to explore the 
dialectics of anthropological critique by placing it in a dynamic, capitalist modern context. 
Keywords: Critical anthropology, modernity, creativity, innovation politics, ethnography, 
inversion, Ghassan Hage 

Introduction 
In his work, “Critical anthropological thought and the radical political imaginary today”, 
Ghassan Hage (2012) puts forward the ethos of primitivist anthropology – as a premise to be 
maintained for critical anthropological thoughts. Hage treats the anthropology of Eduardo 
Viveiros de Castro (2014) as an avant-gardist for critical anthropology because it is used for 
radical politics. Throughout his argumentation of the need for new and experimental ideas, 
Hage follows the trope that the “world could be otherwise” than how modern Westerners 
typically think in their everyday lifeworld. Consequently, he argues, the anthropological 
discipline is in a prominent position to make the modern world aware of living in “minor 
realities”, which involves this display “take[s] us outside ourselves to see how we can be 
radically other to ourselves” (Hage 2012: 295; see also Hage 2013, 2015). However, it 
appears that Hage attacks contemporary anthropologists who conduct fieldwork in non-
modern, as well as in modern, societies. He explains, 

While there are still many anthropologists working on non-modern cultural forms within 
relatively remote tribal cultural formations, only a minority are interested in seeing in their 
findings something that speaks to the societies and the modernities they come from. On 
the other hand, the number of anthropologists working on modern ‘all kinds of things’ is 
rapidly increasing, but not many see a critical continuity between their work and the early
anthropological tradition. They mainly see the relation as one of method, ethnography, and a general interest in ‘culture’. (Hage 2012: 304)

As a reader, one could, imaginably summarise Hage’s confrontation that many contemporary anthropologists circumvent the application of the intrinsic potential of ethnographic critique, which results in a tensionless monologue rather than a tensional dialogue (see Friberg forthcoming). His quarrel is with the last kind of anthropologist who works in the modernities, and claims “[…] the anthropologies that deal with the modern world can only lose their anthropological critical edge if they are to abandon the ethos of primitivist anthropology and distance themselves from it” (2012: 306).

Hage’s sophisticated reasoning reveals the dialectics of anthropological critique—constituted by the tension between modernism and primitivism in ethnography. While modernism, here, is understood as the aesthetic of rational straight lines that differentiate institutional and conceptual domains (see Ingold 2007), primitivism is considered as the aesthetic of creative network relations that connect institutional and conceptual domains (see Mauss [1925] 1966). In this sense, Hage seems to claim that the tensional relationship between modernism and primitivism is a prerequisite for criticism. For example, when modern ethnographers encounter and experience other primitivist worlds, they are equipped with potential critical thinking about politico-organisational matters of modernity. Hence, Hage’s argument echoes a long disciplinary tradition that tentatively takes a departure from Stanley Diamond’s (1974) anthropological, dialectical project that is, criticising inside Western socio-political issues with the help of conclusions drawn from research from the outside peripheries.

However, in the new emerging context of innovation politics, Marilyn Strathern (2000, 2004) has pointed to the problem of pursuing the dialectics of anthropological critique concerning the new imperialistic tendencies “at home” (within public universities) in their attempt to strive towards one world. As the intentionality of innovation politics is that of acquiring control over other worlds (cf. Schutz 1962), such as the university world and the industrial world, it could be comprehended as an extension of power and influence through imperialism (see Friberg forthcoming). With this in mind, How can we maintain the dialectics of anthropological critique in the context of the imperialistic innovation politics? The overall purpose of this article is to explore the dialectics of anthropological critique by placing it in a dynamic, capitalistic modern context (Friedman 1994, 1996, 2019; Florida 2004a, 2004b) and to provide expression of its logic of inversion (Marx and Engels 1947: 14; Chambers 2013). In other words, the paper is meant to be a largely suggestive statement for contemporary anthropologists who attempt to explore the possibilities for an anthropological critique.

**Background**

To answer the central question of how to maintain the dialectics of anthropological critique in context, it is useful to outline a (back)ground of how modernity is transformed (Friedman 1996) and its close relation to the emerging ethos of creativity (Florida 2004a) as situated in the new knowledge economy. This relational background thus attempts to show that modernity is not one coherent stabilised unity; instead, I argue, today we ought to observe it as a dynamic unit (based on modernism) with embedded potential units within its own structure (such as primitivism, traditionalism, and post-modernism) that are occasionally
expressed in various political projects. Consequently, as modernity is changing, so is the dialectics of anthropological critique, primarily because of the tension constituting the relation between modernism and primitivism.

The Dynamic Modernity

The anthropologist Jonathan Friedman (1994, 2019; see also Lash and Friedman 1992) has written extensively on how to comprehend global phenomena in a world system framework. In “The Implosion of Modernity” (1996), Friedman takes a historical departure from various identity projects around the world: The attempt to re-establish the Hawaiian nation as a self-governed political unit, the return of territory to First Nations tribes in Canada, the endeavour of Native American tribes to become self-supporting and thus independent of the United States of America, and the Sami’s strive towards a potential “nation” within the Swedish nation-state. Friedman’s analytical point is that these phenomena of identity are meaningful if anthropologists with a broad global perspective become involved. According to Friedman, the ethnification, as a global course of events, is not random. In addition, these phenomena are not to be understood as mere expressions of various states’ promotion of “multiculturalism”, or increased global forms of communication. Instead, Friedman points out that here we are dealing with a hegemonic decline, which means that the centralised model of identity, modernism, is broken up and provides the way for the expression of various forms of “multism”. Friedman’s historical model could thus be grasped as an overall clarification (or context) of the recent anthropological–theoretical development concerned with multiculturalism, multinaturalism, and multinationalism (see Fischer 2014).

Friedman (1996; see also Rata 2013) emphasises that the structure of modernity, as an identity space, is to be considered as the foundation in all attempts to understand and explain the contemporary. Within this space, modernity is the dominating identity—based on the resolution of previous holistic structures of identities. Modernity constitutes an ego that appears flexible in the sense that there are always other potential identities and existences. Consequently, modernity forms a differentiated world in which the private becomes authentic and the public is taken as artificial or constructed. The ego is something that one is developing or creating, which implies a tendency and openness to change. It is the principle of trial-and-error that lays the ground for change and development—one goes on and becomes better, wiser, and more efficient. According to Friedman, change and development are key in order to understand that “thing” we call modernity. Modernity as an identity space, however, is dependent on external conditions, that is, one needs a direction towards something (e.g., the belief in a certain future). There must exist a place to begin and proceed towards and a past that is left behind. This spatial and temporal imagination appeared as a result of Western expansion in the late 14th century, which later resulted in a modern social and economic European center with alternative peripheries. In a world system model, we recognise this formation as the center–periphery structure, significant for the modern epoch (cf. Ekholm Friedman and Friedman 2011). The main point here is that modernism is dependent on real expansion to maintain itself as a strategy; it needs a future of social and individual mobility.

1 Within the anthropological discipline, researchers have noted that this form of findings and reasoning—units (here, primitivism) within the unit (here, modernism)—appears to make a contribution to a post-plural approach (Holbraad and Pedersen 2017; Candea 2017). However, this is not the place to develop the notion of post-pluralism, as it demands more textual space than is available in this article.
As the economic and political conditions of modernism are failing, the consequences are expressed as “a crisis.” In the crisis of modernism, there is no longer any reliable and certain future or social mobility, according to Friedman (1996). Hence, the notion of development will be likened with a catastrophe, and the search for alternative identities will begin. The crisis in the modern world system is about a crisis of accumulation in the center, which means decentralisation of the capital. The increasing welfare in the center might lead to the question that the cost of production is too expensive when compared to the underdeveloped peripheries. The re-localisation of production from the center to peripheries means cheaper human resources, lower taxes, and more favorable economic conditions. During such a time, according to Friedman, the “people” in the center attempt to relocate the capital in various forms of fictive investments, speculations in properties, bonds, and stocks. I argue that today we can understand these economic phenomena as venture capitalistic processes in which people are willing to invest in “things that do not exist”, as characteristic for the notion of innovations.

Friedman (1996) emphasises that during the crisis of modernism, it becomes exposed to various confrontations. As advocated by Friedman, modernism could be reduced to an identification that stands in contrast to nature (pleasure, childishness, and obsceneness) and culture (superstition and traditional absolutism). By outlining a four-panel figure, Friedman contrasts modernism with traditionalism, primitivism, and post-modernism. When it comes to traditionalism, he argues that this is the most common reaction to modernism, as it speaks for culture (traditional authority, order, and accepted codes for meaning and values) and turns its back against nature (lack of control in an anarchistic world of pleasure). Regarding primitivism, he explains that it embraces nature (creativity, innocence, earnest intimacy) while standing in opposition to culture (power and authority according to traditions). Post-modernism, in turn, is both pro-culture and pro-nature (both considered to be the carrier of traditional wisdom and human creativity). In a time of crisis, according to Friedman, various conflicts emerge between the four directions. The latter three directions ought to be considered as potential spaces of identification that are usually suppressed by modernistic identities. It follows then that the Western hegemonic crisis is the crisis of modernism, which means that the modern identity space implodes. Consequently, those identities that previously were restricted become liberated.

One could consider Friedman’s emphasis on the social fact that contemporary, modern, Western societies consist of potential multiple political projects, which means that modernity is not a simple, fixed, homogenised dialectical political unit, especially as there are potential political units within the political units, such as the case with primitivism. In light of such reasoning, I will raise a concern for the emergence of creativity and its association with a political form of primitivism.

**Creativity as a Form of Primitivism**

Sociologist Richard Florida’s seminal work, *The Rise of a Creative Class* (2004a), reveals the emergence of a new social and economic formation in modernity. Supported by statistics and interviews, his overall thesis focuses on the perception that human creativity is the driving force in today’s knowledge of economic development. Even though Florida’s thesis has been questioned and debated in various situations (see Florida 2004b), I can see similarities in his expressions that I found in my own fieldwork (which I will return to momentarily). Florida writes:
Thus creativity has come to be the most highly prized commodity in our economy—and yet it is not a “commodity”. Creativity comes from people. And while people can be hired and fired, their creative capacity cannot be bought and sold, or turned on and off at will. This is why, for instance, we see the emergence of a new order in the workplace. (2004a: 5).

Today, the everyday lifeworld is permeated by the creative ethos. The transformation of everyday modern life is most visible with the emergence of the creative class (such as scientists, engineers, entrepreneurs, educationalists, artists, and designers). In this new creative form of economy, Florida emphasises that this class lives a different lifestyle. In particular, Florida mentions four points: (1) workplaces are undergoing a sort of soft control rather than strict modern authoritarian governance, as it attempts to liberate creativity; (2) the identity formation is creative in itself as work, home, and leisure blend; and (3) the time frame is changing, which means that the boundaries between various modern domains become dissolved. The modern liquefied domains depend on the matter that creativity is not something that can be switched on, respectively shut off, and (4) the form of communities is encouraged to become creative. Taken together, according to Florida, our contemporary era is not simply technological; instead, it is a socio-cultural era constituted by creativity.

We might consider Florida's statement in alignment with Friedman's (1996) general notion of primitivism as a political project, especially as it fosters creativity and thus rejects modern authoritarian power and control. In this sense, creativity in primitivism is about the possibilities to hybridise or intertwine modern opposed institutions and concepts. For example, this form of creativity is free to mix the private domain of business with public institutions such as the university (known as the “entrepreneurial university”) as long as it creates uniqueness and innovations for the future public good in the welfare society.

The transformation of modernity from power and control to human creativity can be seen in how it expresses itself in the economic world. Florida, thus, discusses the creative ethos (understood as the fundamental character of culture) in the formation of everyday society. Even though the creative ethos has been seen in modern history, Florida points to the social fact that creativity is essential for how we work and live today. Hence, that is why policymakers and politicians would like to harness creativity in various forms. Among other things, policymakers and politicians attempt to set up various units and institutions in the hope of being able to control and direct the creative ethos.

Florida refers to Joseph A. Schumpeter's ([1934] 2017; see also McCraw 2010) work on creativity and entrepreneurs as essential for capitalistic, innovative development. It is from creativity that we can develop innovative “knowledge”, which, in turn, becomes today's basic economic resource. The aim of these creative processes in the knowledge society is for the outcome of innovations that can generate value (see Gibbons et al. 1994; Nowotny et al. 2001). In this sense, which can also be seen in my own fieldwork, policymakers are loaded with a mission to create a social structure of creativity, a structure that is characterised by three aspects: (1) new systems for technological creativity and entrepreneurship, which are often connected to research in universities because they accelerate the processes of establishing new firms and create commercial innovations; (2) new efficient models of producing goods and services, which usually involves employees contributing with their creative ideas as well
as their physical labour; and (3) a broad socio-cultural, regional milieu beneficial to various forms of creativity (Florida 2004a).

Here, the socio-political milieu described by Florida is to be considered as supporting the fundamental ecosystem, in which creativity as a form of primitivism takes root and flourishes in the world of innovation politics.

Ethnography, Theory, and Puzzle
The relation between ethnography and theory is seldom pre-determined during fieldwork. As noted by Michael Agar (2013), fieldwork has its abductive logic since the ethnographic material consistently interacts with the theoretical concepts throughout the whole analytical process. One could argue that the disappearance of the contradictions between the ethnographic material and the analytical concepts gives the ethnographer an indication that (s)he has reached a reasonable point from where it is possible to explain the phenomenon concurrently as new puzzles appear (Agar 1987).

In the following section, I illustrate how an ethnographic “problem” emerged when I studied innovation politics and how it connected to theory—an analytical process that later constituted my concerns with the dialectics of anthropological critique in context.

Innovation Political Expressions
While observing the relatively novel expressions of political innovation in the context of the Öresund region (southern Sweden and the Copenhagen area in Denmark), as an ethnographer, I struggled to make a general sense of various situations. However, as the sensemaking process seemed to take a departure from the structure of relevance that belongs to the modern academic world, an ethnographic “problem” emerged.

At the Medicon Valley Alliance’s 2015 Annual Meeting in Copenhagen, Denmark, Danish entrepreneur Lars Tvede served as a keynote speaker. The main reason for inviting Tvede was because he recently published The Creative Society: How the Future Can Be Won (2015). As most people in the audience associated with life science research in the public and the private sector, the expected context was that of innovation politics. Life science might be considered to include a large number of scientific traditions studying living organisms such as plants, animals, and human beings. The knowledge production in life sciences is commonly done “in-between” public universities and private industries (see Friberg 2017). With this in mind, policymakers and politicians treat life science as a creative way to improve life in society, notable when it comes to agriculture, medicine, and health. Policymakers consider the collaboration and the hybridisation between two different modern domains—the public and the private—as the mediums for creating more life science types of “innovation”.

As participants, we received a free copy of Tvede’s book upon arriving at the Annual meeting. While sitting in front of the scene, Tvede entered with a big smile while the chairman beside him claimed, “We need creativity and innovations to increase economic growth in the Öresund region”. The chairman’s statement implied that we all could learn something from listening to the keynote speaker, and continued by emphasising, “Two words are important here, that is, innovation and economic growth. Take your ideas and foster them for the market. Such an act depends on creativity”. In this situation, Tvede began to explain some “surprising things that he has learned about innovation”, and he
further enlightened us about how global creative thinking emerges from Western countries. Hence, his book is about Western creativity. While reading about creativity, he argued, he saw a pattern beginning in the 16th century which became crystallised in the Western dominance of the world in the 1950s. How then, he asked, was it possible for the West to dominate the world even though they make up only ten percent of the world’s population? Tvede’s generalised answers refer to ‘Western de-centralisation processes’, which mean that more ordinary citizens were able to use their creativity in their working lives.

For Tvede, creativity is one of the most unique and fundamental forces as part of the progress of civilisation, as it solves difficult problems while creating new opportunities. With creativity and innovation, economic growth follows naturally. He declared, “Centralisation kills creativity”! and exemplified this by referring to the Roman Empire’s attempt to control the socio-political environment using centralisation, which led to its own demise. The creative society should be understood in contrast to the static model of society (see Tvede 2015: 384-399). In such a creative society, according to Tvede’s narrative, people think of their destiny in terms of control and that they are in control of their own destiny.

Later during the so-called expert panel discussion, the participants listened to Swedish life science coordinator and social democrat politician Anders Lönnberg, who stated, “The public and the private ought to collaborate to make more creative innovations in the future”. Regarding life science research, he argued that the university world and the world of business ought to collaborate more intensely. He further claimed,

We need a better innovation fund—trying out creativity and innovations in new ways. Every political party in Sweden agrees that the creative Triple Helix model is the future. No matter what party succeeds in grasping political power, the Triple Helix will prevail since it is not political.

In contrast to a centralised model (in which the state controls the worlds of the university and industry) and the laissez-faire model (in which the university, the state, and the industry collaborate to a certain extent across explicit boundaries), the Triple Helix model undertakes hybrid and collaborative relations between the three worlds (Etzkowitz 2008). The Triple Helix model is used by policymakers and politicians to generate creativity, and thus, innovations to increase social and economic growth.

We could understand such expressions in terms of a distinct shift in governance of the public sector, that is, from neo-classic economic theory with a focus on competition (as the main driving force of innovation) to economic theories concerned with collaboration (as the main driving force of innovation) (see Hedensted Lund and Vaaben 2014; Vaaben 2014). In contrast to the New Public Management principles that follow neo-classic economy (with its focus on *homo economicus*, self-interest, market mechanism, and investment in existing things), the recent New Public Governance (NPG) principles take their departure in the altruistic collaborative human being, shared interests, the idea of creativity, and investment in things to come (Wiesel and Modell 2014). By using the NPG principles, politicians and policymakers imagine that they can create synergy effects in the context of the new emerging economy based on producing and selling knowledge. The key actors in these settings are universities (scientists), industries (entrepreneurs), and the state (policymakers). The
collaborative hybridisation of the three actors is explicated in the logic of the expression of the Triple Helix policy model and as a prolongation of “The New Production of Knowledge”, (Gibbons 1994) founded in the early 1990s (Shinn 2002).

Hence, the ethnographic “problem” arising in these situations was the expression of a seemingly primitivist political world—the preoccupation of creativity, the pushing for collaborative hybridisation of separated domains (such as the private and public), and the creation of innovations for the uncertain future—all within the “modern” everyday lifeworld.

Theoretical Inspiration and a New Puzzle
To make sense of the ethnographic expression presented above, I had to capture it with a specific world, especially because this innovation political world expresses its objectification, intentionality, and attitude in contrast to that of the aesthetics of modernism. As such, by treating the innovation political project as an expression of its world, I took theoretical inspiration from Alfred Schutz (1962: 207–45), who clearly states that the modern everyday lifeworld consists of multiple worlds. For example, the world of art, the world of social science, the business world, and the political world. Schutz’s (1962) main point was that every world has its structure of relevance, which gives meaning to specific conceptual and material objects in well-defined situations. For example, in the world of social science “truthfulness” and “the law of non-contradictions” could be considered as two meaningful and relevant objects in seminars and peer review processes, but this might not be the case in the political world, where we find “lies” and “inconsistency and contradictions” in public situations (cf. Weber 1977). The difference between the world of social science and politics could be understood as a matter of diverse intentionalities, that is, directions towards the distinctive state of affairs. Furthermore, the main differences between the separated worlds could be comprehended in terms of two distinct attitudes (a doxic belief in the being of the world, in which the person takes the surrounding reality for granted).

With this social phenomenological theory (conceptual relations) at hand and in combination with the ethnographic expression above, the innovation political world could understand its own intentionality as directed towards the notion of an uncertain future. If considering this statement at the backdrop of Friedman’s (1996) reasoning on the implosion of modernity as an identity space, the imagined future is that of uncertainty. Consequently, the politicians and the policymakers embrace a creative and innovative horizon to make certain the uncertain future (see Nowotny 2008, 2016), here, predominantly with the help of life science. With an increasing number of innovations, many innovation policymakers and politicians believe that they can control better and predict the future—they consider creativity and innovation to be the best way to transform uncertainty into certainty (Godin 2015, 2017; Godin and Vinck 2017).

Moreover, the ethnography demonstrated the relevance and meaningfulness of the objectification of “creativity” (see Florida 2004a, 2004b) in the world of innovation politics. As I have suggested elsewhere (Friberg forthcoming), the world of innovation politics is constituted by lateral thinking (De Bono 1970), which is a form of creativity. As the lateral thinking stands in contrast to vertical thinking (i.e., congruent with the modern thinking in logic and mathematics), it follows that policymakers and politicians can avoid modern conceptual and institutional boundaries, such as the separation of private and public domains. In other words, when policymakers imagine or utilise creative, lateral thinking,
there is no resistance to the hybridisation of the public university (with its associated scientific researchers) and private industry (with its related business entrepreneurs).

As can be seen in the ethnographic material, the hybridisation finds its creative logic in the Triple Helix model and could be perceived as imperialistic politics, that is, making one world out of three distinctly differentiated worlds (see Figure 3). Additionally, the ethnography exemplified the attitude in the innovation political world, which may be interpreted as an expression of primitivism, particularly as it celebrates creativity, anti-authoritarian modern conceptual and institutional boundaries, and collaborative hybridisation.

Having established the notion of an innovation political world, with a distinct attitude of primitivist aesthetics in modernity, evoked an anthropological feeling of being in an analytical, inversed position (see Chambers 2013: Ch. 4) and was something that puzzled me considerably. As trained anthropologists, we are socialised towards the assumption that Western political projects (the inside) are constituted by modernism while the Others are socio-organisational expressions of primitivism (the outside). The first-mentioned political project we learn in textbooks and during lectures is imperialistic, in the sense that it extends its power and influence over other worlds by colonisation (Stocking 1993). In these situations, modern anthropologists who study other “primitive” worlds become analytically equipped to critique their own “modern” everyday lifeworld, which implies the dialectics of anthropological critique (Mimica 2010; Kapferer 2018). But then, what are we supposed to do with the dialectics of anthropological critique when an inside imperialistic political project (such as innovation politics that attempts to extend power by hybridising the world of public university with the world of private business) is constituted by the attitude of primitivism? My first thoughts went to Stanley Diamond’s (1974) anthropological project for inspiration, but then I was reminded of Hage’s (2012) updated view concerned with critical anthropological thinking.

**Critical Anthropological Thinking**

Because Hage (2012) is interested in the nature of the critical anthropological tradition, he initially searches for the general notion of social scientific critique. He points to the similarities between critical sociology and anthropology, as both disciplines associate themselves with a type of criticism that challenges the taken-for-granted socio-cultural order, that is, a form of an imperialistic politics. Hage treats critical thinking as constituted by a dialectic between “the outside” and “the inside” concerning inter-personalities, cultures, societies, and states. By transcending such, this dialectic will thus enable us to reflect upon the present context of politics, which consequently makes it possible to “move outside ourselves”. When Hage (2012: 288) reaches the specific critical nature of the anthropological discipline, he claims:

It is well known that anthropology as a project began as a study of human cultures that are situated outside the dynamic of our capitalist modernity. This was so even if, paradoxically, it was that dynamic itself that was behind the very possibility of the anthropological encounter between modern and non-modern peoples. And even if that very process was part of making what was outside modernity inside modernity. It is in this sense, as many have argued, that we can say that early anthropology captures what was outside modernity in the very process of it becoming inside modernity, with anthropology itself being part of that very assemblage of capture.
In this historical–anthropological situation, the dialectics of the modern inside and the primitive outside presents itself in the distinction between “modern and non-modern people”. Hage’s approach echoes a Marxist–anthropological tradition (Dumont 1992; Wolf 1999, 2001) in which the anthropologists’ missions are about to expose the socio-cultural processes that imprison human beings in the West by using the primitives as a mirror. By showing the Others as less alienated, it provides an image of the primitives in ourselves, which creates new political possibilities for ourselves. Hage’s critical project is thus also an expression of the classic logic of inversion—the dichotomy of the true inner essence and the distorted outer appearance (Marx and Engels 1947; Chambers 2013).

As a prolongation of this form of anthropology, Hage appears to consider capitalistic modernity as a singular inside unit while placing non-modernity as outside plural peripheral cultures. As a logical consequence of this reasoning, the modern anthropologist is required to be involved in studies of the primitive “radical alterities” (see also Baudrillard 2008), such as the case of Viveiros de Castro’s (2014) studies of Amazonian Indians. Thus, the knowledge of cultural alterities spontaneously works as a transcendent criticism when brought back home to what appears to be a singular unit of modernity. Hage (2012: 289) writes,

One should immediately note here how this critical anthropological knowledge differs from other disciplinary critical thought. It differs not just in the fact that it takes us outside of ourselves culturally rather than temporally, socially or psycho-logically but also in the way it posits a relation between the outside-of-ourselves space it takes us to and the space in which we are dwelling.

Perhaps it is reasonable to outline Hage’s general notion of critical anthropological thinking, as shown in figure 1.

Figure 1. Hage’s structural reasoning

Thus, Figure 1 shows Hage’s structural reasoning—the dialectics of anthropological critique—constituted by three spaces: modernism → primitivism → criticism. To maintain
an anthropological critique in the context of innovation politics, I argue, would demand that ethnographers ought to shift the ideological content in the space of the inside and the outside (*a reversal logic of inversion*), as follows in Figure 2, which also implies that the modern anthropological discipline logically becomes the radical Other (positioned on the outside).

![Figure 2. The maintenance of anthropological critique in context](image)

To argue that the modern anthropologist is the radical Other in the context of innovation politics might be considered as controversial at the backdrop of our disciplinary, imperialistic legacy (Stocking 1993). However, the point here is to explore the possibilities for a logically, critical anthropological research space in which we can observe our imperialistic tendencies from the outside.

### Performing Anthropological Critique

This part will demonstrate an anthropological critique from within the imperialistic political world (here, the primitive policymaking on innovation), followed by a radical anthropological critique from the outside.

#### Anthropological Critique from the “Inside”

It might be a thought-provoking idea to take part in an anthropologist’s experience of being inside the political world of innovation. An online interview (see Human Show 2010) with an anthropological colleague, who has operated in the science-industry-state relationship in the last decade, might give some insight into anthropological critique.

The interviewer is asking about how to ethically move between the world of the university and the corporate world during fieldwork:
The anthropologist: I started with observations. I was sitting in an open office so I could observe what was going on in everyday life. I was enrolled in projects on different matters of how to change the organisation. In the beginning, I was trying to build up some kind of organisational sensibility in order to understand what was going on. I think it was important to improvise during my work there. Of course, to be critical but critical in a constructive way. I was not there to deconstruct everything, but I tried to say; “Okay, I am in a position where I can say things that perhaps an ordinary employee cannot”. I got a license to be critical, so to speak. That was something that the management and the employees accepted. Some of my interlocutors came to me and told me about some of their everyday work issues, some of their challenges, because they could see that maybe I could share this problem with the management. […] They could use me like a person that could maneuver between different layers in the organisation.

The anthropologist’s mode of critiquing organisation is that of being constructive rather than deconstructive. One way of practicing this form of critique is as a carrier of moral messages between various organisational units.

Continuing to ask about the struggle between the perspective of the university and the organisation, the interviewer is given the following answer:

The anthropologist: I don’t think I experienced any struggle. Of course, people in my department were asking about my position because I was an industrial Ph.D. I was hired by the company. So how to make a critical, distanced analysis of an organisation if they pay the salary? So, for me, it was important from the beginning to make an agreement: “Okay, I am not a consultant working in the organisation. Yes, I participate in different projects, and I am a form of recourse. But still, I need time to distance myself from the organisation to analyse the data. To reflect and to write my PhD”. Traditionally people have done their fieldwork abroad. […] I did my Ph.D. here […], and I went to X University and Y University. I left my home country to do my analysis because I needed to get away—they wanted more time and resources to different projects. In that sense, it was important to find a space to reflect, to write up. But I didn’t experience problems with academia. Yes, we had some discussion on how to balance these different kinds of interests. But I think it is an experience in all kinds of fieldwork. It is not only in [the world of] innovations—people we study have different kinds of interests.

The anthropologist’s notion of critique balances different interests and physically distances the researcher from fieldwork to practice reflection, write an anthropological text, and analye the collected data.

Moving towards the anthropologist’s recent research, that is concerned with the collaboration between private industry, the public university, and the civil sector, the interviewer wonders about the critical, collaborative, and creative process:

The anthropologist: Something that has been important for our work, and actually maybe something that stands in contrast to science policy of Triple Helix idea of collaboration, converge into new innovative consensus spaces… The most important thing that we have learned is that we, as anthropological researchers, while engaging with these other disciplines, different organisational fields, have also established a self-awareness of our own discipline. So, when we meet people from other institutional disciplines or fields, we open a space where we
see ourselves in relation to others. While engaging with other disciplines, we experienced this kind of reflection of self-awareness of what it is to be an anthropologist.

As listeners, we understand that the critical, collaborative, and creative anthropological moment generates a self-awareness of the own discipline.

As the dialogue between the interviewer and the anthropologist remains, the discussion moves onto the future of being in the political world of innovation:

*The anthropologist:* [let us] try to design particular futures—from an anthropological perspective. How can we, through social analysis, predict certain desirable futures? Of course, we can’t predict them, but we can make some social practice imaginaries in order to direct other developments—influencing research policy. [...] I think this focus on the future is quite interesting; talking about collaboration. We are trying to establish experimental spaces between people from different disciplines, people from different organisations: In spaces where we are not controlled by institutional disciplinary backgrounds. I try to be in the space not to be so anthropological if you understand what I mean. Not so much as a researcher but being part of this team (this experiment). And this is how I see collaboration. In this space, we try to free ourselves from certain organisational, institutional, disciplinary code of conducts. We are trying to make these spaces where we can experiment.

The thought of the future, in the collaborative situations, seems to imply a critical notion of freeing oneself from “organisational, institutional and disciplinary code of conducts” with the help of experimental spaces. In these experimental, collaborative spaces lie the anthropological possibilities to influence future research policy.

*Being “Inside”*

The above anthropological thought is about being inside: being critically constructive *in* the organisation where the anthropologist is conducting fieldwork; becoming critically self-aware of the code of conduct *in* the anthropological discipline; being able to create critical, experimental spaces *in* the context of research policy. Accordingly, the anthropological thought of critique from the inside seems to be stuck in the primitivist innovation political world because it takes as given the hybridised-collaborative relationship between industry, university, and state (see Figure 3).

*Figure 3. Anthropological critique from the “inside”*
What makes the primitive space (policymaking on innovation) a creative space is the lack of the modern aesthetic of rational straight lines that differentiate institutional and conceptual domains, such as the industry, the university (including the anthropological discipline), and the state. In this sense, creativity is a form of lateral thinking (De Bono 1970), meaning that policy-linked researchers and policymakers are unbound to act out of specific institutions, concepts or boundaries. On the one hand, they are free to crossbreed or intertwine all kinds of subjects and objects. On the other hand, however, they are captive “inside” a world without any possibilities to move outside themselves, especially as there seems to be no encouragement for critical dialectics from the outside. It follows that the logic of primitivism attempts to hybridise all modern domains—creating one collaborative world out of competing worlds. In this situation, we might consider Marcel Mauss’ notion of a “total social phenomenon” (1966: 76-77); that is, there are no explicit boundaries between modern economic, critical, and political domains.

However, such primitive processes connect to modernism’s rationality because this form of creativity is to be seen as a continuation of securing the modern belief in a certain future. To hybridise the modern domains in various creative manners would mean that we can now produce “innovations” to secure the social and economic order for the future welfare society: without a dialectic critique.

**Anthropological Critique from the “Outside”**

As the innovation political imperialistic tendencies encapsulate the anthropological discipline, it is possible to argue that the “inside” anthropological critique is directed further inwards, which could be comprehended as a narcissistic tendency (cf. Baudrillard 2008). Therefore, there is minor space for the existence of Hageian radical alterity. The inside anthropological thought is left with a selfishness that fails to distinguish itself from external objects. The result is an admiration of its own organisation, discipline, or research policy. The remedy for the lack of analytical empathy—an anthropological critique from the outside—, I argue, could be outlined in six straightforward steps:

1. Objectifying the political phenomenon (such as innovation politics) to escape a narcissistic anthropological thought.
2. Outlining a dynamic, historical background to get at the appearance of the contemporary phenomenon.
3. Studying the ethnographic material to make sense of the phenomenon’s ideology, aesthetic, and conceptual relationships.
4. Treating the phenomenon as an expression of a different world than the anthropologists’ world.
5. Utilising a reversal logic of inversion to create temporary dialectics of anthropological critique.
6. Assuming the radical Other’s space, and exploit the critical position to figure out how to make a Hageian passage to “move outside ourselves”.

However, the six straightforward steps are not to be considered as constituting a conclusive
programmatic approach. On the contrary, the steps are to open for all forms of critique, especially if the assessments depart from ethnography.

Concluding Remarks
In this article, I suggested that ethnographers ought to inverse Hage's (2012) structural reasoning concerned with the dialectics of anthropological critique in the context of innovation politics if they would like to maintain a critical attitude about new emerging imperialistic tendencies (Strathern 2000, 2004).

To validate my suggestion, I outline a background of dynamic modernity that gives the expression of political ideologies other than that of modernism (Friedman 1996; see also Rata 2013). Hence, I focus on primitivism as an expression of the ethos of creativity in the emerging modern knowledge economy (Florida 2004a). As modernity is changing, the ideology of modernism seems to transform into primitivism (among other things), which can be observed in the expressions of innovation politics. With the help of my ethnography in the Öresund region, I illustrated how innovation political expressions—such as the promotion of the creative ethos, hybridisation of private and public domains, and innovations for an uncertain future—make sense before the backdrop of a changing modernity. Moreover, I demonstrated how my encounter with the political world of innovation also laid the ground for the origination of the puzzling thoughts concerning the dialectics of anthropological critique.

From the contextual background to my fieldwork observations, I then deepened the discussion of Hage's structural reasoning concerned with the dialectics of modernism and primitivism, which make possible a third space of criticism. To maintain the scope of criticism, in the context of the political world of innovation (that is constituted by a form of primitivism) thus demanded a logic of inversion (cf. Marx and Engels 1947). The inversion at hand meant a shift of the content in the space of the inside and the outside in which modern anthropologists become the radical Other. My illustration of how to perform an anthropological critique from within the political world of innovation was then followed by a Hageian step-by-step critique from the outside.

Such an anthropological critique from the outside could extend the disciplinary conversations concerned with the radical alterity in “modernities”. When radical alterity seems to fade away in modern politico-organisational contexts, critical anthropologists should search for new analytical tools and positions. The essential critical tool is the reversal logic of inversion (see Chambers 2013) that makes possible a temporary dialectical position as the radical Other.

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Bricolage
Two John Ericsson(s) Make One Anthropologist

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New Yorkers Beware!

After eating alone at a restaurant in Göteborg, Sweden, on my first visit, I asked the waiter if service was included in the bill. He replied in perfect English “yes, but not the tip”. Perplexed by a response which might be taken for humor in some other country, I dutifully added something extra to an unknown amount already included on the tab.

This common enough muddled encounter for travelers quickly taught me that although much is mandated by the Swedish state, there is still a strong sense of personal responsibility mandated by conscience. Taken together these can constitute a heavy burden for the natives. I later learned that the tip is always a few extra krona (Swedish currency) in cash, and that eating alone in public is shameful.

The restaurant encounter took place close to where I was staying in Göteborg as the 20th century drew to a close. Even closer, on the city’s main street, stood an ignored granite statue of John Ericsson, one of the city’s adopted Swedish sons. Oddly enough, about equally distant from the house in which I grew up in mid-20th century America, there is another statue in honor of the same John Ericsson, who I assumed was an adopted son of Brooklyn. The Swedish version of a mature and pensive Eriksson looms over the city’s main thoroughfare as he reflects on a document. In the New World, he is an iron-cast young man straining on cables in a symbolic effort to hold the American Union together during the U.S Civil War. Ericsson’s now eternal labor resulted in the construction of his innovation, the iron-clad warship Monitor, which he completed as a U.S. resident. Reflecting a new spirit and era, in the late 19th century the name of my street in Brooklyn was changed from King William to Monitor Street in memory of Ericsson’s achievement. Until recently, although a frequent passerby, I took no notice of the serenity of the Eriksson there in Göteborg, nor for decades gave any thought to the hyperactive one in Brooklyn. Now these contrasting images are constant reminders of my life.

Initially the Brooklyn Ericsson had more practical than symbolic value. We locals were encouraged to park ourselves there and reflect on this rare bit of cultivated nature represented by that single statue, the only one for miles except for the saints guarding the surrounding churches. However, as small children we made use of John Ericsson by climbing onto and scrambling around his metal body. With added inches, we played basketball using one of
Ericsson’s oddly angled hooked arms as the hoop. As teenagers, when the park attendants and adults had left, we learned to smoke cigarettes and drink beer in his company. It was also with Ericsson’s encouragement that I first talked to the then 14-year-old who was to be my wife. A few years later, together on one of our first dates, we ventured across the river to “the city”, to see Bergman’s “Wild Strawberries”.

In time, the space between two Eri(c)(k)ssons was joined by other admired Swedish images in cinema, sports, academia, and politics. As friends in my multi-ethnic boyhood community eventually announced and took pride in their Irish-, Italian- or Polish-ness, for some strange reason I became a secret Swedophile. As I recall them, these images now reappear to me as signposts in an unlikely trek from the streets of Brooklyn to the gator (streets) of Göteborg. Voyages begin long before we are aware of or have embarked on them.

Prefigured or not, I first found myself in Sweden as a visiting lecturer at the University of Göteborg on a typical cold and damp spring day in 1983. Despite my unusual interest in the place and being relatively well-traveled, it was a first. In fact, I had never even met anyone who admitted to being Swedish-American. I assumed they must all be tucked away in Minnesota. However, the first Swede I met, invited me to lecture at his university in the country’s second-largest city. I had never heard of Göteborg before, and when there, learned that I could not pronounce its name. All I had to fall back on was a memory of a statue in my old neighborhood.

My first impressions of Sweden were pleasant but unsettling. Instead of a different place, I experienced a different time, filled with vivid images from my youth. Most of the people were white, neatly dressed, and reserved, at least on weekdays. The streets were clean, and what we called trolley cars still ran along the main thoroughfares. Even the parks seemed useless, and on the weekends, gas-guzzling, fish-tailed American cars from the 1950s cruised the streets. I also had the impression that the real city must lie somewhere across the river, separating glamor from the everyday. That was not the case, but I was back not only in space but also in time, to Brooklyn and the American Golden Age. The experience was surreal, but nonetheless comforting. Even more eerily, I eventually noticed that John Eriksson, older and wiser, was still eyeing me.

Trying to make sense of this reestablished order, I started the journey again – but this time in reverse, from Göteborg to Brooklyn via the printed word. The literary journey was not what I had expected. I assumed that an actually prosperous, peace-loving democracy would be admired, particularly by those from countries such as my own, which proclaimed these virtues but fell short of the mark in practice. However, I soon learned that for one reason or another the over-whelming majority of those who came before me did not share this view.

In the 17th, but also mostly in the 18th and 19th centuries, visitors to this land were mildly perplexed – particularly as to how the locals related to the universal dichotomy between nature and culture in this “land of flint”. Most would conclude that the natives had somehow managed to get things upside-down as they placed greater value on what was provided for them by nature than by the culture they had created. The forests were cathedrals and the trees statuary.

As a consequence of this unsettling oddity, Sweden was not the most popular destination for those seeking cultural enlightenment. One typically jaded 19th century visitor would eventually sum up the Swedish experience when he sniffed: “It is worthwhile to see the North but not until one has done the South”. Although there are allusions to Scandinavia in the classical and medieval texts, calling attention to a land of tall men and long ships, the
first full-scale literary account of Sweden by a foreigner does not appear until 1561. This book was also an almost entirely plagiarized account of Swedish history by the Englishman Sir George North, who arrived to negotiate a possible royal marriage between Elizabeth I and the Swedish Crown Prince. His *The Description of Sweden, Gotland, and Finland* (North, 1945 [1561]) was taken almost entirely from an existing manuscript penned earlier in Latin by a more scholarly native. Although “borrowing” is common practice among travel writers then and now, North took few pains to disguise his rendition of Swedish history. He merely added some rude remarks about the neighboring “horrible” monarch of Denmark, with an equally kind characterization of the local “prudent” Gustave, a descendent of Noah himself.

The Cromwellian Lieutenant Bulstrode Whitelocke’s two volume *A Journal of the Swedish Embassy in the Years 1653 and 1654* (Whitelocke 1855) is no more enlightening, unless one is interested in the quality of the local roast beef. In the 18th century there appear recorded “scampers and jaunts” left behind by English scribblers primarily interested in a primitive Nordic experience of wine, women, and song, as the Continent was closed off to them by the Napoleonic Wars. One such character by the name of Drevon pontificates in *A Journey through Sweden* that as it “consists entirely of one continued rock of granite, covered in different places with a greater or lesser quantity of earth … it is not likely to become the residence of strangers, or, indeed, to be often visited by strangers”. Drevon was impressed only by the women he encountered, who were “more inclined to the desires of love than the tenderness thereof” (Drevon 1789: 94). Another in his wake, John Robinson, similarly impressed with the sights, mentions in *An Account of Sweden*, “The Women, while young, have generally fair Complexions, tolerable Features, and good Shapes, and some of them are accounted more eminent for Chastity before Marriage, than Fidelity after …” (Robinson 1694: 76). Later, in the same vein, Nathaniel Wraxall’s *A Tour of Some of the Northern Parts of Europe* took “enchanted” note of “a number of pretty forms among the women… and I must own that I distributed my shillings more in proportion to their beauty than their age, infirmities, or poverty …” (Wraxall 1776: 60). Together these accounts initiated a stereotypical vision of Sweden as a frigid natural landscape with a warmer feminine climate. This perception persists to this day, to the dismay of many contemporary female natives.

The first serious account of Sweden from a different gender perspective appears in the late 18th century, with the arrival of Mary Wollstonecraft’s long, agonized 1796 Letters to her lover in Paris (Wollstonecraft 1796). An early feminist and single parent, she brought her baby and a servant with her on her journey. Yet she also had some age-old problems. Her lover, who had suggested she take the journey, immediately moved in with his new attraction in the Paris she had just vacated. These personal concerns cast troubled emotional clouds over her visit to the “land of flint,” so unlike the more “polished” parts of Europe. In the typical fashion of a certain class of English person, Wollstonecraft preferred her animals over the mantel, and rose bushes where trees once swayed. Nature had to be subdued, particularly for the Swedish women, who conveyed a “total want of chastity similar to that in America” (Poston 1976). Although Wollstonecraft and others had managed to put their collective finger on something significant, they did not grasp that the issue was the unaccustomed inverted nature/culture divide.

For Sweden, then and now, as usual, males are the dominant sex. However, in this exceptional instance, males are associated with nature rather than culture. Females as usual are the subaltern sex, but associated with the culture which takes a back seat to nature in Sweden. This unusual – if not unique – framework, which combines the expected (male
dominance) with the unexpected (males’ association with nature rather than culture) confounded visitors. The evidence for this odd arrangement is derived from everyday behavior, the very stuff of cultural anthropology.

The natives often told me: “There is no such thing as bad weather, just bad clothes”, suggesting that nature is never the problem.¹ I was reminded of this insight as males in particular remained unperturbed in conversation in a downpour, or more amazingly as mounds of snow gently gathered on their heads. The situation could have been resolved easily with a hat, but to the native there is no situation.

Swedes are suspect WASPS when it comes to the P for Protestantism. The first Swedish bishopric was not established until the mid-12th century, over a thousand years after Christianity had taken root in parts of Africa and Asia and centuries after its spread to other parts of Europe. The faith’s belated appearance, and the time it took to spread throughout the rural landscape have implications for today. Although early on the Swedes and other Scandinavians had an otherworldly religion, this perspective did not deny the relevance of the here and now, in contrast to the Christian emphasis on the hereafter. Reflecting this deep-seated perspective, on the Sabbath native parents prefer to take their children into the forest to forage for edibles rather than indoors for food for thought to nourish the soul.

With the arrival of summer, Swedes gather around a tree to celebrate the sun; later in the year, they come together again on the darkest day to recognize the return of the sun. These occasions are not outmoded folk traditions. They are, in a term usually reserved for techno-primitive societies, expressions of “animism”. This term does not simply imply the worship of rocks, trees, or waterfalls. That sort of characterization is a serious misinterpretation that reduces a complicated concept to a simple label. In its basic and original sense, animism means aliveness, connoting a spiritual existence of things in the natural environment worthy of human reverence. This perspective does not deny the existence of a Creator, or a God. Thus the Swedish belief in animism is not incompatible with any of the world’s major religions, nor indeed all religions. As in most other instances, the prevailing cultural situation is a matter of emphasis, not absolute difference in the sense of the presence or absence of a phenomenon.

As a result of a natural inclination and environmental protection legislation, Sweden from the air is a vast forest with minimal clearings indicating human activity. The very opposite picture emerges over non-Scandinavian Europe, where the land is comprised of large cultivated areas with small spaces remaining for a few trees in a prison of the human community. In animist Sweden, nature surrounds and dominates society. The opposite situation prevails in other parts of Europe, as human society dominates and encapsulates nature. It is not enough to say, as even the natives are prone to do, that Swedes respect nature more than most, and leave it at that. The relationship between humanity and nature is more profound than one of respect. The depth and meaning of the perspective are hinted at by certain seemingly inconsequential features of Swedish belief and behavior, such as the strange notion that there is no such thing as bad weather.

Although changing with globalization, the Swedes’ continued resort to pre-Christian first names for males, such as Bjorn (bear) and Ulf (wolf) is instructive. These creatures still roam the Swedish countryside exemplifying a totemic relationship characterized by a respectful avoidance. The Swedish usage of these names is not fanciful, as in other lands where Leo inhabits a distant, if not mythical, land or domestic prison. Although nature names are

¹ “Det finns inget dåligt väder, bara dåliga kläder” which rhymes in Swedish (ed. note).
common in other places, they are usually attached to females, as in Rose or Robin, rather than males. This difference supports my hypothesis of a dominant male association with nature, also expressed by a similar preference for nature over culture for Swedish last names.

Anderson is to Sweden as Smith is to England. Both are common names in their respective lands, but the similarity ends there as these designators go off in dramatically different directions. The English usage refers to an occupation crucial to the development of European culture and society. Other popular names, such as Carter, Carpenter, Gardner or Farmer further signify the dominance of culture over nature. In contrast, in Sweden Anderson, the son of Anders, signifies a natural rather than a cultural identity. One third of all Swedish names fall into this naturalistic patronymic category. The remaining ones, such as Berg (mountain), Strom (stream), Lind (tree), Dhal (valley), or Falcon (falcon), all refer to the natural world. An extensive list of Swedish last names does not include a single one referring to culture.

Vulgarity – or rather the impossibility of resorting to it – in Swedish is an even more profound indication of a different perspective on nature. Most European languages resort to nature for a source of blasphemy or vulgarity. This linguistic strategy takes three basic tracks in order of increasing seriousness. The first is using crude words for biological functions, such as “shit”, and the second is bringing together nature and culture in inappropriate ways, such as in “Holy shit”. The third category is more complex; its mildest sub-form involves using the name of an animal for a person, e.g., “ass” or “bitch”, and in its most profane form the ingenious resort to animal names for the human anatomy, the “c…” words, rooster for male and rabbit for female genitalia.

In American or English films these words and phrases are commonplace, resulting in translation problems for Swedish. Referring to nature or natural acts to express anger or to insult others is impossible in Swedish. Thus, a film character’s lengthy string of invectives, calling attention to dubious parentage, oral sexual perversions, and sex with one’s mother, is incredibly, usually translated as, jävlar, i.e., devil. This one word – practically a term of endearment in English – is the worst thing one can call another human being in Swedish. The inability to use nature to insult is a profound feature of Swedish “culture”, particularly as it is related to English and other Germanic languages, where a crude resort to nature in speech is an art form akin to poetry. This differing evaluation of nature and culture in Sweden is best appreciated through personal experience.

For the average American, including this one, an anxious awareness of another culture is apparent when in a nightmare reversal, the natives appear not to be wearing sufficient clothing, or worse, none. That experience is common in Sweden at beaches or the elaborate public Sim Hallen, where in addition to the pool there are changing rooms, showers, and saunas, so a certain amount of undress (or no dress) is encountered. Nature shock can be experienced only on a cultural occasion. For me it was at the opera house with female colleagues for a contemporary adaption of Don Giovanni. At one point the hero appeared on center stage in the spa of his country villa sporting only a skimpy towel, and launched into his aria. In seconds the towel was gone. The Don, now naked, visibly strained on, devoid of all culture. In the background there was a red Jacuzzi, and in another minute, he was in the tub. However, his respite and mine was short-lived. He was shortly out again, now wearing only bubbles, and continued his lament. The aria eventually came to an end to polite applause. This scenario certainly does not represent “culture shock”.

In one of my last visits to Sweden, I was considering these matters while at a colleague’s
Nursing School graduation. In the midst of a successful career as a social anthropologist, she decided it was time to do something useful with her life. Remaining the useless anthropologist, I noticed that many of those around me were holding flowers. Thinking I had figured out what was going on, I quickly left the building and returned with my own bouquet. At the end of the ceremony, I confidently handed it over to my colleague, but only then noticed that my blommor (flowers) were the only ones still wrapped in paper. All the other gift-givers had removed that insignificant bit of culture, so that the celebrant received – only – nature.

Culture, or the lack of it, would not be the concern of 20th century visitors to Sweden, who would fixate and fulminate on the country’s unsettling social arrangements and accompanying “mood”. By this time, Sweden had emerged as a peaceful, industrial democracy enjoying one of the world’s highest standards of living and all that goes with this presumably admirable condition. Internally it had achieved something close to income and gender equality. It had stayed out of the conflicts that had wracked, and were still wrecking, most of the world. Instead of war and empire-building, it had obliged itself by law to share a portion of its wealth with less advanced nations with non-military assistance. Importantly, studies of “happiness” and other data-driven satisfaction studies indicated that the residents were pleased with their lot. In direct contrast, outsiders with no need for data assumed that the natives were morose and in despair.

This negative attitude reached critical mass during the Cold War era, when and where Sweden became more of an idea than a place that outsiders had a vested interest in defining. Traveling to and through Sweden came to a halt as commentators simply appeared on the scene signifying the analytical purpose of their task. Moreover, as the traveler was stationary, the country was moving. In extraordinary fashion, some visitors rearranged the cognitive map by relocating Sweden from the Northern Hemisphere, where it had been in early times, to the more suspect “East”. Indicating the new world order, Americans appeared on the scene to take part in re-orienting Sweden.

Positions hardened on the issue of Communism versus Capitalism. Few had the capacity to imagine an economic and political “middle way” characterized by neutrality and democracy. Sympathetic portraits such as the one that appeared in The New Yorker (Heller Feb. 16, 2015) were rare. Moderate voices were soon lost in the rush for a more simplistic understanding of “the Swedish enigma”, identified by outsiders as the dismal experience of living in a beneficent society. For the majority of American commentators in particular, the country was an exasperating anomaly beset by moral issues, all having to do with Socialism, Suicide, and Sex.

No longer off the beaten path for a nature holiday, Sweden was now on the European fringe offering an alternative model for everyday existence, a “Brave New World”, as one visiting commentator ominously put it in 1972 in The New Totalitarians (Huntford 1972). The idea of a “national character” enters the lexicon indicating the American preference for conceiving of a nation or a culture as a single giant personality easily understood in psychological terms. These “studies of the enemy” comprised a genre honed during the Second World War by American social scientists at the behest of the U.S. government.

During those post-war years, the most infamous off-handed characterization of Sweden and its presumed problems was pronounced by the avuncular U.S. President, Dwight Eisenhower. In the late 1950s, during an early debate about universal health care for its citizens, “Ike” drew attention to “a certain Scandinavian country” which he said had the world’s highest suicide rates, mainly as the result of easily available health care and other
social services that minimized individual responsibility. Although higher than that of the U. S. at the time (but not now), Sweden did not have a high suicide rate compared to the rest of the industrialized world; it was similar to Switzerland’s. According to “Ike”, “socialized medicine”, which he and other politicians had already secured for themselves as American public servants, would sap the will of the remainder of Americans as they struggled to survive in a competitive social environment. This stereotypical image of Swedes constantly on the verge of suicide was firmly set in the American public’s imagination and remains there to this day, over a half-century later. The suspected abundance of sexual activity in Sweden, which at the time was as scarce in the U.S. as health care, was also a matter of concern.

Illustrating this deplorable situation, a 1955 article in *Time* magazine reported that a Swedish official believed that sex was “natural” even for the unmarried young, so that education on the subject was prudent social policy. The essay continued that sociology had become “a religion itself” in Sweden, and proclaimed the results were as expected – sexual promiscuity, birth control, illegitimate babies, and unwed mothers who “are practically heroines”. Worst of all there were abortions for those who decided not to opt for heroine status. A fact-filled response to this depiction of Swedish immorality in a letter by the Swedish Ambassador in a subsequent issue had little effect. It was now sex and suicide, and somehow, they were connected.

Raising the temperature even further, the more conservative Catholic *Commonweal* magazine declared that the Swedes suffered from the usual “melancholy; a sort of spiritual deficiency-disease, a polite desperation” or “dullness”. Another commentator during this era declared that Sweden is “not quite the West”, for “the Scandinavia peninsula is more like “an extension of Siberia”. A presumed suppression of individuality in favor of the collective, an inordinate respect for authority, an overbearing bureaucracy, and low church attendance – even less than that of the Soviet Union, exclaimed one horror-stricken Irish American writer – led to the obvious comparisons to Sweden’s then Communist neighbor, the enemy of “the Free World”. Others drew attention to superficial correspondences between Sweden and Japan – the previously inscrutable oriental enemy of the Western Democracies – having to do with social formality. Harking back to World War II propaganda, the Swedes were depicted in one account as “...masters of concealment and evasion”.

These negative national character publications, at times funded by the C.I.A. through front organizations, chased Sweden through time and space to dislodge it from the Western World. The British author Paul Britten Austin as a “Writer in Residence” produced the best books on the country that was financially supporting him (Austin 1968 and 1970). After presenting an initial sympathetic image of the country, Austin proposes to decipher the Swedish personality by seeking out key cultural idioms. Apparently unaware that personality and culture are quite different abstract phenomena having no logical relationship to each other, Austin interprets what he considers to be familiar Swedish linguistic tropes. These include *längtan*, rendered in English as a self-satisfying longing for the unattainable; *stämning*, a feeling destroyed by attempts at verbal expression; *vemodsglad*, happy-sad; *ensamhet*, a sense of loneliness and isolation in the presence of others; and of course *lagom*, neither too little nor too much. He also refers to the slightly more up-beat but hardly uplifting concepts of *att trivas*, the almost unattainable ideal of spontaneous enjoyment, and *snäll*, good, kind, and well-behaved so as not to draw attention to oneself.

Without explanation, Austin seeks the inspiration for these themes in the isolation, inbreeding, and resulting homogeneity of Sweden, which inexplicably produced the “beautiful
Swedish blonde”. He also reflects on the overbearing sense of nature, cold climate, and periods of darkness that engender a brooding soul. “Like the physical landscape”, Austin writes, “the Swede’s psychological landscape seems in the past to have been particularly static”. On the other hand, he also concludes that Sweden’s rapid achievement of modernity has resulted in a sense of personal alienation. For him there seems to be “no easy solution to the problem of being Swedish”, as the natives engage in a paradoxically self-satisfying quest for the unattainable. For Austin, then, neither tradition, often seen as the saving grace of some societies, nor change, the savior for others, offers any respite for the Swedish character. Despite the absence of supporting data and in the face of contradictory evidence gathered in systematic fashion from the natives, indicating they would not recognize the image of themselves, Austin presents this negative and subjective portrait, as an objective account of another culture and people.

Others, such as Chris Mosey, another British resident journalist, echoed what was becoming a contemporary stereotype. In Cruel Awakening, he employs a similar strategy of feigned objectivity by first admitting that Swedish solutions to social problems still besetting other countries are impressive. He follows with the suggestion that these achievements have also produced an “impoverishment of the human spirit”, and inexplicably proposes the assassination of former Swedish Prime Minister Olof Palme, who was shot as he left a movie theater with his wife and son, as a meaningful metaphor for the failure of contemporary Swedish society (Mosey 1999). The American journalist David Jenkins, who visited and stayed in Sweden at the expense of an organization called “Meet Modern Sweden”, considers the usual topics in the now-familiar initially balanced tone. His discussion also considers the country’s “admirable” resolution to the social problems still plaguing other industrialized societies, but in Sweden and the Price of Progress (Jenkins 1969) concludes that it is a “boring place”. Finally, another journalist invited by the Swedish Institute in Stockholm to present his views on the country, listed the usual admirable social achievements before referring to “the dark side” of the Swedish landscape as the result of “widespread individual unhappiness and dissatisfaction,” and “despo-socialism”. The Swedish for “no good deed goes unpunished” would be apt at this point, but if quoted, a commentator would likely consider it characteristic of the dark side of the Swedish personality.

The negativity did not ease up with the end of the Cold War, as Sweden’s previous failings were replaced with contemporary ones. In what was intended to be an amusing account of the country that turns out to be laughable instead, P.J. O’Rouke takes some pleasure after a visit by noting in Eat the Rich that the Swedish experiment is now finally, finally, failing as the country vainly seeks “prosperity without capitalist chaos”. O’Rouke’s basic social indicator for this unhappy situation, which makes his New York City so much fun and Stockholm so dreary, is the number of “crazy people living on the streets” at home. For O’Rouke they could still make their appearance if Sweden would only get itself disorganized properly (O’Rouke 1998). This sketch is provided by a representative of the U.S. where at the present time twenty-two usually homeless veterans alone purposely end their lives on the street every day, in a country with the highest level of income inequality in the industrialized world and one with less social mobility than Sweden. On the most recent Social Progress Index, which provides objective measures of a country’s ability to meet basic human needs, well-being, and opportunities, Sweden ranked number two in the world, and the U.S. an unfortunate sixteenth.

These examples show that a literary strategy concerned primarily with creating and
promoting a negative image of another society, has been effective, but as argued, it has employed a simplistic and illogical procedure. Based on this perspective, which prioritizes personality over the group, the admittedly admirable societal achievements of the Swedes must have been produced by a uniformly dismal populace on the verge of suicide. How this woeful group managed to produce an admirable social system agreeable to everyone but the critics, is not explained.

To make sense of Sweden these personal negatives must be dismissed as causal factors and substituted with positive social characteristics such as a sense of community and collective responsibility, a concern for social justice, conciliation, and consensus rather than confrontation. These communal inclinations were regularly commented on by 18th and 19th century visitors to the country, which strongly suggest that they were the cause for the emergence of the Swedish welfare state in the 20th century.

In light of so much negativity, Sweden has apparently had to pay a penalty for going first in adopting certain national policies. Indeed, being correct may be less forgivable than outright error and failure. An example of this view is provided by a reporter for the British Spectator who in the 1960s drew attention to the “rigidity” of Swedish society at the time in prohibiting smoking in elevators, public transport, phone booths, and department stores. Worse, this reporter suggested there was hypocrisy on gender issues, since in Sweden, in order to be considered equal to a man, a woman had to be both educated and employed – as if these were apparent feminine failings.

Sweden has not only experienced the problems of “going first” but has also had to bear the burden of being the messenger of woeful tidings. The country’s rapid modernization and early responses to the problems of this complex process have not always been well received by others. Traits that are inevitably and regretfully referred to in the U.S. as contributing to the “collapse” of the family and marriage and the deterioration of “family values” made their appearance early on in Sweden. But these phenomena are the eventual products of a post-industrial capitalist society, rather than of the Swedish social welfare state that has had to respond to them initially. As these issues have appeared in other countries, Sweden has often been held up as a negative societal example. Again in this instance there has been confusion over cause and effect in assuming that Swedish social policy has been the cause of these rearrangements, rather than the response to them.

My primary concern here is not so much an apologia for Sweden as an understanding of the context that has allowed for the negative image of that society. Sweden’s national defects in the past, include its 17th century colonial adventures in the New World, imperial expansionism into Eastern Europe in the 18th and 19th centuries, the eugenics movement, and cooperation with Nazi Germany in the 20th century. All of these historical events had a negative effect on other countries. Oddly enough, these episodes are never mentioned by outsiders; Sweden receives a pass. Instead the country is taken to task for taxing its citizens for health care and social equality, as if these were failings to be guarded against by other countries.

**Postscript**

As a matter of full disclosure for this positive estimation of the country, I should add here that for some years I received a large orange envelope from Sweden with the word PENSION prominently displayed on the cover in black ink. The numerous enclosed sheets of paper explained in various languages that I could request a pension payment. I assumed this was
because for several months, one year I had been officially on the payroll at the University of Göteborg as a Visiting Professor to chair some Ph.D. “disputations”. The enclosure listed various amounts of Swedish krona, in boxes, that were clear enough. However, I could not figure out how often this amount would be paid over a year. Weekly seemed appealing. I eventually called Sweden and talked to someone in the pension office, who informed me in the usual perfect English and without a hint of humor – after a short pause to refer to her calculator – that the first figure in Swedish krona equaled about $2.34, which could be paid to me on a monthly basis. The second figure, the annual amount in Swedish krona, totaled – after another pause – $28.08. I was also informed that I could not receive these sums unless I lived in a country that had an agreement with Sweden for this purpose. The cost of the phone call was $50.68. I should put the pension aside for tips.

References


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2 Final examination and defence of the thesis (ed. note).
In Memoriam: William Arens

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Prof William Arens of Stony Brook University, an internationally renowned anthropologist and scholar, was a close friend and a much-appreciated colleague of several anthropologists in Sweden. He was awarded an honorary degree of Doctor of Philosophy at the University of Gothenburg in 1989. In 2000-2001, having gained a prestigious Fulbright Foreign Scholarship, he worked as a lecturer and research scholar for a long period of time at the Department of Social Anthropology, University of Gothenburg. Several years before that, he had completed extended fieldwork in Tanzania which in 1979 resulted in his first monograph, “On the Frontier of Change, Mto Wa Mbu, Tanzania”. In the same year his second book, which explored reports on cannibalism as a cultural phenomenon, “The Man-eating Myth”, was published. It stirred up heated but refreshing, perhaps even necessary, academic discussions; and so did his third book, “The Original Sin: Incest and its Meaning”, published in 1986. In the wake of the second book, he was invited to Sweden as a guest speaker, an invitation which resulted in several subsequent visits, long lasting ties, as well as the above-mentioned honorary degree at the University of Gothenburg. Meanwhile, he read and analysed much literature with Sweden as its subject. The present article – his analysis of travel literature available in English on Sweden and Scandinavia from the 18th to the 20th centuries, was finalised but not published before his demise at the age of 78 in August 2019; in it he skillfully explores the perceived image of the countries up north, particularly Sweden, presented to other nations of the Western world.