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## Interlude I. Frictions of Distance and Proximity. Observing IOs in Action

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## **Interlude I. Frictions of Distance and Proximity. Observing IOs in**

### **Action**

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Anthropologists tend to observe international organizations in action, interested less in what they are, than in what they are doing. This makes their approaches so diverse. When they observe the impact, the material and symbolic effects of international policy making on concrete life-worlds in situated places, the methods they use depend on their engagements in the field and pragmatically, on the concrete questions that arise on-site. When exploring IO headquarters, anthropologists focused on the daily practices of governing and followed the construction of institutional identities through images and language. They closely observed the interactions, uncovered dissent among and between groups, and unpacked the emergence of disputes and the formation of consensus (see Chapter 2 – *Participant Observation*). Most of the time, they did not find their most precious materials in the official transcripts of negotiating sessions. They gleaned them in serendipitous encounters (Hertz 2010), spontaneous interactions and through careful observation. The strength of ethnographic approaches is to take the time to understand, to dare deconstruct the seemingly obvious all of which by observing daily interactions and routines and by engaging with actors while keeping a distance.

*Observing IOs: A diversity of approaches*

From my own work on international organizations, it became evident that there is not just one toolbox, but multiple approaches. Like any social scientist who relies on ethnography, I had to constantly review my methods. My first research on the WTO

negotiations in Seattle in 1999, started out in the street, following and observing the different forms of protests, attending the side events, the staging of the counter summit and its articulations with the official event (Müller 2000). The next research was completely different. It took place at the heart of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations' (FAO) administrative headquarters in Rome. From within the administration, I followed the way in which one of the most controversial FAO reports – the SOFA 2004 on “Biotechnology. Meeting the Needs of the Poor?”– was produced (Müller 2011). I first started out by analyzing the report and then traced its social life in the institution by both interviewing administrators and talking to members of civil society organizations and as well as examining the hundreds of entries contributed to an online consultation (see Chapter 3 – *Ethnographic interviews*).

*The material you produce depends on the angle you take*

The methods and consequently the material that can be collected and generated depend on the angle taken for the research and the conditions of access to the field. When following a global event such as Rio+20 or COP21, international organizations do not appear as confined entities but rather as *dispositifs* (Foucault 1994) (assemblage or apparatus). They constantly attract new players, involving them as interlocutors, consultants and experts and formatting them through forms of calculation, technical reasoning and capacity building (Müller 2011). On the other hand when intervening on the local level, international organizations represented by their experts appear as a single coherent actor producing normative frameworks and bringing into effect relationships of power and control from the metropolis to the remotest parts of the world.

The complexity of international organizations becomes all the more apparent during major multilateral events. To make even remotely sense of what was going on in the multiple forums of the Rio+20 Conference in 2012 and at the Climate Summit COP21 in Paris in 2015, we attended these events as a multidisciplinary team of anthropologists, historians, economists and sociologists and produced both times collective event ethnographies. We prepared for the event together and then explored it from different angles. Some of us observed the negotiations themselves, while others were focusing on civil society events, the indigenous peoples' caucus, the closed meetings of the business sector, etc. (Dumoulin Kervran 2021, Aykut, Foyer and Morena 2017)

The cooperation with the other research teams allowed each team to go deeper in their analysis. Part of my own research, for instance, focused on the minute details of the negotiation of a seven-line paragraph in the Rio declaration. The paragraph dealt with the international governance of agricultural investments, an issue crucial in another international forum, the Committee of Food Security, where negotiations on guidelines were to begin in 2012. I knew the wider political context and hence could guess the implications of the interactions between the negotiators in the three-hour long debate. The more subtle powerplays with language, intonation and voice only became apparent when I analyzed the recordings back at my office in France together with the linguist Gilles Cloiseau (Müller and Cloiseau 2015). Combining anthropological observation and linguistic methods enabled us to uncover the ways in which negotiators interacted in a highly coded language, how they “performed”, by exploring, playing with, and twisting the grammatical structures of the spoken language (see Chapter 11 – *Discourse analysis*).

When observing the meetings of the business sector at the Rio+20 conference (Benabou, Müller 2015) and at the COP21 climate negotiations in Paris (Benabou, Moussu, Müller 2017), again it was the serendipitous encounters that gave us the most interesting material for analysis. In Rio, for example, I found myself sitting around a table in a hotel ballroom with the CEOs of the world's top four mining companies, openly recording our table discussion on sustainability reporting for global ventures. The discussion revealed their dividedness on the central issue of international governance; should the states be imposing constraining regulations on corporations or rather should the corporations themselves be trusted to act responsibly?

Observing the effects of international governance on the local level again provided a different angle (see Chapter 2 – *Participant observation*). I was conducting fieldwork in a Nicaraguan village, when the Food Security program of the FAO was implemented there. I used material found on the internet to reconstruct FAO's interventions into the conception of food sovereignty laws in Nicaragua. I then followed two FAO food security projects at local level over several years, observing meetings, official visits, talking to farmers and accompanying them to the fields (Müller 2013).

#### *Observational Participation in IOs: Access, positionality and ethical considerations*

Access to places where interactions take place and where relationships of trust can be established is crucial for ethnographic fieldwork as the different contributions to this book show. When an international organization is powerful, it has mechanisms to impose its standards and decisions at the global level and affect the interests of big businesses and capital holders. It then becomes difficult to gain access to them. Discretion is required. Doors to the negotiating rooms are closed to the external observer. Anthropologists are then asked to "do fieldwork without taking note"

(Dematteo 2011). In contrast, the areas of “soft” international governance, such as the section of the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) dealing with traditional knowledge (Bendix, 2013), often seek to exchange with social scientists to circumscribe their fugitive objects and find ways and means to transform them into legal objects. As an expert on cultural knowledge, Regina Bendix was asked, for instance, to highlight how the delegates themselves went through processes of acculturation inside WIPO (Bendix, 2013).

To access their field-site, social scientists take on a variety of roles, sometimes combining research with expertise (Fresia, 2013) or, on the contrary, disengaging in order to conduct a more detached analysis. For some researchers, the difficulty consists of getting access to information in relatively closed organizations. For others who were able to immerse themselves, the challenge is to keep a distance and negotiate a way out of their role as experts (Mosse 2008; see Box c – *Multipositionality*). As observers, they are rarely disconnected from the issues at stake. Their complex position, at times close-up, at times remote, may lead the organization to expect a certain degree of allegiance and discretion from the researcher (see Chapter 1 – *Direct observation* and Chapter 2 – *Participant observation*).

The most difficult and ambiguous situation I put myself into as a social anthropologist of IOs was the observational participation (see Chapter 2 – *Participant observation*) in the two-year-long negotiations on guidelines for responsible agricultural investment. From 2012 to 2014, I became a technical advisor and in a few instances even negotiated on behalf of the Civil Society Mechanism in the UN’s Committee for Food Security. Not only did I clearly take sides in the negotiations, but I also had access to the strategizing of the Civil Society Mechanism and to its internal frictions, which I deontologically and ethically could not share with the outside world.

The guidelines that we negotiated were only in appearance "soft" texts. As they defined normatively the direction that agricultural investments should take in the future, they challenged high economic stakes and were subject to fierce battle and high emotions. Practically and emotionally involved in the negotiations, I was unable to step back, observe and write down not only my own experiences but also those of others. I accumulated mountains of material, lots of notes but few fieldnotes, and I have to date written little about this experience (McMichael, Müller 2014; Müller 2019).

### *Repoliticizing international language*

Most anthropologists who have studied international organizations do not define themselves as IO scholars. It is not so much the organizations as such that are of interest to them, but rather what happens among the people inside the *dispositif* of international governance. How are the ideas produced and how do they travel within international settings? What are their impacts? Furthermore, how does the "real" world get translated into international language? Working with a linguist – as mentioned above – provides complementary theoretical tools to bring the international language to life (see Chapter 10 – *Praxiography: Document analysis* and Chapter 11 – *Discourse analysis*). Etiquettes of speaking, acronyms and an intense haggling around terminology and word choice leading to heavily coded and often opaque and "technical" texts (Riles 2000; Merry 2006), are deconstructed. For the outcome of negotiations language practices can be deeply consequential (McMichael and Müller, 2014). Each commitment made in a global forum slowly adds new layers of global governance and multilateral terminology and serves as a reference for future negotiations in the patchwork of international institutions, public or private (Biermann et al. 2009:16).

Ethnographies following the political processes that produce technical and

seemingly apolitical IO reports, guidelines, etc. are instrumental for understanding what is at stake. In the multiple forums, non-state actors, representatives of corporations and civil society organizations use the rules of the game of international institutions for their own purposes and also for their relations to the nation states. Furthermore, in the life of projects on the ground seemingly technical issues are re-politicized (Louis and Maertens, 2021). What is experienced as anti-politics, as the dissolving of conflict in a discourse of harmony, is thus less an essence than a recurring practice of IOs that has to be observed “at work”.

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