NOTES FROM THE FIELD

Methodology Matters in Iran

Researching Social Movements in Authoritarian Contexts

Paola Rivetti

Abstract: How can scholars conduct fieldwork in an authoritarian environment, engaging 'dangerous' topics such as social movements in Iran? How can they overcome the limitations imposed by the authoritarian state and win the trust of activists? This article reflects on the knowledge that scholars produce under such difficult circumstances, arguing that the deployment of non-mainstream research practices and methods can benefit the scholarship, exposing under-studied and overlooked aspects of the topic investigated. More specifically, the article elaborates on how methodological choices inform the knowledge we produce and how they can therefore be used to overcome structural limitations generating innovative and fairer scholarship.

Keywords: activism, co-research, fieldwork, Iran, methodology, social movements

This article examines how conducting fieldwork with qualitative research methods that question the binary distinction between the 'researcher' and the 'object of the research' generates findings that may ultimately innovate the study of social movements in authoritarian contexts, generating better and fairer knowledge. This is part of a broader methodological reflection that looks at research methods as an integral part of a research project, not as a mere instrument for gathering evidences, and that have, therefore, a significant impact on the nature of the project itself and the knowledge produced.

While mainstream scholarship approaches the study of social movements with theory-led questions or by applying a theoretical model (usually produced in European or North American universities) to activist organisations, this article finds that the involvement of activists and militants is beneficial, and enriches the researcher's perspective. In fact, such an approach not only increases the researchers' awareness of their own positionality in the field but

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may also reveal aspects of the topic researched that would otherwise remain concealed to 'external' eyes. This is particularly relevant when it comes to challenging environments such as Iran and to issues that may be considered 'risky', such as social movements. In such instances, a bottom-up approach helps reveal a number of aspects that heavily theoretically informed methods conceal. An example is the decade-long scholarly interest in the paradigm of democratisation. From the mid-1980s to the 2010s, in fact, scholars of comparative politics, area studies and Middle East studies have analysed social and political activism exclusively as evidence that a transition to liberal democracy was either beginning or under way (Kubba 2000). This normative reading of politics and activism, which informed Iranian Studies too (Abootalebi 2001; Khosrokhavar 2000), was problematic not only because of its questionable scientific findings, as transitions to liberal democracy have not taken place (Albrecht and Schlumberger 2004; Carothers 2002), but also because it was blind to the activists' subjectivity. A top-down approach was implemented, with little attention to fine issues related to the ethics and research methodology.

On the contrary, approaching social movements as producers of knowledge allows for a situated understanding of how dissent and social movements function in a certain environment. When engaging a 'culturally distant' field, as Iran is for me, being humble and letting respondents guide one in the process of knowledge production helps foster a richer and more nuanced scholarship, which also has spin-offs in the field, allowing the researcher to 'give back' more easily.

This article is based on methodological reflections and conversations that I started with colleagues and activists in and from Iran years ago but that have intensified since the assassination of the Cambridge PhD student Giulio Regeni during the summer of 2016 in Cairo. The killing of Regeni has not only shed light on the brutality of the Egyptian regime, which continues to be protected and strengthened via arms trade by the United States and European countries, which consider it a bastion against terrorism while deliberately ignoring the fact that those who fall into the category of 'terrorists' are mostly political dissidents (El-Ghobashy 2016). It also urged scholars of the Middle East and North Africa to question their research methods and consider the ethical consequences that conducting fieldwork in authoritarian environments may have, both for themselves and those who work with them in the field. This article builds on this debate and brings it further, discussing the implications of using fairer research practices in producing knowledge about social movements. My direct experience and field research is used as the starting point for this discussion.[1]

Doing Field Research in Iran: Disentangling Religion and Politics

In 2015, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs called in a European colleague resident in Tehran for research-related purposes in order to review his visa. 'New rules are in place,' he was told, 'you now have to get an HIV test to have your visa renewed.' This colleague was rumoured to have a number of love affairs with Iranian women. His colleagues, myself included, had no knowledge about such 'new rules in place', and we were left wondering if this would have happened in a non-Islamic, secular republic. However, upon closer examination, we realised that the crucial point here was that he was sent a message about his presence in the country, which was inextricably connected to his work and research project in the first place, and to his un-confirmed love affairs only in the second place. While my colleague was suspected to have violated a moral and religious code of conduct, what the state's intervention targeted was the process of knowledge production he was part of. Echoing such reflections, Jillian Schwedler (2006) argues that field research in the Middle East is not difficult because of religious limitations or Islam, even for women. Goli Rezai-Rashti (2013) and Arang Keshavarzian (2015) also underline that Islam or religious references were rather absent in their experience with field research. In fact, they argue, more than Islam and religious precepts, what regulates social relations and ultimately the relationship between the state and researchers is the social categorisation of individuals that the state operates. The state apparatus indeed locates individuals in different categories and social classes from which they can speak to each other.[2] Foreign researchers too are placed in this broader classification and allocated a 'status' within state structures, which corresponds to a specific code of conduct (Obeid 2015). Such a code does not only impose moral limitations to the researchers' accepted behaviours, as it is for everybody in the country, but also, and crucially, delimits their freedom of research.

While such moral and behavioural codes are present in every country, what is specific to Iran is the fact that they are pivoted on the state agents' right to interpret the religious principles and transform them into laws. The origin of this authority, which, however, is contested, goes back to two events. The first is the Islamic revolution, which codified and licensed the state authorities' broad control over the population. The other event that consolidated this power is the Iran–Iraq war, which allowed a state of exception and strengthened the regime's authority. Under such conditions, religion served this same purpose, consolidating the institutions created after the revolution and fortifying the central power of the state. The primacy of 'politics over religion' is also demonstrated by the imposition of Islamic garments on women. While Islam per se does not require the compulsory use of the hijab, the Iranian state and legislation do. A number of religious interpretations in fact disagree with such a policy, but they are considered unlawful by Iran's state authorities and therefore disregarded.

While respecting a code of conduct can help researchers deal with structural limitations to their activity, they may compromise their personal ethics and principles. In fact, keeping a low profile – being 'politically invisible' to the institutions and the society – may entail not researching some issues or silencing specific aspects of one's research project, thus making it harder for researchers to reduce the cognitive dissonance between their actual behaviour and ideal selves.

How can scholars and field researchers produce knowledge in such circumstances? How can they negotiate the code of conduct they are expected to respect, and how can they cope with the authoritarian intervention of the state? Such questions are fundamental, and several scholars have already engaged them (Clark 2006; Hegland 2004; Hegland and Friedl 2006; Merriam et al. 2001; Nadjmabadi 2004; Rouhani 2004; Shahshahani 2006; Suzuki 2004). However, they are not alone in impacting the field researchers' practices and methods, as ethical challenges must also be taken into consideration.

Ethical Challenges

Field research activities force researchers to come to terms with a number of both specific and more general ethical challenges. One of the most relevant to any researcher engaged in fieldwork is to avoid treating locals as 'native informants' who have no role but helping researchers to advance their career. The unequal distribution of power between the researchers and the 'researched' should be acknowledged and addressed.

However, it is important to keep in mind that ethical aspects to field research may change with the context. In an authoritarian country, for instance, researchers might not be as open about locals' contributions as they would be in a democratic country. Although the ethical duty of giving back and acknowledging the contribution of locals exists for all researchers, it takes a specific form when it comes to authoritarian settings because such acknowledgements may expose and put respondents in danger. It follows that while researchers need to construct fairer and participative research practices and to acknowledge the role played by contacts on the ground, they also must protect them. This might mean hiding their existence, contribution and even suspending interactions with them, contrary to what received academic wisdom and research-ethic guidelines would suggest.

In 2008, I was in constant contact with a student activist whose help was crucial to me in order to get a deeper understanding of student politics. One day, he disappeared. Although I was worried, I did not contact him because I feared he was in trouble with the security forces. In that instance, any contact with me could have worsened his situation. After a few days, I received a call from an unknown number. A man was on the other side of the phone and told me he was my friend activist. He told me he was detained in a local prison,

drugged and abused. He wanted to meet me. I did not recognise his voice, and I feared that my positive answer could have been used to accuse him of having contacts with a potentially suspicious foreigner. We did not meet, and I cut contacts with him. He contacted me months later. He told me it was he that day on the phone. He thanked me for not showing up and not contacting him again. He said he planned to stay away from politics for a period. Intelligence and security forces constantly monitor activists regardless of their contacts, but connection to a foreigner may provide the justification to target them.

Research Practices and Methodological Implications

Given my research interest in social movements and political dissent, I have always been very cautious in approaching activists. Not only have I always been aware that my presence may constitute an indirect threat to them, as discussed in the previous section, but I have also tried to keep a distance between me and the 'objects' of research I was dealing with. While I have always been aware that a relationship based on confidence and trust was necessary and desirable, I have had almost no exposure to non-mainstream methods arguing that the researcher–researched distinction is not only dysfunctional but also brings about a number of ethical problems and flaws when it comes to fieldwork. I realised the shortcoming of my approach when, while connecting with activists, I was often caught in the contradiction between my attempt at being politically invisible and detached, and the personal and emotional engagement I felt for my project and the people I had the luck to meet.

During the initial stage of my fieldwork, when I insisted on my 'neutral' position as an academic, activists often challenged the usefulness of my research. This led me to consider a related aspect, namely my 'desirability' among activists in Iran. In fact, my respondents 'rated' my presence according to certain, shifting assessments. Foreign researchers may be a threat but may also increase the reputation and visibility of single activists, campaigns and political groups because they can circulate information about them freely and internationally. This can be welcome or unwelcome, depending on the broader security environment. In my case, because of my reluctance to act as an activist, some activists criticised me as not dedicated enough. This suggested that I needed to reconsider my positionality in the field, because my presence was creating frustration in the activists, as they had expectations I could not meet, as well as in myself, as my work was not progressing.

So I started to engage more with the activists I was meeting – translating documents, offering mutual assistance, support and protection in many different instances. This helped to build trust and also understanding when I refused to engage in advocacy activities in their favour or when I had to distance myself from the field. This happened for security reasons, both my and others' security, as researching social movements during long periods of fieldwork can

easily attract the unwanted attention of Iranian security forces. By building trust, I was able to negotiate my positionality and to disengage from the field according to my assessment without creating frustration.

It follows that, while building trust with activists, I also started to discuss my research project with them, opening it to their assessment and critiques. I soon realised that I was putting into practice a specific research method known as 'co-research' which originated in the 1960s and 1970s, during the early years of what later came to be known as *operaismo*, or 'Italian workerism' (Bologna 2014; Cobarrubias 2011). More specifically, I was following in the footsteps of Romano Alquati (1993) and his work of inquiry. As explained by Armano and colleagues (2013), co-research is

> research carried out together with subjects [. . .] [creating] an open and practical process that facilitates the acquisition of knowledge able to develop a common activity, setting in motion the subjectivity of participants [. . .] [transforming] their various social roles [. . .]. Co-research is a form of reciprocal contamination and contagion, even if it is difficult to extend it spontaneously. The cooperation that develops contains levels of reciprocal orchestration between participants who, according to Alquati, need to explicitly overcome the dichotomy between technical organization – competencies – and political organization, where decisions can be made.

This approach to field research allowed me to 'co-construct' my research question (Malo 2004) with the people I met in the field, situating and defining 'the field' with them and discussing how to work on it. My research interests ask why and how people engage in politics in an authoritarian context, namely in a context that is seemingly inhospitable to critical subjects. I was thinking of this issue in terms of an anomaly, because it seems irrational for activists to insist on pushing the political limitations they face. Arrests and detentions, to my eyes, were the logical consequence of activism, and I considered those engaging in politics despite such threats heroes and 'exceptional' subjects, with steel will and some out-of-the-norm personality.

In 2008, a male activist friend and I were discussing atheism and its ethics when he told me that his father had been an atheist for a long time before accepting God in his life. We come from similar social backgrounds. Our parents are state employees in the education sector, in primary and secondary public schools, and we faced similar economic and social challenges in our lives. My friend, a brilliant university student, shared his frustration at the 'culturally elevated' people he got in contact with during his university years because of their 'snobbish' attitude towards lower-middle-class people, whose social status was elevated thanks to the expansion of the state. The same happened to me when I entered my PhD programme, as I was one of the very few students whose parents do not have a university degree, and I did not attend prestigious secondary schools. My activist friend then told me about the political and religious evolution of his father, who approached religion because of its politicised nature in the late 1970s. Political passion never abandoned his

parents' house and heated political discussions have always been common at the dinner table, my friend commented. This resonated so much with my own family life. While his story echoed what I read in many academic books about the revolution and the politicisation of Islam, I realised, thanks to my friend's comments, that 'common' families raise kids in Iran preparing them for a politically active life that hardly corresponds to the real possibilities the state offers for politically active citizenship. Likewise, my father raised my sister and me as emancipated and independent women, blowing self-confidence into our souls but hardly preparing us for the continuous belittling and dismissive attitude we would encounter so many times in our workplaces because of our gender and regardless of our actual skills. I then started thinking about my research question in terms of how young people are trained to be active citizens in an environment that pushes them towards obedience, and consequently how politically active people deal with the limitations to activism they encounter in Iran.

I have obsessively discussed this with my friends and respondents in the field, realising that they all went through an intensive political training during their life. Not only their families, but also media, schools, and the majority of state agents of socialisation in Iran taught them that almost every aspect of their life is a political space in which a political performance is required. The very private mourning of martyrs' widows, for instance, is turned into a show of anti-imperialism by the state (Saeidi 2010).

While this pervasive presence of the state is what in part distinguishes authoritarian and liberal political systems, it also has the opposite effect of making Iranians political subjects prepared to engage the state and society on a political and critical ground. Discussing and sharing family stories and episodes convinced me and the activists I was working with to redefine our approach to political activism, from something 'exceptional' to something activists are unintentionally taught by the state and society. This shift was crucial to my approach to research but also was important to activists: as some stated, they felt more entitled to be activists. As a feminist activist told me, thinking about her widowed mother and two sisters: 'I am not doing nothing [*sic*] special. After all, in my family, we are all feminists.'

I also built on a number of other non-mainstream methodologies which have advocated in favour of the blurring of the distinction between the roles assigned by professionalised academic research, calling for *métissage*. Examples are participatory research, popularised by Paulo Freire and his critical pedagogy during the 1970s; critical ethnography, developed starting from Mikhail Bakhtin's (1982) work; Enrique Dussel's (2013) philosophy of liberation; and Linda Martin Alcoff's (2011: 67) analectics, which she describes as an 'epistemology for the next revolution'. Participatory research was particularly useful when I had to deal with contested notions such as civil society, of which I investigated the multiple competing understandings, and when I had to theorise a functional and pragmatic approach to 'social movements', a label that is often too broad and includes very diverse groups and ideologies.

In this instance, I found that contrasting the roles my activist friends and respondents were assigned by the external environment, provided a clearer picture of how different groups and ideologies were treated by the state. Activists from student, environmental, feminist and children-focused groups, whether NGOs or more informal networks, offered different accounts when it came to the political limitations they have to respect. In 2016, progressive and reformist student activists painted a situation in which they just resurfaced from a decade-long period of repression. Feminists had an acute awareness of their potential and limitations, thus putting in place an efficient set of strategies to survive political repression, while environmental NGOs, when not too confrontational, were in 2016 living in a golden age of political visibility and credibility. Children-focused groups, whose majority is composed of NGOs, were in 2016 going through a period of close monitoring by state agents, after having enjoyed more (relatively speaking) freedom for a long period. How could we account for the framing and discourses of 'acceptable' versus 'unacceptable activism' the state has mobilised?

In the early 2000s, the notion of 'civil society' had become a buzzword in the realms of politics and activism, and almost all actors (from student activists to journalists) reclaimed it. I was interested in grasping under which circumstances different meanings of 'civil society' are mobilised. In 2012, while talking to an Iranian journalist in exile in Turkey, I realised that he was using 'civil society' to designate both a state project, according to which the civil society helps the government to attain political development, and as an extra-state, if not anti-state, agent. In this latter version, civil society is an oppositional force forming a counter-power to the government and the state, which are described as authoritarian actors that need to be counterbalanced. This distinction resonated with how activists from the main student group, Daftar-e Tahkim-e Vahdat, talked about civil society between the late 1990s and late 2000s. More specifically, both meanings were mobilised by the students, who embodied both of them. The shift between the two meanings of civil society depended upon the changing relationship the students had with the government (Rivetti and Cavatorta 2013).

I realised this when I stopped discussing political theories about civil society, from Habermas to Gramsci, with my respondents and started discussing the roles and 'rules of the game' they had to respect and comply with in order to be framed as an 'acceptable' political and social force by the state authorities. Our discussions often included role playing, during which we interpreted different roles. In this way, not only did the competing meanings of notions crucial to the political debates in the country, such as 'civil society', became grounded in specific contexts, but the different degrees of 'acceptability' of political groups and ideologies also became clear and bound to specific historical and political circumstances. This helped me to refine my understanding of the 'terms and conditions' of the relation between the state and the diverse world of social movements.

Continuous discussions with those involved in the process of knowledge production also limit the effect of what can be called 'methodological path dependence'. In fact, respondents often react to researchers on the basis of the assumptions they have about the researchers' framework of analysis. This is valid for social research broadly speaking, but in the specific case of Iran and other Middle Eastern countries, this is relevant because of the strength of stereotyped representations of Iran, Islam and the Middle East in general. Nearly every European or US researcher of contemporary Iran has dealt with ordinary Iranians concerned with being seen as 'terrorists' because of expanding Islamophobia in the West, of which Iranians are aware. This may push Iranians to overemphasise attitudes in contrast to the stereotype they think that the researcher endorses and that they want to challenge.

For instance, an often-repeated claim in the literature about contemporary Iran is that the Iranian population is the most secular in the region. Though it may be true, this claim needs to be contextualised in a broader setting in which respondents are aware of Islamophobia and the negative image of Iran that is propagated in large areas of the world. Research participants may just see the researcher's work as an opportunity to react to such negative propaganda by emphasising secular behaviours or discourses. Furthermore, the lack of discussion about the meaning of heavily politically charged words, such as secularism, reinforces well-established claims in the scholarship and discourages critical voices, originating methodological path dependence.

Thus, it is crucial to keep in mind that the researcher's findings are generated in a broader context that mirrors both specific and larger dynamics (such as the impact of international politics and dominant discourses about Islam post 9/11), and that these dynamics are methodologically relevant because they have an impact on our findings. Unless the dialogue with people on the ground is kept alive through continuous and nuanced discussions about religion, politics, identity and justice, those dynamics cannot be acknowledged as carrying methodological relevance.

A Better and Fairer Scholarship: Producing Knowledge from Below

In what way can the production of knowledge from below originate a better and fairer scholarship? When it comes to my experience in the field, adopting the approaches described above helped me grasp more firmly the dynamics that were present but that would have easily escaped my attention. This was valid, for instance, for divisions internal to circles of activists or for enhancing my understanding of what, in a specific context, certain ideological allegiances mean.

Co-constructing questions, fields of action and research projects also means that I was able to get a better sense of how to deal with the generalisability of

the issues and the dynamics I was analysing. This is a relevant issue to Middle Eastern studies, as scholars often generalise their findings although they may not be relevant to broader environments than the one in which they were observed. By keeping the discussion alive, in fact, it is possible to grasp the nuances and locate the observed phenomena in the micro–meso–macro scale.

In conclusion, I would like to mention that these reflections from the field may be relevant to researchers engaged in other settings as well, beyond the geographical limitation of the Middle East. In fact, when it comes to applied methods and their impact on the production of knowledge, field researchers deal with common challenges such as winning the trust of respondents and dealing with the latter's expectations and frustrations, regardless of geography and broader political regimes. It follows that area studies should contribute more forcefully to methodological debates in the social sciences.

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Notes

1. I am a female, non-dual national, European researcher who has been carrying out research in Iran since 2005. The latest fieldwork I conducted was during the spring of 2017 in Tehran. As a foreigner, I need to apply for a visa to travel to Iran. My visa applications were rejected between 2011 and 2014. The procedures of visa application have been relaxed since 2015, and in 2017 I received my visa just two hours after I submitted my documentation to the embassy. Research visas are particularly hard to obtain, and touristic visas are often the only option researchers have. This may, however, bring about further personal security concerns, as it is illegal to carry out research in Iran unless you obtain a research visa. Moreover, this strategy causes ethical issues, as research participants may be exposed to additional risk if 'caught' in or suspected to have sensitive conversations with a 'fake' tourist. It is important to be open with respondents in the field about the potential risk to

which they are subjected. It is, however, important to remember that environments that are inhospitable to critical inquiry are not limited to authoritarian or Middle Eastern countries. In 2016 in Italy, for instance, an MA student in Anthropology from the University of Venice, Roberta Chiroli, was arrested and brought to court for her ethnographic research on an oppositional social movement, which is particularly defiant of state authority, and accused of 'complicity' with it. She was sentenced to two months detainment. See Chiroli (2017).

2. The state is a fragmented apparatus composed of institutions and agents. However, although I am aware of such a fragmentation, I also contend that 'while the "decentred" notion of [state] power makes room for an analysis of agency, it obscures the unevenness of its circulation; in some places [state power] is far weightier, more concentrated, and "thicker," so to speak, than in others' (Bayat 2010: 44). So, with Obeid, 'the state should be seen as system of power' (2015: 438) and I adopt this view while discussing the state's classification and citizenry project.

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