Field Research in a Securitised Area: The State and Information in Sudan

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> Clearly, research on civil wars must be grounded in sustained, systematic, and long-term observation or ethnographic reconstruction at the mass level coupled with archival research.[2]

> Most the people here do not know, do not understand why the war started. Much worse they do not understand why it ended. They are scared that if they talk about it then it will start again.[3]

A field methodology for research in conflict areas has yet to be written: very little is published on the practice of such research, and the topic is rarely addressed directly out of fear of criticism. As a result, instead of authoritative texts and informed discussion, students learn what they can from conference-table war stories and peer experience,[4] extrapolating from literature on research on sensitive topics[5] and rare anthropological accounts of fieldwork in dangerous circumstances.[6] Although 'rigorous frameworks for understanding and explaining'[7] are, as Reno argues, perhaps useless in arenas in which events and actors intrude and disrupt any formal process, more guidance and awareness would improve both the rigour of research and the safety of the researcher. This article does not pretend to fill this academic gap but rather aims to contribute observations towards such a project.

What follows is both a descriptive and a reflective overview of some problems faced during field research in a securitised area, an environment where difficulties in accessing archives and unreliable interview information are compounded by concerns for the security of the researcher and his contacts. It looks briefly at orthodox questions concerning research design, access to sources and information problems, as well as the distinctly unorthodox question of human error and its consequences in field research.

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[2] Stathis Kalyvas, '"New" and "Old" Civil Wars: A Valid Distinction?' *World Politics,* 54 (2001): 118.
[3] Interview in East Beirut, Lebanon, September 2003.
[4] A great help here was the workshop on Field Research, organised by the Deutsches Vereinigug für Politische Wissenschaft (DVPW, or German Political Research Association) Ad-Hoc Group Ordnungen der Gewalt, Berlin 12 December 2002.
[5] Lee Raymond, *Doing Research on Sensitive Topics* (London: Sage Publications, 1993).
[6] Dennis Rodgers, 'Making Danger a Calling: Anthropology, violence, and the dilemmas of participant observation', in London School of Economics Crisis States Programme Working Papers Series 6 (London, 2001). http://www.crisisstates.com/download/wp/WP6_DR.pdf.
[7] Interview with Will Reno by Pablo Policzer, http://www.armedgroups.org/BREAKING%20NEWS/willreno.htm (accessed November 2004).

This article is based on three months field research in Northern and Central Sudan for a PhD project funded by the Volkswagen Foundation (VF), with some references to a similar stay in Lebanon.[8] The VF research group, based at Humboldt University, Berlin, is tasked with studying the micropolitics of armed groups in civil war. The group is, by necessity, multi-disciplinary. Developing social theory from the in-depth study of empirical cases,[9] the focus is not on building inductive models abstracted from a social context but on deducing causal explanations based upon a constitutive understanding of actors.[10]

The genesis of this project was the belief that the currently dominant economy of war approach, and the circular debate between 'greed' and 'grievance' when discussing the causes of civil wars, never represented more than part of the picture[11] and focused excessively on contextless and monocausal explanations of behaviour that confused individual and organisational action. The VF research group set about gathering, through fieldwork, empirical descriptions of the internal politics of a small sample of seperatist, militia, guerrilla and insurgent groups with which to build prospective generalisations that could be opposed to current theory.

Choosing Risk

Despite the scepticism of scholars used to data-rich studies of OECD countries, the academic study of instability, violence and war in developing countries is essential. Whilst the scepticism is rooted in the poor quality of data normally available from war-torn countries, the need for such research, paradoxically, is rooted in exactly the same place. Informed academic research dedicates more time and energy to simply understanding events and actors than any other enterprise. Academics are assessed, at least partially, by their peers, rather than consumers or clients, and possess an independence enviable to most journalists and analysts. As such, research, even when not a paradigm of scientific procedure, is an essential foundation for policy formulation and feeding public awareness in the international 'community'.

[8] A further source are the discussions held at a workshop on Field Research organised by the DVPW Ad-Hoc Group 'Ordnungen der Gewalt', held in Berlin on 12 December 2002.

[9] More explicitly, the research group's analytic approach is based upon the German 'World Society' (*Weltgesellschaft)* school of international relations. This approach theorises the world not as a quilt of distinct state-dominated territories, but as a fabric of different societal characteristics (values, organisations and economic systems) and systems of authority. At present most of the theoretical literature is only available in German. For an exception, see Dietrich Jung, 'The Political Sociology of World Society', *European Journal of International Relations* 7 (4) (2001): 443-474. More relevantly, for an empirical application of this approach, see Klaus Schlichte ed., *The Dynamics of States: The Formation and Crises of State Domination* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005).

[10] Alexander Wendt, 'On Constitution and Causation in International Relations', *Review of International Studies* 24 (1998): 101-118.

[11] David Keen, '"Since I am a Dog, Beware my Fangs": Beyond a 'rational violence' framework in the Sierra Leonean war', in London School of Economics *Crisis States Programme Working Papers*. (London, 2002).

On 9/11 the world saw the 'Mogadishu line', demarking the limits of international intervention in local conflicts, crossed from the other direction and with this, international indulgence of collapsed or failed states ended. This political interest creates responsibilities that should be reflected not only in the selection of research questions but also in methodology. The researcher is torn between unambiguous hypotheses (good for policy-relevant conclusions) and detailed explanations of single cases (that help avoid the 'frameworking' of complex social problems). Furthermore, one must choose between case studies that are known to provide 'data', and have generally been heavily studied before,[12] or cases about which little is known and research possibilities are perhaps uncertain or inconclusive.[13] The former will lead certainly to more robust research, yet risks merely replicating structural deficits in our knowledge both of countries and topics that are difficult to study.[14]

When deciding on my research design I opted for a combination of all options. On the one hand, I agreed with the anthropological sentiment that the study of war is a cynical exercise unless one goes to where violence takes place.[15] On the other hand, local observation alone makes it difficult to accumulate and amplify the generalisations necessary when building explanatory theory or formulating policy. Having decided, therefore, to attempt a political sociological study of the Sudanese civil war, I hedged the risk of studying this very fluid conflict by using Lebanon, a well studied civil war, as a comparative case.

Sources: of Politicians, Administrators and the Military

I landed at Khartoum airport on 20th December 2003 with few contacts and little, beyond a house, lined up. I first set about cultivating (drinking tea in) different arenas, various universities, the International Non-Governmental Organisation (INGO)/UN sector, the neighbourhood in which I lived and the government's Peace Advisory, as well as calling the telephone numbers I had and asking friends for potential leads. These strategies slowly bore fruit, but only after almost one month, much of which was spent on dead-end

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[12] For example many of the dominant hypotheses of greed-driven war and resource wars that purport to explain all or most civil wars have in reality been developed and tested almost entirely on relatively few African conflicts – notably Sierra Leone, Angola, Liberia and the DRC - cf Karen Ballentine and Jake Sherman, *The Political Economy of Armed Conflict: Beyond Greed and Grievance* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2003), 10.

[13] Rodgers, 'Making Danger a Calling'.

[14] For example, it is disturbing how much more is written on development and relief issues in an African context than is expended on studying how African societies and polities actually function. It is legitimate to ask whether in those societies about which greater historical and societal understanding exists, say Europe or the Middle East, such simplistic materialist explanations would be considered legitimate.

[15] A. Robben and C. Nordstrom, 'The anthropology and ethnography of violence and socio-political conflict', in C. Nordstrom and A. Robben eds., *Fieldwork Under Fire: Contemporary Studies of Violence and Survival* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995), 4.

interviews with highly sceptical interviewees and no-shows. The sole reason the quality and accessibility of contacts improved was the expansion of my personal network, or rather networks. One friend, a pro-government Sudanese expat, sought out passes and interviews with ex-police and military officials that would have been extremely difficult to procure alone. Furthermore, great leaps forward were provided by two influential expats willing to open their address books to a PhD student. However, even armed with telephone numbers, access could be difficult. One influential political-military figure in Khartoum, for example, answered my phone calls with his name and then politely denied his own existence every time I asked for an interview.

Another successful means of finding interviewees was through cold calling – dropping in on institutions and the houses of potential interviewees unexpectedly, and asking if they were willing to grant an interview. I openly stated my research interest, whilst avoiding discussions about my precise question, and whilst I conducted my interviews in private, did little to disguise my activities. The intention was to use my openness as a foil against suspicion and make myself, rather than any of my contacts, the focus of security officials. This practice exploited the vagueness of the researcher's position to gain information, as interviewees would talk to me whilst trying to establish what I was doing.

During the first three weeks I spent in Sudan I frequently found myself talking for hours to politicians, academics, or international workers with palpably little knowledge of my research question and with very particular political agendas. Most were resident in Khartoum and rarely came into contact with people outside of their personal networks defined by background, neighbourhood, profession or political affiliation. Some openly recognised that there was a lack of understanding that was crippling policy formulation, and willingly directed me in more fruitful directions. Particularly helpful in this regard were those Sudanese academics who were frustrated with a financial situation that forced them into repeated aid-related consultancies to the neglect of deeper analysis. I was embarrassed by their willingness to hold lengthy and insightful discussions, for which I could give very little in exchange. However, my most reliable sources were functionaries concerned more with the jobs they were doing than prefabricated explanations of events – from amongst both international and national sectors. Retired military officers, policemen, local administrators and INGO field workers provided more concrete information through their personal perspectives and observations than the assortment of long-winded explanations of experts in the capital. I am, for example, still grateful to the philosophically inclined rural administrator in a crumbling office who lectured me for four hours, very patiently, on the histories of tribal relations in the Nuba Mountains.

Similarly, and somewhat surprisingly, some high-ranking government supporters were willing to talk and could be surprisingly honest about their trajectories and frustrations. For some, once convinced that I was a genuine academic researcher, I represented an opportunity to understand Western

reactions to events in Sudan. To others, I was an opportunity to present views and arguments that they felt were ignored by Western media and activists. Other enlightening discussions came about through interviews with disgruntled government officers and political activists unconcerned with the potential repercussions of their testimonies.[16]

Passing Poison from Your Hands into Your Blood

A problem with studying an armed group from the perspective of its internal politics is that inevitably you understand the conflict from its perspective. This does not imply that actions are forgiven or that trust is established, but that clear moral judgements are obfuscated by a recognition of the constraints, obstacles and misconceptions faced by both leaders and combatants. That, in other words, you are forced to accept the humanity of those demonised by an international 'moral' community determined by adhesion to human rights and non-violence. You go from shaking hands with 'the violent' to beginning to understand their actions.

The higher ranks of the armed groups, or the politicians to which they were attached, were often charming, European-educated, Anglo- or Francophiles. Some had attempted to atone for their sins, some refused to accept any responsibility and others defended their actions firmly.[17] Many lied repeatedly and blatantly about their involvement, whilst a few were painfully honest either out of shame or anger. Most described their participation not as an action but the result of a process of involvement and acculturation to violence and a growing distance between themselves and the communities and values for whom they had taken up arms. There were others who were not of this mould, such as politicians and demagogues, whose views were simply repulsive, but they were the minority.

This was not solely a moral problem; to hear the other side of the story created problems that crossed political, ethnic and physical boundaries. In one town in the Nuba Mountains, I overheard that I was referred to, with disgust, as the 'White Arab', due to my visible contact with a number of local administrators and military officials.

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[16] Some because they had been in and out of prison already, others because they had powerful protection and others still who just wanted to say what they thought for once. Although I did not use names in my research, I was surprised by the number of interviewees who insisted that I quoted them and gave their names.

[17] Somewhat disturbingly, it was the former, not the latter, who appeared to bear most psychological scares as a result of their actions. One, the deputy of a much-feared intelligence service in Lebanon, trembled violently whilst explaining one particular event for which he was responsible, and then described the hate letters he had received after having confessed and apologised publicly for his actions.

Information: When Everything is True, Nothing is

The Sudanese government relies on apparent disorder as a means of maintaining comparative advantage over political rivals and keeping a step ahead of international pressure.[18] The reality of politics was not of a cohesive state, or even a shadow-state, but rather of institutions subverted by multiple, competing clientelistic and personal networks. Competition between rival networks did not focus solely on the accumulation of resources, although this played an important role, but more importantly on the distribution of positions, powers and reputations to allies. Private conflicts created disorder, disorder provoked confusion, confusion obfuscated responsibility, and responsibility, for many actors, is much better left unclear. Academic research aiming at clarity was in no way neutral or objective but deeply challenging to the very logic of this governance.

Having arrived in Northern Sudan I discovered that not only were the National Records Office, newspaper archives and various libraries difficult to access, but also that the Bank of Sudan's economic reports had been 'tidied' and the University of Khartoum had been cordoned off after a series of anti-regime demonstrations. Archival obstructions were not solely political: after finding me photocopying pages from an MA thesis, an elderly librarian at one University of Khartoum library refused me access to MA theses for copyright reasons.

Furthermore, the history of the conflict was simultaneously fiercely contested and rigidly controlled. Repression by the regime has encouraged the Sudanese to abandon a tradition of open political debate. Many Northerners were much better informed about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict than the war in their own country. I was forced to establish not only an explanation for actions, but simultaneously to try and extract, from a mass of multifaceted, fragmented and subjective information, a historical account of events. In both tasks, public or recorded facts were often as or less relevant than rumour, suspicion and superstition in determining behaviour.

To complicate matters further, the logic of disorder requires that the issues evoking a response from the multiple internal security agencies, are unspoken and, to an outsider, unpredictable. Topics deemed sensitive changed according to who one was speaking to and in what context. I was frequently tripped up in discussions of the war in the South by red lines that I was not aware existed. For example, whilst a discussion of Southern militias was acceptable to many of my interviewees, government officials became much more elusive when the discussion turned to militias in the West[19] or to particular names or dates. Frequently, only in retrospect and

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[18] Patrick Chabal and Jean-Pascal Daloz, *Africa Works: Disorder as Political Instrument* (Oxford: James Currey, 1999).

[19] For example, sensitivity to this point, after the massive attention given to Darfur recently, is obvious. Whilst conducting research in early 2003, Darfur was still discussed

with greater knowledge, did it become obvious why certain, even seemingly mundane, topics were sensitive.

The result of security concerns was that interviews often glided between structured and unstructured as I skirted away from sensitive topics and allowed interviewees to lead me away from sensitive prepared questions. Similarly, questions were often vaguely phrased and asked both for facts and opinions, allowing the interviewees themselves to choose the limits of what they wished to say and whether to discuss their role or that of a third party. This strategy, however, often led to equally vague answers, and the most successful interview style was the asking of concrete factual questions about general events – 'did this happen?'– that in themselves led to more specific questions about events or opinions, but would not necessarily incriminate the interviewee. Although I designed a survey for university students, this was abandoned after I became concerned about the security of the research assistants that would have been necessary for its implementation.

What to do when it All Goes Wrong

One aspect of fieldwork that has received almost no attention is that of the eventual consequences of error – not in method, but in judgement. Most texts on research methods reflect an ideal situation in which risks and uncertainty are assumed away, and researchers possess near impossible foresight and judgement. Reactions to admitting that much of what is done in the field is *ad-hoc* and reactive differ between disciplines, depending on their dependence on field study, and the disciplinary/institutional attitudes to risk.

Whilst conducting interviews in the Nuba Mountains in Sudan I was detained by internal security officers when applying for a travel permit. The direct cause of my detention was that one of my notebooks was opened and an illegible joke about Osama bin Laden was spotted, but deeper reasons were to blame. Of all of these, my increasing insensitivity to risk was the most instrumental. For example, the travel permit I had requested was for a village that lay very close to the front line. I had heard that this village had remained ethnically mixed throughout the war, and had wanted to interview residents about their personal experiences and perceptions of the fighting. What I find surprising, in retrospect, is that I was more relaxed in contemplating this trip than almost any of the trips to interviews I had taken in Khartoum. After two and a half months of conducting field research, sometimes in places where the first question asked of me would be 'do you realise where you are?', I had become incautious and clumsy.

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publicly only in the vocabulary of banditry. In private, however, a number of Sudanese openly stated that they were convinced the government was attempting to hide another war.

After three days of reporting to the local security offices for tea and questioning, I was escorted on a two day journey to Khartoum where I was detained for two weeks in the political section of Khober prison. During a rest stop on the journey back to Khartoum, I had called the emergency contact number that had been established in Berlin. This, combined with the Sudanese political climate of March 2003, would see me released sooner rather than later.

After being escorted to various offices and questioned for the first four days, I convinced my case officer that I was a researcher and was left largely alone until my release was negotiated by the British consul. I was held in a very loose version of solitary confinement, and denied the right to contact my embassy, but was otherwise treated well, in the sense that I was allowed to exercise and was fed three times a day. It is not an exaggeration to say that conditions in that particular section of the prison were substantially better than the living standards of most Sudanese, and were almost better than those of the local administrators I had met whilst travelling in rural areas. At no point was I in any way physically molested, although others around me had been. However, my statements were not investigated outside of the interrogation room, suggesting that coercion was the primary technique of information gathering. The main trauma of the experience was the confiscation of an important research notebook, largely due to the claim that it contained a military map.[20] When I was released all my money and belongings, except this notebook, were formally returned to me.

Whilst well-treated, I was never told what I had done or what was happening. All of my questions, even the most banal, were met with credible lies ('you are being released tonight/tomorrow, all you need is another permit which is being sent for as we speak, it is all ok'). However, the security services also had a problem. They were holding a foreign researcher with his prime potential interviewees, the highest ranks of political prisoners in Sudan, and were understandably nervous about any interaction I had with other inmates.

During questioning, I would not mention contacts unless my questioners had deduced the information first. I then determined who I could speak of, and in what context. As a result I felt that I was able to account for my activities in Sudan without endangering those I had contacted. It was apparent, however, I think, that I was not telling the whole story.

After two weeks, and around five days after the beginning of the invasion of Iraq, I was released. Very shaken, and unwilling to endanger contacts by continuing to do research, I changed my ticket to fly out of Khartoum. What saddened me most was that after the bombing of Baghdad,

[20] Only later did I deduce that they were referring to a spider diagram of the different social actors I considered relevant to the civil war. Ironically, I was given back the highly detailed UN map marking the location of all known minefields and roads in the area.

for the first time during my stay in Sudan, I felt, as a white man, aggression from people on the street.

Conclusion

My experiences in Sudan met with two distinct reactions from other academics. From African/Middle Eastern scholars, on the one hand, there was some concern about my well-being and often a deep interest in the impressions drawn and the characters encountered whilst I was detained. A number of scholars recounted similar tales that had happened to friends or themselves. On the other hand, political scientists more accustomed to the comforts of the armchair often responded with both disbelieve, and admonitions. I was told, as were colleagues of mine whilst attending a conference, that research 'was not worth' the risks I had taken.

I was forced to formulate both academic and moral arguments for why I held such research to be essential: both to maintain the vitality of social science research and the veracity of more 'clinical' studies of civil war. In my mind it seemed absurd to make such criticisms when Sudanese activists, academics and journalists, more so than any foreigner, took risks on a daily basis that were far greater than my own in pursuit not of political causes but of their own conscience or interests. It is also apparent to me that the academic search for 'truth' has only recently become a kind of sanitised history of innocuous exploration, and for much of its history has been both dangerous and challenging. In exchange, I willingly concede that my research would not meet the edified standards established for research in other fields, and furthermore that this is a goal towards that research in difficult areas should seek to reach. Methodological weakness should not be considered merely the norm of such studies, but a cost that should be minimised and defrayed as effectively as possible.

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