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## **Investigating beyond the red lines: limits of knowledge, boundaries of power**

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This paper presents a research project, « OFF-SITE : Violence, State formation and memory politics: an off-site ethnography of post-revolution Iran » (ERC starting grant 2019-2023) which departure point is a reflexive investigation on the production of knowledge in Iranian studies and its relations to the shaping of public space in Iran. The research project will start in January 2019, hence the aim of this paper and presentation is to discuss the hypotheses and methodologies envisioned for the research, which draw from an analysis of the power-knowledge relationship in Iranian studies and maybe more generally in social science based on empirical fieldwork.

### **Off-site/Off-sight**

The frontiers of closed societies are no longer as they were. Boundaries of power, built over State violence and the management of its legacies, are transformed in the age of global circulation of data, of norms and of course of people (Michaelsen 2017). How, in this context, can we rethink the modalities and frontiers of empirical investigation, and the constrained relations between power and knowledge? The project addresses this question through the case of post-revolution Iran. It is borne at the crossroads of three observations. 1) Structural factors: restricted access to the field, and the construction of some research topics as 'off-limits', pose long-lasting obstacles to the advancement of knowledge. 2) Conjectural factors: new data are available due to the evolution of memory regimes, from silence to disputed narratives of violence, which oppose State politics of denial (Cohen 2001) and truth-seeking initiatives (Bickford 2007) carried by civil society in exile. 3) Methodological opportunities: archival research is benefiting from a renewed empirical outlook (Stoler 2010), digital archives platforms offer technologies of collaborative research, social media and the Internet change practices of circulation and sharing of empirical data, and the access to ethnographic interviews increases through the realities of global circulation (Appadurai 1996) and temporary movement of people back and forth "selectively porous" State boundaries (Sreberny 2006).

Through the anthropology of the State and violence, ethno-history and the use of new technologies, the project experiments trans-disciplinary methods in the production of empirical study off-site, in order to fill a substantive gap in scientific knowledge on the Khomeini years in Iran (1979-1988), and how their legacy is revisited in today's politics of memory. By classifying and reviewing available sources in a digital "counter-archive" (Motha and van Rijswijk 2016), the project will establish a genealogy of post-revolutionary violence and state formation in Iran, and make this documentation available for further research. It will also document and analyze the memory politics linked to this foundational past and how they redefine the boundaries of political participation.

### **Limits of knowledge, boundaries of power**

How exactly did the 1979 revolution in Iran turn into the theocratic regime of the Islamic Republic? What is the history of violence of the Iranian revolution: one that did not result from the revolutionary days *per se*, but from the post-revolutionary era, and the micro-politics of State formation following the regime change? This history has not been studied so far, but different narratives are told. Why is there such a gap running through an entire decade, while so much has been written on “one of the most important revolutions of the 20<sup>th</sup> century” (Keddie 2006)? This void is anchored in the conditions of the production of knowledge in, and on, post-revolution Iran. First, there is no access to state archives and empirical data on the field. Not only are the required authorizations (visa, agreements to lead interviews, access to archival funds, etc.) not being issued for such research, but applying for these authorizations would expose both researchers and subjects to grave risks. If official routes of investigation are closed, more discrete research methods, like informal interviews with the victims’ families and survivors, or visits to mass graves, have not yet been carried out either, because of the level of State surveillance and fear, and the risks involved for both interviewers, interviewees and informants. Research in social science, specifically access to field of enquiry and quantitative data, are subjected to many layers of State control in Iran. But beyond these general difficulties, some topics, like state violence and politics in the 1980s, fall outside of the domain of ‘researchability’ since they are banned from the sphere of public debate. Foucault has analyzed the relationship between power and knowledge (1976), pointing at how the conditions of production of knowledge are controlled or influenced by power, and how *vice versa*, the exercise of power leans on specific knowledge. In Iran, the power-knowledge nexus evolves around established frontiers between authorized and unauthorized subjects – or ‘red lines’ (*khâ t e ghermez*) – mapping the public debate. Researchers in and outside the country are subjected to these delineations insofar as crossing a ‘red line’ exposes one to administrative or penal detention, expulsion from universities, passport confiscation or a ban on entry in the country. In order to preserve their safety, or carry on research activities that demand access to the field and the country, the research community has come to acknowledge these ‘red lines’, thus keeping a series of subjects outside the scope of scientific scrutiny, both inside and outside of the country.

The project does not seek to navigate ‘red lines’, but to investigate beyond the established boundaries of knowledge production, in order to shed light and create the conditions for further research on a blind spot of contemporary historiography of Iran. It also seeks to understand, through reflexive and epistemic analyses, how these boundaries were established: through which processes the “red lines” were acknowledged and taken as obvious without being made explicit.

In the current context, this research ambition faces renewed obstructions. But these difficulties make the project even more necessary, and also provide rich additional material for further investigating the construction of collective memory. Indeed, if one periodizes the politics of denial – which will be undertaken carefully in the project – the first period of orchestrated silence that prevailed from 1988 until 2009, was followed by a disordered emergence of the subject in the public debate since 2009, which gave way in the few last years to State efforts towards a more coherent memory politics based on denial and falsification of historical facts. While for decades, there was no mention of the Iranian eighties in historical textbooks, TV programs, etc., a new historical narrative is emerging, based on the reduction of the scale and proportion of violence, and the representation of “the perpetrators as

victims and the victims as perpetrators” (Cohen 2001). This new memory politics proceeds through two operations: on the one hand, the suppression of historical evidence (in particular, the destruction of mass graves and cemeteries); on the other hand, the construction of a hegemonic narrative (Gramsci 2000) through museography, new “sites of memory” (Nora 1984) and cultural productions. This context intensifies the risks for the enterprise of data gathering that we are undertaking, but it also offers new empirical data, if one is willing to take up the challenge of an off-site ethnography (Robben 2010).

### **Off-limits ethnography and counter-archives**

Participant observation on-site is the trademark of ethnography. However, in contexts of political and collective violence, does the study of violence necessarily imply direct observations? And does the absence of first hand observation of violent interactions necessarily disqualify for ethnographic research? Other questions follow: how and until when is it possible to observe violent phenomenon as they are taking place? When working on a violence that took place in a (more or less) recent past, are we out of the scope of ethnographic investigation? Most studies in the anthropology of violence focus on violence in the past, and the fieldwork research on which they build is primarily composed of ethnographic interviews and life stories – not observations. Crapanzano (2008) studies the memory of the violent migration of the harkis after the Algerian war, and the non-transmission of trauma to younger generations. Panourgia (2009) studies State violence and the camp detention of the Greek left from the 1940s until 1974. Theidon (2012) studies the internal conflict in Peru throughout the 1980s and 1990s. Naepels’ work on violence in New-Caledonia (2013) devotes 5 chapters on 6 on past colonial violence that took place before the author came to the field in the 1990s. Das’ study on the relationship between violence and language (2006) focuses on sexual violence in the 1947-48 partition between India and Pakistan. Feldman is present on the North-Irish field at the hearth of the conflict he studies, but he deliberately chooses to build his analyses exclusively on interviews: the author focuses on oral history, and not observations, to lead his research as a “political-cultural project” of narratology of violence and the event (1991). Many ethnographies of violence don’t rely on direct observation of (often past) studied phenomena, but they proceed through the mediation of narratives, discourses and memories. These methods imply heterogeneous empirical data, combining ethnographic interviews and documentary sources: colonial sources (Naepels 2013), institutional documentation (Chatterji and Mehta 2007), NGO reports; testimonies collected through truth and reconciliation commissions as the extensive corpus used by Sanford (2003) on her work on mass graves in Guatemala.

Anthropologists have studied how violence, social injustice and local histories are narrated through the law, and how legal procedures inform collective memories (Shaw, et al. 2010). However, this scholarship has tended to focus on transitional justice and arenas of international human rights or environmental law making. Thus it reproduces the normative boundaries between “official” state-endorsed, versus “unofficial” initiatives. The latter remained mostly unexplored. The project proposes to explore this blind-spot in studies of law and memory. One documentary source the project will use, among many others (as detailed below), is the records of a people’s tribunal. The use of this source is both innovative and challenging. As practices of memorialization and spaces of “truth telling”, peoples’ tribunals produce collective

memories and narratives of violence through legal frameworks and terminology, yet outside of institutional apparatuses. These practices bring a useful counterpoint to the debates on the crafting of historical narrative through international criminal trials (Wilson 2011). The case of the Tokyo Tribunal (Chinkin 2001) shows that, deprived of legality, peoples' tribunals ground their legitimacy and efficiency in solid fact-finding procedures aimed at creating a fuller and more accurate historical record. This raises important issues such as the archival dimension of unofficial truth telling, and the ethical challenges linked to data-collection in repressive, dangerous contexts as allowed by multimedia and the Internet networks (see methodology section below). Another question is how legal-based individual case records construct collective narratives of state repression or conflict, and produce a corpus of empirical data to engage with when on-site investigations prove difficult or unfeasible.

This method faces a major epistemic risk that I will unfold through a brief example. The case happened during the citizen tribunal's hearing on State crimes in Iran. An eyewitness was testifying about the death of five family members in a counter-insurgency operation in Kurdistan. She detailed how the body of her brother was still bleeding five days after his death. A feeling of discomfort ran through the audience in reaction to this implausible fact that jeopardized the whole credibility of the testimony. In the Iranian context of impunity and denial, the citizen's tribunal had no access to administrative documents or on-site inquiries. It thus depended on the witness testimonies as the primary sources. The Kurdish woman's testimony was important because it gave names, places, dates and a sense of the scale of violence and its modalities. But it was also fragile because the witness was telling these facts in a different language than that of transitional justice. Did this different narration, this epistemic gap, invalidate her testimony? Our project meets the same obstacles that the truth-seeking initiative: extreme scarcity of administrative documents, lack of official documents directly about State violence, impossibility of on-site investigation. As in the case of the citizen's tribunal, narratives do constitute the main material for empirical investigation: oral history (through ethnographic fieldwork), second hand testimonies (produced by truth-seeking initiatives), memoirs written or interviews given by State agents officials (in the Clergy, the militias, the administrations). In this context, how to work with the epistemic gaps (Feldman 1995) that pass through the perceptions, experiences and representations of violence? The project will take these tensions and frictions (between regimes of language, experience, perception, narration) as the departure point of the analytical work. This implies a strong reflexive practice at every level of data collection, analysis, and restitution. Observations, interviews and presence on the field do not sum up the ethnographic method: it is foremost about an "ethnographic sensibility" (Jourde 2009) in the handling of these epistemic questions. Indeed, the proposed approach not only questions the limits of knowledge production as instituted by power, the boundaries of participation and belonging as established by a State, but also the frontiers of the cognitive enterprise. The efforts deployed by an off-limit ethnography, however impure they may seem in regards to the traditional rules of the method, fall within a cognitive process that progresses and invents in order to grasp what remains as off-access.

These methodological choices may become radical. This was the case as the presence of anthropologists in post-invasion Iraq was reframed in the "human terrain system" US military program (Forte 2011). In reaction to these efforts to encapsulate the production of knowledge in enterprises of "mediation" and intelligence, a

collective research produced an ethnography of Iraq “at a distance” (Robben 2010). The idea was that an off-site ethnography of post-invasion Iraq would be less biased than on-site fieldworks in the determined conditions of the “human terrain system”. The project offered the opportunity of a methodological experiment, questioning the frontiers of ethnography. It compared second hand data and ethnographic interviews with exiles, with the authors’ previous experiences on others sites of war and counter-insurgency. Through a comparative approach, the authors analyzed the effects of war on the Iraqi society, at the light of modalities of government in the Israeli occupied territories, Red Khmer’s Cambodia, Northern Ireland, or the Argentinian dictatorship. The comparative ethnography focused on “processes of changes”, keeping in mind however that “similar processes produce different significations, discourses and practices” in different settings. Building on this experiment, the OFF-SITE project will use a comparative approach in order to explore some research hypotheses, methods and main findings: the research timeline is organized around three international workshops that establish a comparative dialogue on 1) counter-memories and counter-archives; 2) off-site ethnography; 3) politics of denial (as detailed in the output’s programme). However, the off-site ethnography we develop does not build on a comparative methodology across different sites. It rather goes in the details of one specific case study, observing violence at a distance through the methods of historical anthropology and the ethnography of the archives. One reason for this choice is that the research questions on State violence in authoritarian regimes strongly echo the issues of violence and memory in post-colonial history: notably, the “silencing of the past” (Trouillot 1995), enterprises of rewriting of history, power-knowledge apparatuses, topographies of impunity, and moral and social orders built on practices of mass violence. As studies in historical anthropology suggest (Comaroff and Comaroff 1992), archives and archival research seem to be the best sites of observations of questions such as the unfolding of violence in different aspects of memory politics, the present uses of disputed pasts and the ways in which they redefine political belongings and subjectivities. Through the study of violence and its legacies in colonial settings in relation to State formation, the theories and methods of historical anthropology offer sharp tools, and useful comparative perspectives, to study today’s repressive societies.

However, in the latter case, we have to lead these researches without access to “official” archives. This is the reason why the project takes seriously Jean and Jonh Comaroff’s invitation to “produce our own archives” (1992), or, as we argue, “counter-archives”. Why counter-archives? Archives are sites where power is actively negotiated, contested, and confirmed (Derrida 1995; Foucault 1979; Schwartz and Cook 2002). In the present research, there is no access to official archives while State sponsored archives are selective and entangled in specific discourses of denial. The project – built from outside the positions of power that have a monopoly on the production of archiving themselves – will gather and review critically these resources, but also consolidate them with, or confront them to data produced by counter-memories of violence. Another dimension is that of temporality. Archiving (mails, documents...) implies storing what is no longer in use: in this sense, Derrida (1995) draws a parallel between archiving and the Freudian concept of “repression”. In contrast, counter-archives point to the ‘currentness’ of a disputed past, a repressed past, that is not yet archived and belongs to the present tense in various ways: because, on the one hand, experiences of disappearances, open wounds and

impunity impart a spectral texture to violence (Navaro-Yashin 2009); because, on the other hand, State narratives that have replaced imposed silence have present-day uses and functions.

Counter-archives are not a way to build up the lacking empirical sources and replace missing archives. They are a site for ethnographing violence as it unfolds in disputed memory regimes and produces different political subjectivities. In this sense, the project echoes Ann Stoler's urge to "move from archive-as-source to archive-as-subject" (2010), through two dimensions: 1) looking at what archives are produced by different actors and how, and in which ways this relates to the (non) patrimonialization of violence; 2) developing an ethnographic reading of archival source as sites of information on shared representations and cosmogonies, the circulation of norms and emotions, and relations of power (Hamilton, et al. 2012). An ethnography of the archives (Fabian 2008; Feldman 2008), will be combined to other empirical methods in order to frame an off-site ethnography. We will ethnograph the documentary productions of truth-seeking initiatives (human rights databases, citizen tribunals' hearings), following the path of an ethnography of truth commissions (Sanford 2003; Theidon 2002). Studies in micro-history opened the methodological path to the combination of qualitative and statistical treatment (Mariot and Zalc 2010) that will also be applied to these documentary productions.

## **Research objectives**

The project's general goals concern the production of new research methods and tools. The objective is to establish the methods for qualitative inquiry in situations that fall out of the domain of researchability, and build an international, trans-disciplinary scientific dialogue through comparative perspectives. The effort to produce knowledge builds on 1) dialogues across time and space, adapting the toolboxes of historical anthropology and comparative approaches, and 2) collaborative modes of data gathering and investigation through unofficial truth-seeking initiatives and digital counter-archives.

The project's specific goals concern the empirical study. First, the project seeks to fill in a research gap in Iranian studies on the Iranian eighties, and foster further research in this field. Second, it seeks to draw a genealogy of the theocratic government through the angles of violence and terror as mechanisms of government of civil society in the long run, and delineation of political belongings and participation. Third, by producing this empirical body of knowledge, the project seeks to initiate a dialogue and enlighten in a comparative perspective more off-site topics that resonate with the Iranian case, such as post-revolutionary violence in Egypt, or methods of Hezbollah counter-insurgency and political violence in Syria.

The projected social impacts are twofold. At the level of research methodology, the project seeks to open the way to further collaboration between social scientists and citizens' tribunals and truth seeking initiatives around the world. Peoples' tribunals on State crimes are multiplying in the last years. However, they have not been studied carefully by legal anthropologists or sociologists (with the exception of Shafafi (2015)), and more importantly, there is no example of how the rich body of data produced by these grass roots initiatives can be used and analyzed in the ethnographic study of State violence at a distance. At the level of the empirical study, the project aims at providing a non-political, scholarly site of knowledge and debate, eventually granting to younger generations of Iranians an access to a past they did

not hear about in the cultural, social or political life. For this generation, “liberation from the past cannot be attained by forgetting but by knowing how their lives have been shaped by (this violence)” (Stoler 2002).