

Being “here”, researching “there”: Reflecting on Temporal and Spatial Remoteness in Ethnography

(Virtual) Workshop, Leibniz-Zentrum Moderner Orient (ZMO) Berlin, 2-3 December 2020

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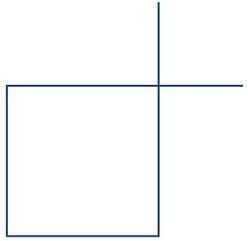
Deadline for applications: 30 September, 2020

While the classical anthropological method of stationary fieldwork, preferably in places that are unfamiliar to the researcher, has in recent decades been supplemented and partly replaced by other forms of ethnography (e.g. multi-sited and online ethnography), long-term immersion with the community studied is still one of the hallmarks of anthropological research.

The restrictions imposed on daily life in the course of the Corona Virus pandemic, however, demanding a forced, rather than voluntary, kind of remoteness and immobility, signify a sudden rupture to concepts of fieldwork that rely centrally on face-to-face encounters. Spending time with people and sharing everyday life become impossible when physical social contacts are associated with the threat of contagion and are generally avoided, if not outright prohibited. Moreover, traveling has become difficult with nearly no international flights, closed borders, imposed quarantine periods, and limited access to accommodation outside and also within private households. As a consequence, since the beginning of the pandemic some researchers have ended up “being stuck” in their fieldwork locations. Many others had to change their plans, as long-prepared research designs were suddenly not feasible anymore.

Yet for some scholars, engaging remotely with communities at the center of their studies is nothing new as they are denied access to these places by virtue of their nationality, political engagement, or for other reasons. For decades, exiled researchers for instance have developed strategies to gather material and testimonies remotely and reflected upon advantages and obstacles as well as on methodological implications of such constraints.

Margaret Mead in 1953 already noted that a range of circumstances may make it impossible to travel to the site of research. She significantly distinguished between a spatial and a temporal inaccessibility: while warfare and barriers to travel and research (for example due to visa regimes) belong in the first category, temporal inaccessibility might be caused by the physical destruction or extreme alteration of the site of study (for example caused by revolutions). In a number of settings today, both dimensions described by Mead painfully conflate. Take the example of Syria, which many researchers, of Syrian as well as other nationalities, have been unable or unwilling to visit due to the violence which has irrevocably altered and destroyed local life-worlds. In the face of such



destruction, the archival character of remote fieldwork becomes more pronounced, while also raising explicit methodological questions.

It is the aim of this workshop to discuss the implications of involuntary remoteness from the field – be it due to health regulations, political conflict, war, or other causes. How do the different circumstances of working remotely shape researchers' room for maneuver, and how are they positioned in/to the field depending on the reasons for remoteness? Are working remotely and working ethnographically necessarily incompatible categories? How do we reflect (on) the archival character of remote ethnography?

With this workshop, we wish to open up a space in which we can share different kinds of experience and strategies for working remotely. Which strategies work in which contexts, and which methodological, ethical or epistemological problems result from which (remote) access strategies to the field? We invite contributions from researchers and activist scholars who have been engaging especially in involuntary remote ethnographies in the different facets outlined above.

If interested, please send an abstract and a few sentences about yourself to remoteness@zmo.de by **September 30, 2020**.

The workshop will **take place on December 2-3, 2020**. Due to the present situation with the COVID pandemic, the workshop is **planned as a virtual event**. In order to allow for a well-prepared and fruitful discussion, presentations will be circulated (either in text form or as prerecorded – i.e., digitized talks) in advance to all participants. In view of this fact, participants are asked to submit their **presentations no later than November 22, 2020**.

Literature:

Margaret Mead (1953): The Study of Culture at a Distance.