## EXTENDED COMMENTS

# When Doing Ethnography with Armed Movements:

# Participation, Rapport, Resistance – And Ethics

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### Introduction

In this text I discuss ethical challenges concerning ethnographic fieldworks and participant observation in resistance movements with armed branches. By so doing, my point of departure will be my own ethnographic fieldwork with the Kurdish movement in Turkey's Southeast that I conducted between May 2015 and January 2016. More precisely, I will discuss a particular instance when I was asked to participate in an unofficial weapon production workshop with militant youth activists in an autonomous Kurdish neighborhood. This situation evoked a series of hesitations, internal questioning and reflections concerning ethics, participation and Resistance Studies that will be addressed below. Although the research interest that brought me to Kurdistan was the movement's experiments with civil forms of *constructive resistance* (see Sörensen, 2016; Koefoed, 2017a) in the context of the movement's ideological paradigm of 'democratic autonomy' (see e.g. Jongerden & Akkaya, 2013), I will in this text focus on violent aspects of the autonomy project, as I find this particularly useful for a fruitful discussion on research ethics.

During the time of my fieldwork, the conflict between the Kurds and the Turkish State escalated dramatically. In July there was a violent attack on a cultural center in Suruç, a predominantly Kurdish town bordering Rojava, Syrian Kurdistan. The center was housing a delegation

of pro-Kurdish solidarity activists on their way to the town of Kobanê with humanitarian aid, hoping to assist in the process of rebuilding the war-torn city. Thirty-two activists were killed, and over one hundred were injured. The incidence shook the entire Kurdish community, and eventually led to the end to the ceasefire between the PKK and the Turkish State. In the wake of the Suruç attacks, a massive wave of declarations emerged from various Kurdish towns, cities and neighborhoods all over Turkey's Kurdish region – announcing 'democratic autonomy' from the Turkish State and denouncing all official Turkish institutions. The logic behind these declarations was a deep sense of mistrust in the Turkish political and social institutions, reflected in the following quote:

> The Turkish state is killing, and arresting, thus, we are building up these barricades (…) to protect our neighborhood, we do not accept the laws of the state, their laws permits killings, violence and torture, so why would we accept them? Therefore we are here building up a system of radical democracy[1], which is based on the ideology of Serok Apo.[2] In this system, it is the people who make the decisions ('Abdullah', movement activist, and member of a Kurdish District Council in an anonymous neighborhood).

Although the Kurdish movement in Turkey's Southeast also includes large scale and widespread civilian branches, civil grass roots initiatives (see Koefoed, 2017a; Tatort Kurdistan, 2013), and legal political parties (see Watts, 2011), it has its historical roots in the armed guerilla warfare of the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK) which still play a crucial symbolic and practical role today (see Marcus, 2007). PKK guerillas enjoy enormous social status among movement participants in the civil structures. Martyred PKK fighters are celebrated, commemorated and remembered through rituals, songs, poetry, theatre, photographs, posters, slogans, stories and cinema (see Koefoed, 2017). Urban semi-

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[1] What the Kurdish movement sees as 'radical democracy' is a fundamental component of their experiments with building up 'democratic autonomy'. For further details, please see (Akkaya & Jongerden, 2012)

[2] Serok Apo', meaning 'Leader Apo' refers to Abdullah Öcalan, the founding father of the PKK.

autonomous youth militia, formerly known as YDG-H, took the lead in 'securing' autonomous Kurdish neighborhoods from interference by Turkish police and military, resulting in long-lasting violent clashes, and also successive long-term curfews in certain areas.

While the importance of informed consent, anonymity, the do-no-harm principle and other box-ticking aspects of ethical research conduct should not be underestimated (see e.g. the papers by Joanna Allan and Massimiliana Urbano in this issue), the aim of this text is to shed lights on some of the more ambiguous, subtle and less clear-cut aspects that I see as related to ethical research conduct. Acknowledging the complexity of research ethics, this text offers no suggestions for 'best practice', but seeks rather to engage in a reflexive discussion illuminating some challenges that could emerge when doing participant observation with a movement that also has armed branches. Due to the controversial aspects of the incidence I will discuss below, I have chosen to not only conceal all names of individuals referred to in this text, but also to keep the names of place and dates hidden. I will start out with a brief description of the particular empirical context within which the incidence that will be addressed occurred.

## A Kurdish Autonomous Neighborhood

Towards the end of my fieldwork, I spent time in a semi-rural area in a small Kurdish neighborhood which had, a few months earlier, declared itself autonomous from the Turkish state by local movement activists. As the narrative of (democratic) autonomy is the discursive foundation underpinning most of the constructive resistance practices the movement had been establishing since 2005, it was essential to incorporate observations and interviews from some of these areas as part of my field research. I needed empirical data to flesh out the various ways political space was broadened by the movement, even when – as in the case I will address below – that broadening included the use of violence.

In this particular neighborhood, the Kurdish urban youth militia called the YDG-H was particularly strong. They were better organized, and seemed to have more direct connections to the guerillas of the PKK compared to in most other autonomous neighborhoods I had previously visited. I had learned that weapons had been smuggled from

'the mountains'[3] to strengthen their resistance. The local population was persistently organized in 'self-defense' activities on a nightly basis as a way to maintain and protect their newly acclaimed and threatened autonomy. This included a self-organized night watch roster consisting of ordinary civilians, covering all entrances of the neighborhood, informing the YDG-H to mobilize quickly in cases where Turkish police and military attempted to enter. From friends and local news, I knew that ever since autonomy had been announced, there had been regular violent confrontations between the YDG-H and Turkish forces in this neighborhood. Turkish forces had at several occasions attacked the area with tanks and helicopters to suppress the resistance. Also the strictly civil resistance projects, like autonomous Kurdish schools and cultural centers, had suffered from these attacks. The result had been massive violent and non-violent counter-resistance by militant youth and the general people from the local community. Several movement activists had been arrested, detained, and injured in the process, and multiple Turkish policemen had been injured. There had also been incidences of activists being killed, and in such cases, almost always claimed by the State to be members of the PKK.

It was in this particular neighborhood that some friends of mine suggested to take me to the local 'People's House'. People's Houses are buildings where movement participants organize meetings, plan resistance and prepare other political activities. They are also social centers where the community hangs out, people discuss, drink tea, sing, dance, and eat together. They could be seen as unofficial grassroots resistance 'headquarters', normally open 24/7, and essential for the resistance infrastructure.

To get to the People's House we passed self-made 'barricades', made either from piles of car tires filled with sacks of concrete, or large steel gallons filled with stones. In some places, activists had also dug trenches in the ground, deep enough to prevent jeeps from crossing. We passed local 'self-defense committees', consisting mainly of unarmed and lightly armed young adults, some of which had walkie-talkies, monitoring the

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[3] 'The mountains' is a euphemism commonly used by participants in the Kurdish movement to refer to the PKK guerillas (stationed in 'the mountains').

area for potential attempts to interfere by the police. As we walked, we passed political flags with logos of different branches of the Kurdish movement, civil and armed ones. Slogans of freedom, resistance and autonomy were painted in the Kurdish colors on walls of schools, shops and buildings. The atmosphere was filled with hope – and rage.

## The People's House

Posters of Abdullah Öcalan and martyred guerillas from the PKK, YPG and YPJ were covering the otherwise-bare concrete walls of the People's House. On the doors, printouts in black and white reminded visitors to turn off their phones and remove the batteries. When too many phone signals were centered at the same spot, I was told, the probability of being shelled by Turkish helicopters increased. As the Turkish surveillance system included censors that picked up phone signals when they reached a certain number, keeping many phones turned on at the same place enabled Turkish forces to detect movement meetings – in order to facilitate repression of resistance activities. On my question of whether they previously had experienced being shelled due to phones not being turned off, the answer I got was a short 'yes'.

As this was a cold and snowy day, my friends and I ended up spending hours at this People's House. People from the neighborhood came and went, and fresh pots of tea or coffee were constantly prepared on the fireplace. Especially the youth were eager to engage in conversations, and they had many questions about why we were there. They wanted to know what my research was about, where I had learned my Kurdish, what people in Europe thought about the Kurdish movement in general, and about Rojava in particular.

To the soothing smell of boiling coffee from the fireplace and tunes from Kurdish folk songs from a CD player, 'Baran', a guy in his mid-twenties who had been active in the entire conversations thus far asked me, 'so since you got education from the movement' - referring to the language training that I had received at the Kurdish movement's own language school, the Kurdî-Der - 'what are you going to give in return?' Acknowledging how little my research was likely to benefit the movement in any direct or indirect way, I hesitantly proposed that 'my book', as I called my PhD thesis due to the lack of a more precise

Kurdish vocabulary, would document how the movement establishes a new political system based on councils, jineolojî, ecology and radical democracy. 'Hopefully, that could be useful also for other minorities and people fighting elsewhere, including Norway, my native country', I explained. 'Baran' did not seem convinced. 'Do you see that door over there?' he asked. I nodded. 'Do you know what it is?' he continued. 'We are making weapons there for the self-defense. It's like a workshop. I'm going there now. Would you like to join?'

## Reciprocity, Participation, and Research Ethics

I was surprised by the directness of such a blunt proposition about this controversial – and illegal – activity, which he not only openly revealed to me that they were doing, but also expected me to join. I was terrified of how to deal with the situation in a way that would not disturb the trust it seemed I had gained.

From an ethnographic methodological point of view, where establishing rapport – trust building – is seen as essential for accessing credible, thick empirical data, 'Baran's' proposition put me as a researcher in a very difficult situation. In one way, his proposition could have been an attempt to 'test' how far I was willing to go to support the movement and their work. It could also be an act of social bonding, a confirmative gesture communicating that he had no doubts about me being on 'their side' in this highly militarized conflict setting. This was far from self-evident in a conflict where rumors of 'agents', secret police and State informers flourished, but essential for my trustworthiness, and therefore also for possibilities of me being included and a participant-observer in the movement's work, which was crucial for my research. From an access-gaining point of view, dismissing his proposition could hence have been a pretty stupid thing to do.

At the same time, accepting his offer would cross all sorts of boundaries for acceptable ethical research conduct. Do no harm. Academic distance. Lawfulness. Unforeseen – and in this case even foreseen – consequences. Even if I had not been there to conduct research, there was no doubt in me that participating in producing some kind of weapons, for whose purpose I did not even know, in a conflict setting where people were

imprisoned and often tortured, injured, and even killed, would have been absolutely out of the question.

However, from a resistance perspective 'Baran' had a point. I had received six months of language training at the Kurdî-Der from Kurdish movement activists who volunteered as teachers as a mean to promote Kurdish culture, and to resist cultural and linguistic assimilation. But what was I giving them in return? I had been taken under the wing by Kurdish movement members who gave me crucial insights into their fascinating work, and by so doing, enabling me to write a PhD thesis that clearly would benefit my own career and open up future employment opportunities. Unlike my Kurdish movement interlocutors, I was even getting paid in the process. The situation illuminated the fundamental lack of reciprocity in this researcher-interlocutor relation. And I did not like to see myself as a person engaged in social relations lacking reciprocity. A wave of shame washed over me.

Unable to categorically reject the underlying criticism that 'Baran's' proposition entailed, I hoped my answer would satisfy him when I hesitantly suggested that 'my book is my weapon', in a voice that involuntarily sounded thinner than usual, and with a smile that I noticed failed to evoke any sense of confidence. I pointed my finger towards the notebook that I so eagerly had taken notes in during the last hours of hangout with the youth. 'I cannot join you making those weapons, because my book is my weapon', I reassured, hoping my answer would be convincing enough for him to drop his proposition.

As soon as I had heard myself speak, a sensation of emotional and intellectual unease again entered my body. Strictly speaking, the reason why I did not want to join was not *because* I saw 'my book' as my weapon. As a matter of fact, I was painfully convinced that the PhD thesis in itself would have limited, if any, direct usefulness for activism. I could still vividly recall a senior researcher at my department in Sweden who, during my first PhD year, trying to convince me that 'nobody will read your PhD. Not even your supervisors will read your PhD in its entire length. Not even you will bother to read your entire PhD from the beginning to an end. I never read mine. Doing a PhD is like obtaining a driver's license. It is what comes afterwards that matters'. I still had some faith in academia's potential of producing societally-relevant ideas,

useful for activists and movements, especially when it came to Resistance Studies. But it would be a bold exaggeration to say that I saw my own research as 'a weapon'. And that was part of my problem. From an ethical point of view, could I really justify going to a conflict zone like Northern Kurdistan and 'taking' insights and knowledge from people who actually do resist, which additionally would benefit my own career, but without giving something in return?

'Baran' gently swept the notebook out of my hands and laughed in a mild but weary tone. He shook his head and looked down towards my book in his hands. 'I used to think like you. I was a journalist student before. Back then I also thought that my book was my weapon'. He looked up from my book straight at me. 'But then my brother was killed by the State. Then I quit my studies, and went to the mountains[4]. And now I do not think that my book is my weapon anymore. Now I am making *real* weapons'.

'Baran's' narrative could provide an interesting entry point for further conversations about why some activists in conflict settings sometimes decide to leave nonviolent resistance in favor of armed guerilla warfare. However, that was not my main concern at that moment. Rather, I was deliberating how to maneuver between ethical research conduct and the expectations of participation from the movement, when the movement also has violent branches? How to balance between maintaining trustworthiness in the eyes of the movement, and my own moral principles of right and wrong? How to balance between the requirement of some level of 'academic distance' – and social reciprocity while doing participant observation in Resistance Studies?

I could have taken a middle ground solution, refusing to participate in producing the weapons but accepting to enter the 'workshop' to observe how they were being made. In that way, I would not be directly involved in the weapon production myself, while simultaneously not completely rejecting his gesture of inclusion, thereby potentially also passing his 'test' to some degree, if that was what it was. But even the thought of entering the room made me uneasy, and I felt as though it would traverse an

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[4] In this context, 'going to the mountain' is another way to say 'joining the guerilla'.

emotional boundary I was not comfortable crossing. It was as though, just by entering, I would offer a gesture of approval for what they were doing; this would implicitly legitimize whatever future actions they were planning, hence potentially legitimizing violence.

At the same time, the potential act of entering to observe could provide me with knowledge that could be harmful if it ever came out. Was that a responsibility I would be strong enough to carry on my shoulders? There would be individuals, particular individuals, who could get into serious trouble with the authorities if they learned what they had been doing. I recalled my friend 'Ferat' and his stories of torture from a Turkish prison, where the police used brutal strategies to make him give them information and names of movement members. Perhaps it was better not to know these controversial things, I thought. What about those situations in which we as researchers gain information so sensitive that it could be seriously harmful, and how do we deal with that information in a way to ensure do-no-harm? I had no clear-cut answers to those questions.

Eventually, it was not so difficult to finally reject any sort of participation in 'Baran's' 'workshop' proposal. 'Baran' and I discussed a bit back and forth in a friendly tone based on what I experienced as mutual understanding. It was not hard to make him see that for me, joining his weapon producing workshop would simply cross my boundaries for what I was willing to do on a personal level.

Two days later, the Turkish police did manage to enter the neighborhood despite the barricades and trenches, and despite the monitoring work of the 'self-defense committees' and the YDG-H. Huge fights emerged as expected, and many Kurdish activists were detained and arrested. The morning after, I went back to the neighborhood to learn how the community dealt with the situation. Just a few meters outside the People's House where 'Baran' and I had had our conversation a few days before, parts of a completely destroyed Turkish police car were spread on the ground. When I asked what had happened, I was told that someone from the movement had placed a home-made bomb in the ground under the car, and that the whole thing had exploded. The car had been empty, and no individual had been injured in the process.

Doing ethnographic fieldwork in Resistance Studies with movements that have armed or militant branches may clearly create situations evoking peculiar ethical challenges, not likely to be an issue in other fields of research.

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