Historical Representations

Kevin C. Dunn

I am most interested in how certain social identities are constructed, and how they make certain practices possible but others unthinkable. Like Roxanne Doty, I examine how meanings are produced and attached to various social subjects and objects, thus constituting particular interpretive dispositions that create certain possibilities and preclude others (1996: 4). I am less interested in ‘what’ questions, since these often prompt historical narratives that mistakenly assume a simple linearity of events. I am also less interested in ‘why’ questions, which tend to assume that a certain set of choices and answers pre-exist. Rather, we should investigate how those options and the larger possibilities of action get established. Doing so allows for greater understanding of the processes and interactions within international relations.

Choosing to explore these questions raises another fundamental ‘how’ question: How does one actually investigate structures of knowledge, such as social identities? How does one collect and analyze appropriate data? Because humans make sense of the world by navigating the social understandings that make reality knowable, researchers must employ interpretative methods. In doing my research on historical representations, I focus in various ways on language, ideas, and culture, particularly as they contribute to the creation of structures of knowledge during specific historical moments.

In this chapter, I discuss the various theoretical and methodological issues I encountered while researching my dissertation on representations of Congolese identity, which was later published as Imagining the Congo (2003). In the first section, I explain what I mean by historical representations, why it is important to study them, how they are linked to broader discourses, and why a deep historical analysis is needed. Employing a contextualized ‘thick’ description is useful for gathering and analyzing data, I argue, but not without limitations. The rest of the essay is dedicated to a frank discussion of how one does this type of research while avoiding possible pitfalls. To guide potential researchers, I focus on four issues in this final section: parameters, sources, data collection, and analysis.

Representation and interpretation

My interest in historical representations flows from my epistemological assumptions, which are grounded in post-modernist and post-structuralist thought. ‘Reality’ is unknowable outside human perception, and there is never only one authority on a given subject. As Friedrich Nietzsche noted, ‘There are no facts in themselves. It is always necessary to begin by introducing a meaning in order that there can be a fact’ (quoted in Barthes 1981: 15; see also Leander and Neumann in this book). This position does not deny the existence of reality but suggests that the ‘true’ essence of the object is always unknowable to us. Therefore we must interpret representations of it.

By historical representation, I refer to how the object of an inquiry (X) has been represented over time and space. X can be anything at all: a country (the Congo), a nation or community (the Kurds), a person (Saddam Hussein), or a concept (sovereignty). Societies discursively produce, circulate, and consume representations of X, constructing what are often called ‘regimes of truth’ or ‘knowledge.’ These discourses are comprised of signifying sequences that constitute more or less coherent frameworks for what can be said and done. Perhaps the best-known example of this approach is Edward Said’s Orientalism (1978), in which he exposed how British and French societies constructed ‘truth claims’ about the supposed innate and inferior qualities of non-white, non-Christian, ‘Oriental’ people.

Informed by Said and other like-minded scholars, numerous international relations (IR) scholars have studied historical representations. Roxanne Doty’s Imperial Encounters (1996) compares asymmetrical encounters between Great Britain and colonial Kenya with representations of the Philippines by the United States within its own imperial project. Cynthia Weber’s Simulating Sovereignty (1995) traces how the meaning of sovereignty has shifted over time within discourses of intervention. Her later book Faking It (1999) playfully explores the representation of the Caribbean region in US foreign policy discourses. I will discuss my own work on contested meanings of the Congo in
historical representations

keith c. drum

81

more detail below. one of my current research projects uses african
american history as a case study to explore the

social interactions of knowledge and identity. i have been interested
in how certain structures of knowledge become dominant and
what implications this has for how knowledge is produced and
distributed in society. i have been particularly interested in how
knowledge is produced and circulated in different contexts,
and how this production and circulation is negotiated by
people in different social and cultural settings.
specific discursive agents and their struggle to gain hegemonic representation. I had to distinguish between Western governments (particularly the United States and Belgium) and explore important divisions within those governments (such as between the White House, CIA, and State Department).

Power is also exercised through the circulation process as competing discourses jockey for greater social acceptance and reproduction. There are often multiple and complex reasons for certain discourses gaining hegemony, and I believe it is important that a researcher be sensitive to these issues. Indeed, while discourses shape power, power also shapes discourse. Power, like discourses, is never totally centralized. A primary goal of this approach is to explore the relationship between discourse and power as they relate to representation (see also Ackerly in this book). The significant points I would underscore here are the multiplicity and contestation of discourses; the complicated ways in which power works through the production and circulation processes; and the recognition that researchers are not neutral observers, but often are intimately related to the power hierarchies at play.

With regards to agency, this approach assumes that people are guided to act in certain ways, and not others, by their discursively produced understanding of the world and their place in it (see Ringmar 1996). It rejects arguments that actors are motivated by inherent (universal) interests, rational means-ends preferences, or even internalized norms and values. As a fairly macro-level approach, it is admittedly limited in its ability to investigate issues of agency (again, see Leander’s employment of Bourdieu). But I am skeptical that micro-level attempts at causal explanation offer better analyses because micro-level analyses usually ignore the effects of discourses as structures of meaning (contrast with Checkel’s claims in this book).

So how does one study representations? My own work on the Congo assumed that representational practices are embedded in historical social narratives. Therefore, I combined discourse analysis and historical research to examine struggles over the articulation and circulation of competing narratives. Each of these actors claimed dominant authorship, but obviously, some of these voices were reproduced more than others, giving them greater ‘weight.’

Exploring the complexities of this discursive production required me to engage with a wide and diverse spectrum of sources and authors. During the 1960s, for instance, the Congo was rewritten on the floor of the UN General Assembly by representatives from the Soviet Union, newly independent African states (most notably Ghana and Guinea), Belgium, and the United States, all competing to present their narrative of events. Within the Congo, multiple voices – President, Prime Minister, future coup leader, secessionist leader, local media, citizenry groups, members of the army – articulated either a Congolese national identity or a regional, sub-state identity. Competing narratives also circulated in international and regional media, pamphlets and fliers passed around at political meetings across the globe, government pronouncements from Western and African capitals, best-selling novels, fictional and documentary films, and the ‘bush’ of the Congolese jungle. As I discuss in the next section, I found it necessary to engage in a wide variety of sources when researching, in part to explore the multiplicity and contestation of discourses, to disaggregate actors, and to explore the complicated ways discourses were circulated and achieved social dominance.

Interpretation requires not just a description of these particular representations and representational practices but a deeper contextualization within the larger structures of meaning of which they are a part. Without going into the theoretical and philosophical debates within the discipline of History (see White 1978; Barthes 1981), let me merely point out that I believe historians produce their own ‘regimes of truth,’ not objective ‘truth.’ History produces its own discourses. Research is highly contested, and the historian is not neutral. This means that both primary and secondary sources should be treated as texts to be decoded and deconstructed. Moreover, this requires a distinction between empiricism as a method (skills of verification, close textual attention, proper sourcing, referencing, and so on) and as a philosophy of knowledge (the illusion of delivering fact, truth, and a knowable reality). While I (and other ‘post-modern historians’) value the former, we reject the latter.

I find Clifford Geertz’s ‘thick description’ (1973) a useful label for this type of deeply contextualized historical analysis. In particular, I have found the ‘long conversation’ concept of historical anthropologists Jean and John Comaroff to be a useful way of understanding the historic contestation over representations. In their work on the colonial contact between the Tswana peoples of South Africa and the British Christian missionaries, the Comaroffs define the ‘long conversation’ as ‘the actions and interactions that laid the bases of an intelligible colonial discourse’ (1991: 198–9). They argue that there were two faces to this conversation between colonizer and colonized: what was talked about; and the struggle to gain mastery over the terms of the encounter. I believe that representations are historically produced within similar ‘long conversations,’ where multiple actors come together to contest the meanings of those identities and the terms in which they are expressed.
Drawing from my research on the Congo, one can see such a conversation taking place at the time of Congolese independence. What was under discussion was the extent that the Congolese were ‘civilized,’ ‘developed,’ and ‘mature’ enough to enjoy the ‘gift’ of independence and sovereignty. One can recognize how various actors struggled to establish both what was talked about and the terms of that conversation.

However, there is a third dimension to the ‘long conversation’ overlooked by the Comoroffs: the struggle over finding and creating an acceptable position or space within the conversation. Specifically, this refers to the ability to access ‘discursive space’ within which to engage in the conversation – as Foucault noted, discourses empower certain people to speak (and act). Delineating and policing discursive space has been an important element in international relations, especially for disadvantaged Third World states like the Congo. At times, international discursive space has been actively closed off to competing and counterhegemonic discourses. For example, immediately after independence, Western governments not only intervened directly to deny the seating of Prime Minister Patrice Lumumba’s United Nations delegation, but also his access to the radio station in his country’s capital. Both of these actions effectively limited his ability to articulate and circulate his narratives of Congolese identity within the ‘long conversation’ at the moment of Congolese independence.

Let me reiterate that I am not arguing that the existence or absence of a specific historical representation offers a causal explanation, largely because these representations are historically contingent (see Hermann’s discussion of content analysis and Duffy’s application of pragmatic analysis, both in this book). For example, the image of Congolese ‘inherent savagery’ (a familiar Western trope) engendered intervention and colonial conquest in the late 19th century: ‘bringing civilization to the savages.’ But this same representation enabled Western policies of inaction and indifference to the Congo a century later: ‘violence is due to their innate barbarism and tribalism, so there is nothing we can do about it.’ Representations do not cause policies, such as intervention, nor do they explain choices, such as whether to intervene at one time rather than another. Representations cannot determine action completely. As Neumann notes, ‘Discourse analysis aims at specifying the bandwidth of possible outcomes’ (in this book: 62).

I maintain that structures of knowledge establish preconditions and parameters for the possibility of action, rather than explaining why certain choices are made. For example, it helps a researcher understand the range of options imaginable to President John F. Kennedy during the Cuban Missile Crisis, but it does not explain why he made specific decisions (Weldes 1999). To examine individual decision making, one would need to employ other methods. But while there might be methodological compatibility, one should be sensitive to the possible existence of an epistemological divide on the issue of causality. Personally, I remain unconvinced that we as scholars can offer causal explanations, only reasonably informed conjectures. The world is far too complex and contingent to be studied with any degree of certainty. My postpositivist approach is based on ‘a logic of interpretation that acknowledges the improbability of cataloguing, calculating, and specifying “real causes”’ (Campbell 1993: 7-8; also see the significant differences between Gusterson and Checkel in this book).

**Practical advice for dealing with data**

There are several steps to this method, each with its logistical challenges. I will discuss some of these along four general lines: establishing the parameters of a doable project, selecting appropriate sources of data, collecting that data, and analyzing it. But let me preface those comments by pointing out that there is almost always an arbitrary element in case selection (even more than Klotz suggests in this book). Many cases may actually work just as well as the ones you end up choosing. It is always useful to keep in mind that your project should be relevant, enjoyable, and doable.

Simple logistical issues will determine some parameters of your research. For example, basic language limitations matter: if you do not speak or read the language that most of the data is in, you should probably find another case. Or there simply might not be enough information out there to find. But you do have to make others choices for yourself, and you should be honest about why you make them. My comments here aim to help researchers understand the intellectual justifications that underpin the choices involved in historical analysis of representations.

**Establishing parameters**

It is easy to get overwhelmed by a topic that is just too unwieldy. I find it useful to pick a very narrow, specific topic that allows me to explore much larger issues (note Leander’s similar advice). For my dissertation, I chose to examine how the Congo had been represented within the international community, beginning with its colonial conquest up to the current civil war. This case study let me explore not only issues of
colonialism and neo-colonialism, but the social construction of sovereignty, the performativity of stateness, repression, and resistance, and the decline of the Westphalian state system.

However, telling the definitive story of how the Congo has been imagined over the past century would be an overwhelming task, filling numerous volumes. To make my project doable, I focused on four historical moments: the colonial ‘invention’ of the Congo at the end of the 19th century; its decolonization in 1960; its re-invention as ‘Zaïre’ during the 1970s; and the ‘return’ of the Congo at the end of the 20th century. (For more guidance on demarcating such historical periods, see Neumann’s discussion of ‘monuments.’) During each of these four periods, the identity of the Congo was being contested, with numerous forces attempting to produce and attach meanings to its territory and people. These forces sought to create ‘regimes of truth’ about the Congo by defining and inscribing its identity.

I originally wanted to have six historical moments but found that would require more time and effort than was reasonable. Likewise, I wanted to have one of my historical moments focus on the Ali-Foreman ‘Rumble in the Jungle,’ and I soon realized that there were a few strong intellectual reasons to include that case beyond it simply being ‘cool’ – if there had not been a larger justification, being ‘cool’ would not cut it. When examining historical representations, what matters most is selecting points where forces are seeking to create regimes of truth about the object of inquiry, representation X, by defining and inscribing its meaning. This type of approach stresses historical contingency with a focus on ruptures and disjunctions rather than continuities. In researching the Congo, I chose four moments that seemed to involve the greatest degree of contestation over the Congo’s identity and that were historically varied, spanning over a century. Admittedly there can be a bit of arbitrariness in the selection of historical moments, but one should acquire a certain level of background knowledge on the subject in order to identify empirically rich moments of historical rupture.

Sources of data
When I talk about ‘data,’ I am first and foremost referring to textual representations: attempts to fix the meanings of my object of inquiry, representation X. This tends to be done by numerous actors. Discourse analysis requires employing multiple texts given that a single source cannot be claimed to support empirical arguments about discourse as a social background (Milliken 1999: 233). When researching the construction of Congolese identity, I engaged empirical data from a broad array of sources. While the majority came from the ‘official’ realm of governmental reports, speeches, and documents, I also drew from journalism, travel literature, academic treatises, fiction, film, museum displays, art, images, maps, and other ‘popular’ texts. These texts often provide the most vivid and potent examples of the techniques through which Third World subjects have been narrated by Western hegemonic powers. For many outside observers, including politicians, these are the sources that have provided the primary framework within which the Congo has been made ‘knowable.’ As David Newbury (1998) pointed out, many Westerners are intellectually uninformed about the Congo but are so inundated by stereotypical images that they feel they have a well-defined cognitive framework. Novels such as Heart of Darkness, films such as Congo, and cartoons such as Tintin in the Congo constitute the basic discursive structure through which many Westerners view the Congo even today.

Different topics will, of course, mean engaging in different sources of data. But I firmly believe in casting the net wide, mainly because our structures of knowledge derive from a variety of sources. Therefore, possible sources include (but are by no means limited to): speeches by political leaders and elites, government records and public announcements, private writings of political elites, popular fiction, non-fiction, newspapers, magazines, music, cartoons, music, television, and the Internet. I will discuss the ‘weighting’ of various data below, but for now I think it is important to begin with an open mind (see also Ackerly and Neumann). A popular text (that is, a text with wide circulation such as a presidential speech, popular movie, or well-known photograph) will clearly be important in the process of structuring meaning. But more obscure texts (those that have a much more limited circulation, like an academic article or poem by an unknown writer) are often still important, if for no other reason than they represent an alternative to the dominant discourse.

Collecting data
I often combine archival work in historical records with interviews and investigations of popular culture texts. These three sources can each provide their own unique problems. Despite my emphasis on narrowing down potential sources, scarcity of data can also be an issue, since gaining access to data can be challenging. While I regard the distinction between ‘official’ and the ‘popular’ data to be a fiction of the discipline, I employ the distinction here in order to highlight different ways of collecting data for each. The ‘official’ is
what has traditionally been treated by the political science discipline as ‘legitimate’ source material: government documents, speeches by state leaders, the writings of political elites, and so forth. What I am calling the ‘popular’ can be considered the non-traditional: literature, movies, music, cartoons, and so forth. This has generally been designated at the realm of ‘popular culture’ as opposed to ‘political culture.’

The ‘official’ data relevant for an examination of historical representations are found in a number of places, from libraries and the Internet, but most often in government archives. Without meaning to state the obvious, not all archives are the same. For example, the British National Archive is extremely well organized, with the entire catalog accessible from the Web. But some countries have, shall we say, a different culture about sharing state records. The Belgian archive was very difficult for me to access, and I was denied entry on several occasions. Or it may be that no organized archives exist to house the historical material you are interested in investigating. For example, King Leopold II burned almost all the documents associated with his rule in the Congo immediately before handing control over to the Belgian government. Fortunately, the Belgian foreign ministry had their own copies of many of the torched documents.

Archives in the developing world often are not as organized, accessible, and user-friendly as those in the developed world, possibly for good reasons – ranging from a healthy (and sometimes well-founded) suspicion of Western researchers to neglect and mismanagement to the impoverishment of state infrastructures due to global inequalities. Sometimes state officials might not even be aware of the existence of archives even though they may be in the same building – an experience I have encountered on more than one occasion. It is usually safe to assume that your time in the archive will take longer than you expect. My experience has been that a personal contact at an archive (no matter where it is) is an invaluable asset for the researcher.

Access to popular culture can also be difficult or simply impossible. For example, I have no idea how I would go about accessing texts from Congolese society in the late 18th century. Therefore, I only examined examples of Western fiction and non-fiction writing, from travelogues by colonial explorers and tourists to popular novels by Conrad and Graham Greene. I examined the ways the Congo was discursively represented: As an empty landscape waiting for Western conquest (Stanley)? As a primordial ‘heart of darkness’ that corrupted civilized Europeans (Conrad)? These were powerful and evocative images that have been re-employed and circulated frequently over time. I also looked at the representations of the Congo in the popular press. I focused on the major newspapers in Belgium, the United States, and France, including major magazines of the day, such as Time, Life, and Newsweek. I also found it useful to examine how the Congo was portrayed in music, movies, television, and cartoons (a highly fruitful source of data for multiple reasons). Museums, world exhibitions, and public spaces (such as public statues and commemorative arches in Brussels) provided additional rich source material. While by no means a comprehensive sample of how the Congo was portrayed in the Western popular imagination, drawing on the myriad of textual and visual forms by which actors attempt to articulate, circulate, and fix meanings compensates for inevitable limitations in any particular source of data.

A potential limitation is language proficiency. The representations of the Congo exist in numerous languages. For example, there are several major languages in the Congo itself (including French, Lingala, Kiswahili, Kikongo, and Tshiluba), while its colonial ruler, Belgium, has three official languages – none of which are my native tongue. This has meant that countless relevant texts went unstudied by me simply because I could not understand them. And even when I could, I suspect my language skills were not proficient enough to capture subtle meanings, allusions, and jokes. This is a serious problem (see Neumann’s observations about ‘cultural competency’). Focusing on material only available in your native tongue greatly limits your observations. In the end, I tried to acknowledge these limitations, avoid any overly grand claims, and recognize the narrow focus of my work.

Interviews provide more challenges than I have room here to discuss fully (see Gusterson for elaboration). Gaining access to subjects can often be difficult. Again, language limitations can also be problematic. For instance, I often use an interpreter and rely on him to accurately translate the words and meanings of the speaker, which is often extremely difficult to do. My being a white male also raises gender and racial problems that can often color the exchange, and often in ways that I am unaware. And, of course, interview subjects may simply be untruthful for numerous reasons.

In many cases, the researcher may be faced with data overload, a problem I frequently encountered when doing my Congo research. For example, when investigating historical representations of the Congo at the time of independence, I was simply swamped with what often seemed to be relevant data – from National Geographic articles to innumerable political cartoons from the European press to an endless slew of official pronouncements from various governments. If I did not make
hard decisions about what counted and what would not (such as limiting my review of newspapers and news magazines to a handful), I have no doubt I would still be researching today—and in some ways I still am! This gets back to my earlier point about setting parameters: I had to make tough decisions in order to make my project doable, and I had to have solid intellectual reasons for making those decisions. I tried to be as honest and transparent about those decisions as I could (see both Leander and Ackerly on reflexivity). As a result, all my conclusions are tentative and tenuous at best. But I believe that is the nature—and value—of doing qualitative research.

**Analyzing data**

So what do you look for in the data? Even as I am gathering data, I begin analyzing it. First, I try to identify the different discourses engaged in representing X at a given moment. In what ways do these actors represent the object of inquiry? What type of language do they use when referring to it? For example, at the time of Congolese independence, how did Western leaders in Belgium and the United States portray the country, its inhabitants, and its leaders?

Second, I chart the contestation of these discourses. For instance, why did the Belgian and American presses portray the Congo in different—though equally negative—ways at independence? Who is engaged in the articulation and circulation of these alternative discourses? What is potentially at stake for these actors? Why do certain discourses emerge as socially dominant but others do not? What are the social and political strategies involved in that contestation? How are these discourses being consumed, and by whom?

Third, I historicize and contextualize these representations and discourses within the larger structures of meaning of which they are a part. For example, American representations of the Congo during its independence were situated within a larger Cold War discursive framework, while Belgian representations were part of a longer colonially inspired framework. Sensitivity to history and context allowed me to observe how portrayals of the Congo changed over time. Here is where I also realized how much the ‘official’ sources were informed by ‘popular’ structures of knowledge. During the 1960 crisis surrounding Congolese independence, Western political elites frequently employed texts, metaphors, and images from popular culture, ranging from Tarzan movies to Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and H.G. Wells' *War of the Worlds* to contemporary magazines and cartoons. The reason for this is simple: the structures of knowledge in a society are as much a product of ‘popular’ culture as they are of ‘political’ culture. The dichotomy between the two is an illusion that obscures more than it reveals.

Finally, I explore how the dominant discourses enable certain policies and practices to become possible. That is, what becomes thinkable and what does not? For example, the Eisenhower Administration's eventual declaration that there was a Congolese problem, and that Lumumba was the source of that problem, had clear political implications: namely, the authorization of his assassination by the CIA. This action was only thinkable because of the representations generated during this time (with their strong historical roots).

Obviously, my approach produced copious amounts of notes (always written on just one side of the page so as to make it easier to find missing quotes or pieces of information later). In this work, I try to track the development of representations and assess their intensity in terms of circulation and social acceptance. I try to structure a narrative of these events—the production, circulation, and contestation of discourses and the range of possible actions they engender. Admittedly, the narrative I produce is an artificial and subjective creation that I use to impose order. Since I am interested in examining historical contingency by focusing on ruptures and disjunctures, I eschew the impulse of traditional historical narratives to portray continuity. In the end, I try to write a convincing narrative that provides an understanding of the 'how' questions which initiated my research.

**Conclusion**

As I noted at the outset, I do not believe that the world presents itself to us as self-evident. I believe our engagement with it is based on interpretation. As human beings, we make sense of the world around us through the social construction of the meanings, characteristics, and ‘truth’ that make reality ‘knowable.’ There is no way to step outside of interpretation. There is no objective Truth to discover, only competing interpretations to navigate.

Since my epistemological position is open to the criticism that it leads to relativism and raises questions about the role of the researcher in the interpretive process, let me respond. I do not believe it is possible to strive for some mythical goal of objectivity, since no such *terra firma* exists. Therefore, I recognize I am not neutral, and I am not too concerned with charges of interpretative bias. But are there ways to decide what counts as 'good' analysis? I believe there are. For me, there
are two important issues to consider when judging the validity of one's interpretation. First, is there supporting evidence to back up my claims? As a researcher, it will often seem obvious to us that the bulk of our data is pointing to a certain set of interpretations. Of course, our interpretation of that data is what is leading us to our concluding interpretation. But I believe it is important to have supporting evidence. If I claim that the US government portrayed the Congo as Y, which thus enabled it to act in Z manner, I need to provide evidence of both Y and Z. If I cannot, then my claims should be taken as highly speculative. I would argue that this is the reason one needs to do as much historical research as possible. But am I slipping rationality and empiricism back in? I reiterate my distinction between empiricism as method versus philosophy of knowledge. The value I place on the former does not make my claims 'true,' but it does strengthen my ability to argue for their validity.

This leads to my second point: that the validity of one's interpretation can be measured by its logical coherence does not imply that there is an objective measure of logical coherence (in contrast to a rational choice approach, for instance). Put simply, I am interested in whether or not my conclusions make sense to me, and if they are convincing to others. Do they provide a reasonable answer for the questions I was trying to answer? If not, then I try again. Does such a position lead to relativism? Absolutely. My goal as a researcher is to provide an argument about why my interpretation is valid, so that I can convince others that mine is one of the best interpretations out there. In a very real sense, I am constructing my own representation of the representations I am studying – I am very much part of the process of knowledge construction that I am investigating. Being self-reflexive and honest, I admit that I, like all other researchers, am motivated by an array of personal, political, and intellectual agendas. With my work, I am constructing my own discourses. And because I want them to gain social dominance, I am concerned that my conclusions convince other people.

7
Ethnographic Research
Hugh Gusterson

The anthropologist is always inclined to turn toward the concrete, the particular, the microscopic. We are the miniaturists of the social sciences, painting on Lilliputian canvases with what we take to be delicate strokes. We hope to find in the little what eludes us in the large, to stumble upon general truths while sorting through special cases.

Clifford Geertz (1968: 4)

James Clifford (1997: 56) has, in a much cited locution borrowed from Renato Rosaldo, theorized the methodology of ethnographic research – my craft – as ‘deep hanging out.’ This perverse phrase captures nicely the improvisational quality of fieldwork, the confusing overlap between informal streetcorner conversation and the serious inquiry embodied in ethnographic fieldwork, and the profound level of understanding of the other for which ethnography aims through apparently casual methods.

This phrase ‘deep hanging out’ also hints at a contrast between the methodologies of cultural anthropology (which inclines toward the informal) and political science (which is more tightly buttoned). It is my impression, based on limited observation of the training of graduate students in international relations, that political scientists are expected to go into their dissertation research with well-honed hypotheses that aim to prise open crevices in the existing literature based on a careful parsing of independent and dependent variables and a shrewd selection of case studies that might illuminate the relationships between those variables. Political Science graduate students often seem to know what their dissertation will argue, and what the chapter outline will look like, before they have got deeply into the research.