

# On the Outside Looking In: Ethnography and Authoritarianism

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Despite the common assumption that ethnography is most successful where researchers achieve recognition as insiders within the communities they study, conducting research in nondemocracies inverts incentives to conduct ethnographic research as an insider and poses unexpected ethical risks to both researchers and respondents. Rather than increasing trust and facilitating access, cultivating insider roles in nondemocracies may have the unintended effects of encouraging conformity with regime discourses, limiting further fieldwork access, and exacerbating respondents' tendency toward epistemic deference. Drawing on the authors' research experiences and the growing literature on fieldwork in nondemocracies, this article argues that outsider roles may be preferable to insider roles for identifying the unspoken rules, assumptions, and taken-for-granted aspects of everyday politics in nondemocracies. Moreover, outsider roles clarify the relationship between researcher and respondent in ways that provide clear ethical advantages in terms of consent, value, and risk.

## Introduction

On April 15, 2016, to mark the very first National Security Education Day, a 16-panel cartoon strip appeared on public billboards in Beijing's Xicheng District. Entitled "Dangerous Love" (*Weixian de aiqing*), the strip told the story of Xiao Li, a young Chinese woman working in a Chinese government ministry who is seduced by "David," a foreign spy posing as an academic. As their romance blooms, David cons Xiao Li into giving him sensitive documents so that he can look at them "for use in academic articles." Eventually the police expose David, put Xiao Li in handcuffs, and bring her in for questioning. Despite her pleas of innocence, the officers tell her that she is criminally liable for her carelessness. The strip ends with an ominous warning of the legal statutes that establish criminal liability for aiding in the distribution of sensitive information to foreign agents.

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The strip illustrates many of the challenges researchers working as outsiders in nondemocratic states must face when conducting research in the field. To the general public, the message resounds clearly: collaboration with foreigners, even those who appear harmless, may be met with serious consequences.

"Dangerous Love" serves as a reminder to political ethnographers working in nondemocratic regimes of the difference in ethical stakes for researchers and respondents who participate in their research. This gap is amplified where access to communities may be politicized and even criminalized in a variety of unintended ways. For many citizens in authoritarian regimes, daily life entails negotiating a labyrinth of informal practices that prevent one from falling into various coercive or extractive traps arising within formal institutions. Insiders working on sensitive topics in nondemocracies encounter a range of limitations arising from the need to balance one's research credibility with concerns about political reliability (Yusupova 2019). For outsiders, gaining access to opposition groups or repressed communities by way of demonstrating solidarity could expose oneself and one's informants to surveillance, deportation, blacklisting, or even police brutality. Even for those aiming to study majorities or nonpoliticized groups, gaining access to a community may entail visibly accepting regime-imposed constraints on one's freedom to demonstrate that contact with the researcher does not involve heightened risk of scrutiny by the regime.

In other words, nondemocracies complicate the researcher's ability to perform the role of insider, which

is often treated as the key to successful ethnographic research: being seen as an insider is not just a matter of the community's acceptance of the researcher, but also of the researcher's acceptance of the risks they pose to one's respondents. In such cases, it may seem less desirable to be caught on the outside looking in, yet remaining an outsider may prove substantively and ethically advantageous when conducting research in nondemocracies.

This article builds upon the growing literature in the social sciences examining the distinctive ways that nondemocracies influence the production of knowledge, particularly focusing on ethical choices regarding researchers' presentation of themselves during fieldwork. Though "fieldwork" encompasses a broad range of methodological tactics, here we primarily discuss those that fall under the category of "ethnography." While definitions of ethnography also vary, there is broad agreement that ethnographic work encompasses those methods of data collection that seek to uncover emic understandings of social phenomena from an on-the-ground immersive perspective, and which primarily (but not exclusively) utilize interpretivist lenses of analysis. This includes such well-known tactics as participant observation, but also includes learning a language, observing rituals or public spaces, holding conversations with locals, and engaging in other more routine practices of daily life at a field site (Volo and Schatz 2004; Wedeen 2010). After a brief conversation about reflexivity and researcher positionality, we begin with an overview of the conceptual and practical challenges arising from the adoption of insider and outsider roles in ethnographic observation. We then consider the specific ways that nondemocracies can affect the nature and value of insider and outsider roles. We argue that authoritarian and repressive contexts invert many of the presumed benefits of insider roles when conducting ethnographic research, such that adopting outsider roles presents researchers with a number of practical and ethical advantages with respect to consent, value, and risk.

### **Reflexivity, Researcher Positionality, and Performing Roles in Fieldwork**

We start with a brief discussion regarding the impact of reflexivity and researcher positionality on how those in the field perform insider and outsider roles. Previous scholarship has treated "insider" and "outsider" as essentially static categories wherein insider researchers are those who share membership in the same group as their respondents (Dwyer and Buckle 2009; Kanuha 2000). However, recent scholarship emphasizes that "insiderness" can be multidimensional and established on the basis of any combination of racial, ethnic, gender, religious, regional, class, professional, or numerous other identities. Researchers may simultaneously hold both insider and outsider status in any given situation (Bouziane 2018; Kingston 2018;

Merriam et al. 2001; Zhao 2017). We affirm that insiderness and outsidership are roles researchers may perform based on the repertoire of identities available to them. We recognize that social identities like insider and outsider are established through intersubjective communication between researchers and respondents, and that given dimensions on which researchers might choose to perform insider and outsider roles may rise and fall in salience (Chandra 2012). Though researchers may attempt to perform insider or outsider roles, the ultimate success of these performances depends equally much on their interlocutor's perceptions. We recognize that researchers' reflexive consideration of their own positionality is key when adopting insider or outsider roles. However, as we discuss below, researchers' plausible self-identification with a role may be constrained by the ways that they are categorized by their informants, and these constraints increase markedly in authoritarian or repressive environments where researchers' identities become politicized.

Reflexively considering researcher positionality is a vital step when discussing insider and outsider roles. By exercising reflexivity about the manner of self-presentation in the field, the researcher reveals both the kind of information that research generates and also how researchers generate it. As researchers enter the field, their choices concerning how they present themselves to respondents must reflect the researchers' "ethical competence" and be sensitive to the "ethically important moments" that might arise in the course of their interactions (Guillemin and Gillam 2016, 276). Researchers' self-presentation to interlocutors in the field as insiders or outsiders thus becomes a performance. Respondents' assessment of the risk they undertake through participation varies depending upon these presentational choices. Chacko (2004, 57) cautions that "every label the researcher or informant adopts, or is given, produces specific discourses." Researchers must be aware of the ways in which they present themselves to respondents as their performance of insider/outsider roles impacts not only the quality and content of a respondent's participation, but also the level of risk surrounding it.

A major aspect of researcher reflexivity involves recognizing which role the researcher performs while conducting fieldwork. While in the past, guides on research methodology treated insider and outsider roles like fixed categories, Zhao (2017, 186) reminds researchers that "insider and outsider positions can simultaneously coexist or alternate within a single research event." Others have portrayed the relationship between insider and outsider status as blurred (Dwyer and Buckle 2009), as simultaneous and multiple (Deutsch 1981; Mullings 1999), or as a product of positionality and power dynamics (Merriam et al. 2001). With particular regard to positionality, some have highlighted that one's status as insider or outsider is ultimately a matter of social relations, such that the insider/outsider distinction is mediated by respondents

in everyday contexts (Halstead 2001). Such dynamics become salient in situations in which the researcher is only partially considered an insider (say, owing to shared language, nationality, or ascriptive traits) and the insider/outsider relationship becomes fluid and negotiated. As Ergun and Erdemir (2010) discovered during their fieldwork in Turkey and Azerbaijan, maintaining insider status entails fulfilling natives' expectations by way of performing or embracing commonalities and playing down differences, but at some point insiders (especially partial insiders) will find their status challenged by conflicting political or social preferences.

Following this thread, more recent scholarship emphasizes researcher positionality and using reflexivity to understand how researchers often occupy a space of in-betweenness (Chacko 2004; Giwa 2015). Work in cultural geography and anthropology recognizes that, in any given interaction, respondents evaluate researchers in the field along multiple dimensions (Benwell 2014). While researchers may be able to claim insider status on the basis of being born and raised in a community, they may be regarded as outsiders due to their professional or educational background, their gender, or any number of other dimensions of identity (Zhao 2017). This lesson was learned by Alexander Sodiqov, a Tajik researcher, who was detained while conducting research on civil society in Tajikistan for his dissertation at the University of Toronto (Clibbon 2014). Those researchers not native to the community, and usually considered outsiders, may attempt to use their ability to speak the local language, their religious backgrounds, their associations with local institutions, and other parts of their identity to earn respondent trust, and become insiders in a different way (Kusek and Smiley 2014). For example, Bouziane (2018) discusses her ability to gain "partial insider" status during her fieldwork in Jordan as a German researcher of Moroccan Arab descent. This status, she reflects, allowed her to broach topics that outsider researchers may have been unable to raise, but also constrained her as she was expected to act according to gender roles that women from an outsider context might have elided.

We join such studies in affirming the fluidity inherent in researcher positionality. However, several external forces may restrict the researcher's ability to effectively perform insider roles. Many of the studies that highlight researcher positionality examine how native researchers experience degrees of outsidership despite their upbringing in the same community as their respondents. For example, Zhao's reflections on how her identity as a Western-trained scholar impacted her ability to perform an insider role during her fieldwork in her Chinese hometown illustrates how researchers may be "in-between" insider and outsider (Zhao 2017).

However, we note that a place of in-betweenness may be unattainable in situations where boundaries between

inside and outside harden, and a researcher's ability to perform either insider or outsider roles is constrained. In these circumstances, researchers may find themselves positioned as either insiders or outsiders by matters of social, political, or legal measures that render performances of identity inflexible rather than fluid and in-between.

While insider/outsider roles may shift depending upon which aspects of identity have been activated, researchers may encounter circumstances in which particular attributes achieve primary salience. For instance, obvious ethnic and racial differences between the researcher and respondents may fix the researcher as an outsider no matter what other claims a researcher makes in attempting to gain insider status. In the case of non-native researchers, geopolitical tensions may cause national identities to override others, hardening the boundaries between researcher and respondent. In these instances, the repertoire of available roles is limited, and researchers may find themselves automatically considered outsiders. These situations may be especially common for researchers studying authoritarian states, where widespread surveillance and policing place native and non-native researchers alike in the role of outsiders.

The authors' experiences in the field reflect such circumstances. As US citizens researching non-native authoritarian regimes in China and Russia, we both approach fieldwork from the perspective of outsiders. We have made numerous trips to the field, which have allowed us to gain linguistic and cultural fluency, cultivate working relationships with locals, and become deeply familiar with our field sites. However, we have also experienced limitations in our ability to perform insider roles due to circumstances beyond our choosing. While working in Chinese Muslim communities in cities throughout China, ascriptive racial and ethnic differences between Stroup and his respondents clearly marked his status as an outsider. Further, his non-Muslim identity compounded this outsider status. Though Goode did not contend with obvious ascriptive differences with colleagues and respondents in the field, the sharpening of geopolitical tensions between Russia and the US made his citizenship an inevitable source of political amusement, hope, or even anger and resentment. In some instances, his knowledge of the Russian language and its idioms merged with decades of anti-Americanism to become a cause for suspicion. However, we suggest that these obstacles did not hinder our ability to gain respondents' trust and successfully conduct research.

## Ethnography and Insiderism

Since Malinowski's (1922) observation that ethnographers ought to become members of a community if they hoped to explain what it meant to be "native," the value of knowledge produced through participant observation and in-depth interviews has been linked to a researcher's achieving

insider status. Even as he argued against “insiderism,” Merton (1972) lamented that it had become commonplace to view group membership or position as conferring monopolistic or privileged access to certain kinds of knowledge. By contrast, “the Outsider has a structurally imposed incapacity to comprehend alien groups, statuses, cultures, and societies” (Merton 1972, 15). Jones (1970) similarly interpreted insider status as granting the researcher access to the ways that information is gathered, stored, and disseminated within a community. Even those who assert the “in-betweenness” of researchers tend to highlight the ways in which native researchers cope with obstacles imposed by differences in education level or profession that mark them as outsiders, or the ways in which non-native researchers model insider behavior through cultural or linguistic fluency (Kusek and Smiley 2014; Zhao 2017). In both cases, performing insider status is prized in terms of gaining results from fieldwork. Acceptance as an insider further provides trust and openness, based on “an assumption of understanding and an assumption of shared distinctiveness” (Dwyer and Buckle 2009, 58). For Ohnuki-Tierney (1984), insider status not only speeds entry into the field but, importantly, eases understanding of the emotive dimensions of behavior. While these are nontrivial advantages, they also represent a selective reading of the insider/outsider distinction. In anthropology, Geertz (1974) noted the value of both “experience-near” and “experience-distant” forms of knowledge as essential. Merton’s seminal piece noted that researchers may simultaneously be insiders and outsiders, given the array of statuses shared by individuals in society. He thus concluded with the ironic exhortation “Insiders and Outsiders in the domain of knowledge, unite! You have nothing to lose but your claims” (Merton 1972, 44).

As awareness grew of the slippery distinction between insider and outsider roles, the general acceptance of insider status as an unquestioned benefit in ethnography came under scrutiny. In pragmatic terms, insider roles potentially come with blind spots and pitfalls that degrade the quality of one’s observations. For insiders, an intuitive understanding of the emotional dimensions of behavior is potentially compromised by the lack of emotional distance and inability to identify related patterns of behavior (Bolak 1996). For informants, assumptions about shared membership with insider researchers might mean that they fail to explain their individual experiences fully, or that they assume the researcher already shares in their unspoken aspirations and opinions. Such shared assumptions may lead to missed opportunities for researchers. In reviewing her field notes, Kanuha (2000, 442) noticed these kinds of assumptions at work in circumstances “in which I did not pursue vague statements, generalities, or even participant-initiated leads with follow-up probes.” For insiders, respondents’ opportunities and means of evasion are significantly greater given the assumption of common

knowledge and the risky social situation of either party openly challenging such assumptions. In organizational settings, insider researchers may experience role conflict (Brannick and Coghlan 2007, 70), while organizational membership may even block access to sensitive areas of research (Leigh 2014, 430). As Labaree (2002, 111) observes, “insiderness is no guarantee to avoiding unintended positioning by others and ensuring the establishment of trust with respondents.” Consequently, insider roles may have the unanticipated consequence of increasing the likelihood that an interview or interaction in the field will be shaped by the researcher’s experience rather than one’s respondents (Dwyer and Buckle 2009, 58).

Hence, insider roles may create blind spots that overlook that which ethnography seeks to achieve. One should be wary of conflating ethnography as a method with the end goal of explaining the ways that “insiders” understand their existence and give meaning to action (Schatz 2009, 8). In this sense, the role of outsider is an asset rather than a liability in shining a light on aspects of practice and discourse that may be unavailable or even imperceptible to insiders. Perhaps emblematic of this is Tocqueville’s (1838) historic observation that “[t]he majority lives in the perpetual practice of self-applause, and *there are certain truths which the Americans can only learn from strangers or from experience*” (emphasis added).

## The Virtues and Vicissitudes of Outsider Ethnography

The role of outsider need not be an obstacle to being trusted with insider knowledge or gaining insight into different points of view, but it can facilitate maintaining the necessary social and intellectual distance that insiders often sacrifice (Bucerius 2013, 707). Because outsider researchers lack native familiarity with the contexts in which they work, they may be able to explore avenues that are unavailable to insiders. Outsiders may gain valuable information by “playing up” one’s foreignness, or the perceived need to be educated by those with local knowledge. Their foreignness may encourage a perception of harmlessness that creates space for asking potentially challenging questions (Herod 1999, 322). Moreover, they might be less likely to be perceived as aligned with subgroups possessing conflicting political stances and therefore may get more information than insiders (Merriam et al. 2001, 411). In interviews conducted in United Arab Emirates, Jones (2015, 31) found that her outsider status helped to relax elites since she was not tied to the local community: “That I was not Emirati, an academic not a journalist, and able to speak Arabic seemed valuable factors encouraging access and a willingness to talk.”

Despite these apparent advantages, outsider roles also present significant complications where respondents and gatekeepers invoke a researcher’s outsider status to constrain or deflect inquiry. To many locals, a researcher’s

inability to ascertain a native understanding of the context in which they situate observations may inherently limit their ability to fully comprehend the significance of cultural events. Bu Wei (2006) posits that insiders and outsiders not only observe and answer questions differently but also ask entirely different questions. On several occasions, our informants at field sites within China and Russia reminded us of our status as outsiders and the inherent limits they presumed it placed on our ability to work within a Chinese or Russian cultural milieu. These concerns can extend to informants' inability to verbalize sentiments in terms that they believe the researcher will find intelligible. Consequently, they may feel the need to educate the researcher on a wide array of topics beyond the purview of the researcher's work.

Outsider researchers may encounter other preemptive constraints justified by their presumed ignorance of cultural norms or habits. In the field, we frequently encountered such situations. While these departures occasionally yield theoretically important discoveries, researchers may find these exchanges pejorative, frustrating, or unnecessary. One interviewee in Jinan insisted that Stroup prepare for their interview by reading a 600-page volume on local Hui intellectual history unrelated to his topic of study, and frequently scolded him during the course of the interview by remarking that the answers to his questions could be found in the book. Goode experienced a similar encounter during research in Petrozavodsk, where a local contact insisted on guiding him through weeks of background reading on Karelia's politics and history before addressing his research questions. However frustrating, interactions like these may also yield data. Volo and Schatz (2004) remind scholars that these moments where community insiders correct a researcher's notions about what ought to be true, or suggest alternatives to something the researcher supposes to be true, may prove to be useful for the discovery of counterintuitive truths about social reality. Brettell (1993) argues that outsider researchers must learn to accept these critiques from insider sources in order to ensure they do not overlook important context.

Most problematic is the frequent assertion that the subtleties of the native culture lie beyond the researcher's comprehension simply because the researcher is an outsider. One of Stroup's interviewees suggested: "Forget about studying contemporary China. You just won't ever understand it. You could study for 10 lifetimes and never understand it. Only Chinese people can truly understand. And really only a very few Chinese people really get it." The respondent continued by likening contemporary China to a character's description of drunkenness in the popular opera, *The Story of the Thorn Hairpin* (*Jing Chai Ji*), which he sang to Stroup, waving his arms in the stylized manner of a Beijing opera performer: "The heavens spin, the earth spins." Contemporary China,

the respondent's allusion implied, simply is not comprehensible. Similarly, Goode observed that respondents in Russia often greet outsider researchers with a pitying look and the famous line from an eighteenth-century poem by Fyodor Tyutchev: "Who would grasp Russia with the mind?" (*Umom Rossiyu ne ponyat*).

Other forms of preemptive constraints may be found in norms of interaction across gender, faith, or class boundaries that may govern interactions between an outsider researcher and respondents. Clark's (2006) survey of researchers who conducted fieldwork in the Middle East found that 38% of women conducting field research confronted gender-related difficulties in the course of their work, including harassment in public places, or difficulty gaining access to opposite-sex respondents. Being perceived as an outsider may actually help researchers to overcome such difficulties by creating opportunities not available to insiders. Schwedler (2006) observes that Western female scholars in the Middle East often call themselves the "third sex" because they enjoy greater access to both female and male interlocutors. Johnson (2009, 323) remarks that while it was sometimes necessary for her to adopt Russian "norms of femininity" to facilitate access, her outsider status allowed her to "call out powerful Russians for their sexist behavior in ways my Russian counterparts may not be able to do without suffering social or financial consequences." El-Solh (1988) found, during her research of migrant Egyptian peasant communities in Iraq, that her status as a foreign researcher permitted her to ask questions that she, as an outsider, could not be expected to know. In this way, el-Solh overcame some of the strict divisions between sexes to interview men.

Such obstacles became apparent to Stroup when attempting to conduct interviews across gender lines in conservative Islamic communities in China. One respondent informed Stroup that, in more conservative Muslim communities, he would need to be careful about being seen in public alone with female respondents as locals might assume that this was proof of an extramarital affair. In order to avoid gaining such a reputation, the contact suggested that Stroup walk on the opposite side of the street and take back alleys to the research location when going to meet female respondents.

The final category of challenge an outsider researcher may face relates to the perception of the researcher as an authority figure and the struggle with epistemic deference. Misunderstanding of a researcher's work—including the goals and methods as well as substantive focus—is the primary driver of respondent mistrust (Cohen and Arieli 2011, 426). Respondents may attribute sinister intent to a researcher simply because of the ambiguity of the researcher's position.

Outsider ethnographers must overcome challenges arising from the disconnect between respondents' perceptions of what constitutes legitimate academic research and their

own topic of research. Volo and Schatz (2004, 267) explain that researchers and respondents are likely to differ over subjects considered to be important, as “the ethnographer is keen to record the mundanity of what is observed, probing interactions that may be deemed irrelevant or too ordinary to require comment by the actors themselves.” Even stated explanations about why the researcher is interested in learning about the daily life practices and cultural norms of a community may fail to resonate. Many Hui respondents interviewed by Stroup found it difficult to believe a foreign scholar would want to know mundane details about Chinese-Islamic culture, rituals, and daily life habits.

Proficiency in boring quotidian details that are taken for granted is a mark of being an insider, yet informants also assume that these are of little interest to outsiders. In turn, informants may feel they lack knowledge about the researcher’s subject and thus are not qualified to address the researcher’s interests. Field researchers in authoritarian contexts may experience *epistemic deference*: informants may deem themselves as unqualified or unable to provide researchers with the kind of information they seek and appeal to higher authorities in response to researchers’ questions (Stroup 2020). While seeking to arrange interviews with non-elite members of Hui communities, Stroup’s respondents repeatedly expressed a hesitance to speak with him due to a sense of scholarly inadequacy. An added dimension is the conviction among informants that their opinions and perspectives ultimately have little bearing on anything of importance given the nature of authoritarian governance. “I don’t think that anything I tell you will change the way things are,” one respondent told Stroup in reference to the imminent demolition of houses in her neighborhood.

## Outsider Ethnography in Authoritarian Contexts

Beyond these preemptive cultural constraints, nondemocratic regimes inject an additional layer of complexity in conducting outsider ethnography. Authoritarian regimes use coercion to maintain a tight control on power, aiming to keep the public disengaged and (mostly) demobilized. To this end, they permit social and economic autonomy so long as the public stays out of politics (Linz 2000). Authoritarian contexts make political science research inherently risky, but within certain limits as long as one is not perceived to support the regime’s opponents. The working group on authoritarian and repressive contexts for the Qualitative Transparency Deliberations reports that, “In these settings, opinions are not freely exchanged, nor is information easily accessed. Locally based interlocutors often face considerable risks—from harassment or threats to their job or family members to imprisonment, torture, or worse—if they share information that is considered

politically sensitive or compromising to the powers-that-be” (Jacobs et al. 2021, 199).<sup>1</sup>

Limitations on inquiry and knowledge are not unique to authoritarian states (Glasius 2018). Democracies, too, occasionally create spaces wherein the securitization of dissent and the implementation of preemptive measures of social control effectively recreate “nonpluralist spaces” and other features of an authoritarian environment within otherwise liberal states (Fernandez, Starr, and Scholl 2011; Rivetti and Saeidi 2018). However, as Rivetti and Saeidi (2018) remark, despite the existence of authoritarian contexts within supposedly liberal and democratic states, it is the uneven distribution of power in autocratic states that sets them apart and poses additional hardships for researchers.

Conducting fieldwork in autocratic regimes where the rule of law is absent, protections for civil rights and liberties are not granted, policing and law enforcement are arbitrary, and surveillance and intimidation by agents of the regime are prevalent requires researchers to overcome specific and unique challenges. Ryan and Tynen (2020, 11) note that “[t]he intersection of authoritarian state power and everyday life impacts knowledge production by altering the conditions under which interview and ethnographic data are collected.” First and foremost, it is important for researchers to understand that the production of knowledge about authoritarian regimes may be viewed as a political act that implicates not just the researcher but their respondents. Bekmurzaev, Lottholz, and Meyer (2018, 105) observe that even in hybrid regimes like Kyrgyzstan, “it becomes increasingly clear that security organs and state actors consider independent research [on sensitive topics] ... a nuisance and interference in domestic politics.” Clark (2006, 419) found “the greatest challenges to conducting qualitative research in the Middle East are those related to the authoritarian political conditions prevalent in most of the countries of the region.” Fieldwork-based research on Eurasia has similarly experienced scientific closure in step with regime closure in the region since the 1990s (Goode 2016).

For researchers working in autocratic states, the regime’s powers of surveillance often filters into interpersonal interactions, and fixes positions of insider and outsider. Moreover, frequent interactions between respondents and those nonacademics practicing “methodological cognates” (i.e., semistructured interviews, surveys, experiments) at sites of research in contentious or authoritarian contexts may lead to participants in research hardening conceptions of who researchers are and what researchers want. Previous experiences with outsider interlocutors may prime respondents to regurgitate prepared scripts, redirect researchers away from sensitive topics, hesitate to participate in research activities, or actively attempt to subvert a researcher in order to minimize risk to themselves (Parkinson 2022). Over-research and over-exposure

of participants may limit a researcher's ability to perform the role of insider or outsider.

The threat of observation by the state and differences in the consequences for the researcher and respondent should the regime deem their interactions a threat prevents researchers from performing insider roles even if they desire to do so. Because information is privileged to the state under autocracy, respondents may fear that the remarks they make to researchers will become known to the authorities. In response, respondents may seek to place distance between themselves and the researcher in order to avoid reprisal. In systems where rule of law and governmental transparency are imperfect or entirely absent, the lack of trust placed in researchers by respondents makes sense.

The expectation of state surveillance may also lead respondents to self-censor. Potential interviewees may qualify their willingness to meet with an outsider researcher only so long as they avoid particular terms, or to speak of certain subject only on the margins. Thøgersen's (2006) research in southwest China assessed that his interviewees often engaged in code-switching between colloquial and official language to ensure their responses remained politically correct. As a result, researchers must be aware that the responses given by contacts may reflect the respondent's desire to avoid reprisal for uttering anything that might be construed as politically incorrect according to the dictates of the regime. Turner (2013) cautions that in initial interviews, respondents are likely to feed researchers the "party line," especially if they are accompanied by a state-assigned research assistant. Noting that norms regarding expression of opinions may result in self-censorship due to a prominent "culture of fear," Koch (2013, 393) reasons that in these contexts, "more meaning can often be found in silences, rather than what is openly expressed or practiced."

While such mistrust may deter respondents from talking to researchers altogether, it may also manifest as preference falsification. Preference falsification is "the act of misrepresenting one's genuine wants under perceived social pressure" (Kuran 1995, 3). While preference falsification does not strictly depend on regime type, it is amplified in autocracies by the uncertain consequences for respondents of participating in the study. For instance, a Levada Center study found that 26% of Russians fear expressing their opinions in surveys, while 49% believe that people purposefully misrepresent their views and more than half of them attribute this to fear of negative personal consequences (Korchenkova and Goriashko 2016). These concerns were further amplified by public opinion scholars in the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, particularly with the adoption of repressive censorship laws that imposed harsh punishments for calling Russia's "special military operation" a war or for "discrediting" Russia's armed forces (Zavadskaya 2022).

In examining preference falsification in China, Jiang and Yang (2016) found that "citizens still do not dare to publicly reveal their disagreement with their dominant discourse," but that this tendency varies significantly in accordance with respondents' individual attributes as well as their perceptions of interviewers as state agents. This last point echoes the conclusions of Bischooping and Schuman (1992), who observed a tendency of respondents to conceal their preferences for the political opposition in advance of Nicaragua's 1990 election as interviewers were assumed to be sponsored by the regime unless they openly displayed pro-opposition symbols.

The implications of preference falsification for a researcher's role as insider or outsider are both profound and contrary to expectations. Rather than cultivating trust and openness, insider researchers may lose credibility and raise suspicions by attempting to raise topics understood to be politically sensitive, especially in cases where a strict informal division is observed between regime politics and citizens' daily lives. Under such circumstances, *adopting an insider role conceivably worsens the incidence of conformity with regime discourses in interviews with ordinary citizens*. Of course, one might argue that an outsider role would not help matters under such circumstances. Elites may be especially reticent when confronted with an outsider, and politicization of the outsider's home government as an enemy may further worsen the situation. Amid the degeneration of British–Russian relations in 2007, Roberts (2013, 341) notes that elites had a difficult time differentiating him as researcher from the government he supposedly represented. Alternatively, outsiders may be viewed as avatars for the outside world or potential "saviors-in-waiting" (Goode 2010, 1061). Either way, the consequences may include diminished access or a surfeit of opposition sentiments if one is not careful.

One of the most commonly recognized obstacles for outsider researchers of authoritarianism is gaining formal access to the field, though perhaps less easy to identify are situations in which access is not really access—that is, when official access presents further, unanticipated complications arising either from gatekeepers or even one's respondents. In her reflections on research conducted in the Sino-Vietnamese borderlands, Turner (2013) identifies a number of state-affiliated "gatekeepers" who stand between the researcher and access to the field. Among such figures, she counts not only the government officials responsible for handing out visas, but also academics in sponsoring departments and research assistants. Harrell (1986, 14) notes that his affiliation with a Chinese university provided him with key resources and training before heading out to the field, but with the tradeoff that many of his sites for ethnographic observation were negotiated and handpicked by the local government. Upon arriving in Russia for extended research in 2014, Goode's local sponsor (the dean of a civil service institute) reacted with barely concealed terror upon realizing

that he planned to research nationalism—an increasingly risky topic in the wake of Crimea’s annexation (and, it bears noting, one that was clearly described in the research proposal that the sponsor apparently never read). The sponsor first proposed several alternative, anodyne topics and then attempted to foist a handpicked assistant upon Goode in a transparent attempt to monitor or influence his work.

Gaining the state’s approval to conduct research may further complicate access, depending on the ways that respondents interpret the meaning of official approval. Norman (2009, 76) notes that researchers who gain official permission may be seen as collaborating, or as legitimizing the state’s actions or ideology. Evoking these associations with the state may damage the researcher’s trust among respondents. Though respondents may cooperate with researchers out of a sense of obligation, previous interactions with the state’s agents may make them wary. Malekzadeh (2016) observes that authoritarian regimes “excel at sowing doubt,” and that respondents may assume the researcher is cooperating with the state in some fashion. One reason for this is that, as Mette Halskov Hansen (2006) notes, researchers often find themselves “walking in the footsteps” of the authoritarian state: the state frequently blazes the path researchers follow in the field, leaving in its wake myriad social and economic consequences for researchers to encounter.

An increasingly unavoidable obstacle to access for outsider research in authoritarian regimes is state surveillance—that is, both *the expectation of surveillance as well as uncertainty about its long-term consequences*. Such surveillance increasingly extends into digital space, as regimes use online spaces to implement measures of authoritarian channeling and monitor online communication as a means of gathering information about resistance to the state (King, Pan, and Roberts 2013; MacKinnon 2011). A respondent’s willingness to meet outsider researchers may also include a hesitancy to communicate online for fear of being observed by regime censors.

The expectation of surveillance presents a catch-22 for outsider researchers: on the one hand, offering proof of the state’s approval might provide respondents with assurance that their contact with the respondent may not lead to trouble down the road. At several field locations, contacts informed Stroup that a letter of introduction would be required in order for people to agree to meet with him. Presenting respondents with an official letter of introduction from a recognizable institution like a university or the local branch of the Public Safety Bureau signals that the state condones the research agenda and the researcher’s presence in the community. The lack of official documentation or proof of registry may also provide a convenient pretext to keep the researcher at arm’s length. After making several unsuccessful attempts to secure interviews with Islamic clergy at one site, a contact with deep connections

to mosques and religious leaders in the community explained to Stroup: “[B]ecause you have not registered with the Provincial Foreign Affairs Office, a few of these work units and individuals may not be conveniently available to do interviews with you.”

Frustratingly, the converse may also prove true: *officially identifying oneself as a scholar with state approval may lead to a general reluctance on the part of respondents to meet with researchers*. The stilted and formal language of an introduction letter may intimidate respondents, who assume it connects the researcher to the state. In one instance, after viewing Stroup’s introduction letter (which was written on university letterhead and stamped with an official seal), a respondent who previously agreed to an interview experienced a change of heart and suggested that he look for someone else to interview. These contradictory responses illustrate the difficulty outsider researchers face in orienting to the habits and identifiers of state surveillance. As Beban and Schoenberger (2019) discovered in the course of their research into land grabs in Cambodia, state surveillance may be exercised through informal networks and proxies whose interests relative to one’s research objectives are difficult to anticipate. In addition, respondents’ subjectivities may shift in unexpected ways given the uncertainty and vulnerabilities of their position. This uncertainty cuts both ways in that potential respondents are equally dubious of outsider researchers, perhaps especially where autocracies have diminished academic freedoms.

Alternatively, respondents may feel that meeting with an outsider researcher will only result in an increase in unwanted attention from the state. Occasionally, respondents strongly suggested that sticking to elite interviews, and primarily focusing on intellectuals, better served Stroup’s interests for reasons connected to his own safety. One respondent suggested: “You ought to communicate more with scholars. Doing interviews like these is safer. Do you understand?” At one field site, Stroup’s attempts to speak with a local imam of some prominence failed precisely because of his registration as a foreign researcher backed by a Chinese university. As the imam explained, “A few years ago I met with a foreign scholar, and afterward the national security bureau came looking to talk to me. So, you see, I can’t meet with you.” Goode experienced a similar phenomenon in Russia. In more than one interview, respondents expressed the certainty that they would be visited by security services afterwards. When sharing this observation with a local academic, she admitted that she was mentally preparing for such a visit as well.

It is worth stressing that such concerns are not merely a matter of the timing of a researcher’s insertion into the field, as state surveillance exposes respondents, research assistants, and partners to risk long after the outsider ethnographer has left. As Driscoll and Schuster (2018, 418) remind us, “espionage, treason, ‘insulting the

president' and the like, can be charged retroactively and carry long jail sentences." In a troubling series of incidents following Goode's departure from Russia in 2014, his local research assistant was interrogated by the Committee on Extremism and pressured to "confess" to organizing election-day provocations in the region on Goode's orders. She was then accused of treason in the press and forced to flee the region for several months. Upon returning home, a case was opened against her by the local prosecutor's office on the basis of the sham accusations in the press (the case was later dropped for lack of evidence) and her university pressured her to change degrees and then to leave altogether.

Researchers may also continue to encounter difficulties even after they leave the field. In response to publications that it sees as unfriendly to its aims, the state may blacklist researchers or deny them future access to the field. The case of the "Xinjiang 13"—a group of scholars who found themselves effectively blacklisted and unable to obtain Chinese visas due to their research on the politically sensitive Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region—provides a cautionary tale for those scholars working on ethnic politics in China (Millward 2011). For outsider researchers examining sensitive topics in authoritarian contexts, the constant threat of losing access to the field may lead some researchers to limit the scope of their inquiry or to shy away from asking certain types of questions. During Goode's fieldwork in Russia, he was threatened with deportation—which would entail an automatic ban on returning for at least five years—and two other Fulbright scholars (both political scientists) were deported on trumped-up charges. During a similar time period, a pair of respected European scholars were deported from Russia on suspicion of being pro-Ukrainian radicals. (They eventually succeeded in contesting the deportation in court.) Yet another colleague was accused of violating the terms of his visa and pressured by Russian police to sign a blank document to obtain his release. Shortly after, he was accused of espionage in the local press. Under such circumstances, it is easy to see how even just the anticipation of such difficulties and risks arising from conducting research in authoritarian regimes may lead scholars simply to refocus their work on more congenial research sites.

### Advantages of Outsider Status

To this point, we have presented the challenges of adopting an outsider role during ethnographic observation—especially in authoritarian contexts, where options to position oneself as an insider may not be available. Less frequently mentioned in discussions of best practices in field research, however, are the ways in which performing an outsider role presents advantages to the researcher. Here we contend that, despite the aforementioned limitations outsiders face, they also possess tactics and tools unavailable to insiders.

Most discussions of outsider research in authoritarian regimes focus on the constraints and risks they present to researchers. Given these conditions, insiders may face fewer obstacles during fieldwork in terms of access, but they also share the same risks and limitations as citizens living under autocracy. Outsider researchers are by no means immune to these dangers and outsider status is no guarantee of cautious treatment. The 2016 abduction and murder of Giulio Regeni, an Italian PhD student studying at Cambridge, by Egyptian security services while he conducted fieldwork in Cairo serves as a sobering reminder that even noncitizens may become targets of violent suppression (Walsh 2017). The arrest of Matthew Hedges on espionage charges in the United Arab Emirates in 2018 also highlights the vulnerabilities of outsider researchers (Hedges 2019).<sup>2</sup> However, outsider researchers are usually less vulnerable owing to authorities' concerns not to draw unnecessary attention or provoke an international incident. While outsider status may translate into limitations on access and greater scrutiny, it can provide researchers with more protection from abuse by the authorities. In one illustrative incident in Russia, Goode was tailed by security services for two weeks and had his room searched while he was out, even finding that the toilet paper had been fully unrolled (a traditional hiding place for *samizdat* [banned literature] during the Soviet era). Later, during extensive questioning by security and immigration agents, he noted regular police grumbling in the corridor that the authorities would never deal "so politely" with ordinary Russian citizens.

While potentially being denied access to the field is a significant deterrent, outsiders are still less vulnerable than insiders. This is not to minimize the psychological and emotional risks they share, and the anxiety concerning one's status in the discipline and the future of one's research career can be powerful. However, such relative insulation from consequences obligates outsiders to make careful consideration of their impact on the lives of respondents prior to entry into the field. Tynen (Ryan and Tynen 2020) describes the painful realization that her mere presence in her Uyghur respondents' friends lists on *WeChat* could prove dangerous for them, particularly after she left Xinjiang. Knott (2019, 141, 144–48) reminds researchers that respondents in the field "reside in dynamic and contested contexts" and that researcher obligations to respondents extend beyond their departure. Unlike their insider counterparts, outsiders ultimately leave, and as such researchers performing outsider roles must understand when ethical concerns and a duty to minimize risk to interlocutors require them to exit. If a regime agent decides a researcher's presence is toxic, then arguably the safest and most responsible course of action (albeit painful) is to remove oneself to lessen the scrutiny of one's respondents and partners. Similar judgment must be weighed when deciding whether or not to return to field sites (Knott 2019, 147–48).

Additionally, one must contend with respondents' and authorities' expectations about the kinds of research political scientists are "supposed" to do, as often this does not involve an appreciation of political ethnography. During Goode's fieldwork in Russia, a sociologist advised that he would draw less attention from the authorities if he did "standard" research—by which she meant sitting in an archive or in front of a computer. The crucial factor is direct interaction with people, in which case the outsider role remains preferable: by meeting and talking with people, an outsider researcher may risk appearing to be an "agent of influence" (or investigative journalist, or covert missionary, and so forth), but an insider researcher might risk appearing part of a traitorous fifth column.

Recognizing the vulnerability of researchers and respondents in authoritarian regimes is part and parcel of accepting the ethnographic principle that one's respondents have agency in their co-creation of knowledge. Perhaps less recognized is that researchers are also vulnerable to their respondents' ability to work within regimes or to manipulate regime agents in ways that can threaten researchers with remedial action. In other words, *respondents may not just be co-creators with researchers, but co-constrainers with the state*, and may have a variety of reasons for seeking to constrain or even punish outsider researchers. As others have noted, scholars may risk implicating their contacts and revealing social networks when conducting research in authoritarian regimes (Norman 2009; Reny 2016). To the extent that the researcher's home government is viewed as a threat, respondents may worry that contact with the foreign researcher is toxic. This has the potential to exacerbate the power asymmetries already present in the relationship between researcher and informant, in no small part related to the uncertain consequences of interaction with a foreign scholar.

In authoritarian contexts, we argue that there is clear separation between insider and outsider roles in ethical terms related to consent, value, and risk inherent in each interaction with the researcher. In the first place, consent may mean different things for respondents depending on whether the researcher is perceived as an insider or outsider. Respondents may assume that an insider will interpret interactions with respondents in the "correct" fashion and exercise self-censorship in presenting their findings, regardless of whatever was indicated in the formal consent agreement. By contrast, respondents can make no such assumption that outsiders will recognize the political implications of their remarks, and thus invest greater trust in their formal consent to participate.

The same could be said for research partners as well as respondents. The different understandings of consent become especially pertinent after field research, when respondents may feel that they have lost power as the researcher seemingly gains sole interpretive authority. In authoritarian environments, the sudden realization of loss

of control and its potential consequences may be terrifying to respondents, particularly if they are dependent upon state budgets or vulnerable to coercion. While contracting with a local academic to conduct focus groups in Russia, Goode noted that his colleague was dragging out the process. When confronted, she expressed concern about how the data might be used and asked him to let her sign off on any written work using the data. When pressed for an explanation, she replied, "[w]e are at war, but we don't know where the frontlines are." The admission allowed Goode to avoid exposing the colleague to risk and to find a different partner to conduct the focus groups. By contrast, an insider might have been expected to intuit and avoid the regime's "red lines" (Glasius et al. 2017), even where consent was explicitly obtained.

Outsider roles also incentivize interactions with researchers in ways that are not available to insiders. Respondents speaking to outsiders derive value from access to foreigners' perceptions and testing out native hypotheses about similarities and differences among their respective communities. Where researchers are not just outsiders but seen as representatives of a regime's nemesis, the interaction further provides respondents with an opportunity to gauge the accuracy of state propaganda, or in some cases, to offer narrative corrections to the way they are portrayed in international discourse. In this way, the researcher affords respondents the chance to reconcile their experiences with—and potentially shape—what they imagine to be the outsider's perceptions. Insider researchers, who navigate the same sociopolitical context as their informants, cannot offer similar platforms for message testing or confirmation.

Finally, consider the element of risk to informants in interacting with insider and outsider researchers. In interacting with outsiders, there is far less uncertainty for respondents and greater ability to control the ways that interactions with the researcher are likely to be perceived. While interactions with insiders may raise the possibility of state surveillance, interactions with outsiders may seem to make surveillance a certainty. As a result, respondents are able to exercise caution and exert more control over the location and circumstances of an interview, such that their own local knowledge minimizes risk for both researcher and respondent.<sup>3</sup> Whereas respondents might feel anxiety about an insider's intentions after field research and seek remedial action (say, by involving the authorities), this is less likely to occur where the researcher's role as an outsider is explicit and unmistakable. By contrast, insiders tread a difficult line in which the researcher's identity qua researcher may be submerged beneath one's social role or even forgotten, or in which case respondents may make inaccurate assumptions about what an insider will and will not report in their research.

Taken together, these concerns point to outsiders' possession of tools and strategies for protection of

themselves and respondents that are unavailable to those performing insider roles when conducting fieldwork in autocracies. Given these concerns and constraints, it is difficult to escape the conclusion that insider ethnography often is not a viable option for studying authoritarian regimes. Being perceived as an insider could place greater limits on one's ability to establish trust in the eyes of respondents or research partners.

## Conclusions

In his classic anthropological study, Geertz (1972) describes his initial frustrations in conducting fieldwork in Bali. After being shut out from any meaningful social interaction, he and his wife attended an illegal cockfight and then spontaneously fled along with the locals when the police raided the event. The next day, he recounts that the village opened up to him: "[E]veryone was extremely pleased and even more surprised that we had not simply 'pulled our papers' (they knew about these too) and asserted our Distinguished Visitor status, but had instead demonstrated our solidarity with what were now our co-villagers." (Geertz 1972, 4) While the tale is often used to illustrate the value to ethnographers of gaining insider status, we suggest an alternative reading. As Geertz undoubtedly sensed, the stakes in choosing to flee were much lower for him and his wife than for their soon-to-be "co-villagers." His choice also reflects an important point: while outsider researchers face different challenges than those seen as insiders, they may also be able to draw on resources unavailable to insiders in managing ethical risk. Whereas familiarity with the research context may encourage insider researchers to be less risk-averse than outsider counterparts, the non-native understanding of context possessed by outsiders may encourage researchers to be more cautious in their approach. Further, outsider researchers may be seen by informants as blank slates, or in need of education on the local context. In this way, outsider researchers may be better able to extract themselves from perceptions of activism or advocacy. This, too, may shield informants from autocratic states.

Our overview leaves us with several mandates for developing a set of best practices when conducting research in authoritarian contexts. We believe that taking this call to heart and building a better research methodology for ethnography in authoritarian states will not only improve the quality of research done as outsiders, but will also allow scholars to conduct fieldwork in a manner that is more ethical and more protective of respondents.

First, we encourage researchers to *explicitly consider the regime context in the research-design stage*. Accounting for the limitations and challenges that might arise during fieldwork before ever setting foot in the field may help researchers to anticipate or avoid some of the challenges presented by autocratic governments.<sup>4</sup> These considerations are necessary, in part, because many of the

foundational texts on social science methodology "treat data as essentially homogenous, regardless of how and where they might be acquired," and as a result, "are largely mute as to which particular practices are best-suited to the context of researching authoritarianism" (Ahram and Goode 2016, 835). As outsiders unaware of local context, researchers need to be careful not to assume the universal applicability of methodologies across regime types. Instead, we recommend that researchers expressly consider how autocratic constraints can flip the research and ethical values of insider and outsider roles.

One way to begin taking regime context into account is to consider the ways that varieties of authoritarianism intersect with local conditions to influence, incentivize, or constrain the availability of insider or outsider roles. A regime's claimed basis of legitimation may be useful to predict whether or how the researcher's presence and interactions may be securitized. For example, Goode's role as an outsider researcher in Russia was less threatening in the early 2000s when Putin's regime was focused on claims to economic performance and modernization. By 2014, however, the rise of neo-imperial nationalism with a focus on NATO and the United States as an existential threat palpably altered his interactions in the field. Another way that varieties of authoritarianism may influence the adoption of insider or outsider roles concerns regime coherence and even competition among subordinates. Personalist or sultanistic autocracies that exercise loose control over subordinates may cultivate loyalty by incentivizing competition to fulfill vaguely defined mandates. Under such circumstances, formal protections for outsiders may become less meaningful relative to the opportunities for ambitious local officials to exploit their presence for advancement.

Second, we recommend researchers *incorporate pilot studies or site-selection fieldwork* into the research-design process. Making a preliminary trip to the field aids researchers in several respects. Especially when researchers lack a native understanding of context, conducting a pilot study allows them to exercise greater care in selecting case sites and to familiarize themselves with the social and political landscape present in the field. In these initial visits to sites, researchers may target sites of interest for further inspection, learn about which subjects breach local taboos, determine what kind of sample might be considered representative, and build important liaisons with key figures in the field as well as social capital that will lay the foundation for respondents' trust in future engagements.<sup>5</sup> Such visits are increasingly important today, given that fewer scholars undergo area studies training that might otherwise sensitize them to such concerns.

Stroup made use of such a trip in July of 2014, making site-selection visits to six cities in China before eventually selecting three in which to do more concentrated study in 2015. During this time he made valuable contacts at field

sites who would eventually provide introductions, furnish letters of sponsorship, and generally aid in the conduct of fieldwork. Stroup also used this opportunity to identify sites of interest within locations for the conduct of ethnographic observation, and used preliminary observations to refine his research's theoretical framework. Even for conspicuous outsiders, knowledge of local contexts is useful for ensuring that one's research is framed in a locally intelligible fashion and not misperceived by collaborators or respondents. In this sense, Goode found pilot studies commissioned from regional experts in Russia to be especially valuable for identifying the relevant terms and discourse (as well as silences) in each region he studied.

Third, once in the field, we encourage researchers to *be aware of the terms respondents set during interactions*. In overviewing an approach to relational interviewing, Fujii (2018) remarks that treating respondents in a humanistic way with dignity and respect necessitates that researchers engage in continuous reflexivity and employ active listening to build working relationships with their interlocutors. Dillon (1990, 172) reminds researchers that listening is as crucial to the success of interviewing as questioning. Practically speaking, researchers must be aware when respondents signal discomfort, or that their questions breach taboos, including being attentive to the significance of respondents' silence or hesitance. Moreover, outsider researchers should take care not to build their questions upon presuppositions about the sociopolitical context or dismiss findings that run counter to theory or assumptions. In short, outsider researchers must be cautious not to exclude or ignore evidence because it is not what they expect to hear.

Finally, outsider researchers should be mindful of their own privilege and responsibility to manage risk to collaborators and respondents, but they should also be wary of indirectly enforcing the state's preferred speech and behaviors. Autocratic rule is sustained as much "from below" as "from above" in the ways that people both repeat claims that legitimate authoritarian regimes and respect the silences they cultivated. For many, these everyday behaviors are coerced by way of dependence on state budgets or even physical vulnerabilities, but they are also maintained by ordinary practices that index the state's power. Outsider researchers may be physically vulnerable and the sense of being under constant surveillance can be oppressive, both of which reinforce the importance of being transparent about the goals of one's research and obtaining respondents' formal consent (Jacobs et al. 2021). However, outsider researchers may indirectly legitimate autocratic practices and reinforce the state's domination—including in everyday speech as well as their published research—by using the state's euphemisms and observing its silences rather than using terms like repression, invasion, war, or genocide. While

outsider researchers might justify this kind of self-censorship as necessary to protect one's respondents and to secure ongoing access to the field, it risks perpetuating greater harms against the societies we study by turning ethnography into propaganda.

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## Notes

- 1 There is a substantial literature on nondemocracies so we focus on authoritarian regimes as the largest category. One might further include hybrid regimes, which lack the ability to dominate opponents and rely instead on the manipulation of formally democratic institutions by informal practices to hold onto power (Levitsy and Way 2010). The potential repercussions for researchers and interlocutors in hybrid regimes therefore are more difficult to predict. Increasingly, both authoritarian and hybrid regimes seek to manipulate information environments to avoid the open use of coercion or violence (Guriev and Treisman 2022), though risks remain to researchers and informants.
- 2 The British government eventually secured Hedges's pardon and repatriation even after he was sentenced to life imprisonment—an outcome that would have been unavailable to insiders.
- 3 This observation should not be construed as advocating that researchers shift the burden of risk onto their informants. Rather, it is to recognize that informants are better oriented to a locality's infrapolitics and, as co-creators, possess an authoritative voice with regard to their assumption of risk.
- 4 As a general practice, researchers might consider presenting research topics in ways that preserve their relationship to questions of theoretical interest while not exposing one's interlocutors to risk. For example, Goode shifted his own research from "nationalism" to "patriotism" when starting fieldwork in Russia in 2014. However, as discussed below, such changes may not be possible or even meaningful where regimes securitize the researcher's identity.
- 5 The notion of representativeness, here, concerns the selection of field sites and does not refer to the actual conduct of ethnographic field research.

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