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A FLEDGING INVITATION TO DISCOVERY

I was very pleased to try urban hitchhiking when Tuuli Malla and Lauri Jäntti presented it as part of the Finnish Urban Studies Days in April 2017.[1] I briefly accompanied a mother and daughter on their way to do some shopping, then spent the rest of the early evening with two artists who were, I recall (I did not make notes of my walks) going for a (another?) drink before heading on to a party. The experience of latching on to complete strangers in the heart of Helsinki's main shopping area was easy, informative, and, above all, enjoyable.

In their essay, the authors set up the modest aim of describing urban hitchhiking as a method for engaging with strangers that was born of artistic practices, but that could be productively developed for making sense of the contemporary city. As has long been common in writing about cities, complexity, restriction, and alienation come across as typically urban experiences or problems at the same time as the city is presented as an invitation to discovery. Another current aspect of the exercise is how it establishes a relationship of equality between the hitchhiker and the 'interviewee'. A third is its enormously open-ended or experimental nature. The tone of the essay is easy-going and descriptive, but it also mentions some widely recognized obstacles to convivial togetherness, particularly the rising concern around the world with social and spatial segregation, what the authors refer to as 'social bubbles'. Although this issue has obvious anthropological resonance, the idea of urban hitchhiking as a 'fieldwork method' may require considerable imagination and/or stretching of categories for scholars of social life like anthropologists (even those open to experimental sites and approaches) to grasp what the authors refer to as its 'anthropological potential'. The sceptic wonders: yes, an exhibition was produced, but what else? What was learned from the experiment?

Experimental, or, if we prefer, unorthodox research methods need not be an end in themselves. As in the experimental turn in writing anthropology of thirty years ago (Clifford and Marcus 1986), they pose substantive and arguably necessary critique. Yet though it is clear that, as a way to open up the researcher to the city in all its fullness and unpredictability (and I hope to adapt it for teaching quite soon), its analytical and critical potential remains to be fleshed out. The essay provoked questions about the shifting and possibly mutually incompatible criteria of good anthropology that circulate today, and it even had me pondering what scholarship is good for, and why the tension between conventional and 'experimental' methods is so fraught.

Questions about how to carry out, document, and authorize social knowledge have always been part of my own research. Much of it has involved working with well-educated environmental activists whose expertise and viewpoints, though often epistemologically defensible, have been side-lined and even suppressed in public and policy discourse (Berglund 1998, 2017). Consequently, I have always done research alongside or with the people into whose lives I have intruded, as well as (I must admit) about them. In fact, medical and environmental problems are rather easily recognized these days as opportunities or even imperatives to 'experiment' with and redistribute the practices of research beyond academia (e.g., Marres 2012; Estalella and Criado 2018). Racial

prejudice specifically and social organization generally are also areas in which social scientists have cultivated principled habits of research (Back 2007): paying attention, describing, and applying critical judgement; encouraging reciprocity if not equivalence between academic and non-academic questioning; and fostering inventiveness in method is to be productive and not just gimmicky. Using such methods, for instance, scholars have been able to deal with the way that relationships between centre and margins have become more complex with each decade. Adopting multiple perspectives with empathy as well as critical judgement, they have also shown that discourses of social (or epistemological) fragmentation, cultural multiplicity, and political restlessness appear in social life as both problems and solutions. Above all, where research is distributed as well as principled, alert to its own positions and prejudices, and willing to experiment with ways to deal with that, it is possible to avoid Manichean analyses pitting the good against the bad (e.g., Back 2007).

Making sense of, or researching, a world that feels out of kilter is thus a popular pursuit. Everywhere. Many anthropologists are in conversation, across disciplines and with a growing range of non-academic researchers, about the whos, hows and whys of conducting research, ethnographic research in particular (Corsin Jimenez 2013; Marcus 2016). Perhaps this debate is worth seeing as case of a wider epistemological crisis that is, probably, related to multiple political crises. After all, those who have long been in charge of producing knowledge for social benefit, scientists in their labs and social scientists with their statistics and generalizations, and even serious journalists, are struggling to maintain authority. At the same time, algorithms and big data (the new oil, as it is said) are extending the reach of quantitative research (or data processing) to ever more intimate areas of human life, to the point that there is talk of progress as 'quantifying the self'. The casualties of these diffuse trends include meaning and curiosity and even, as Tim Ingold put it in his keynote to Aalto University's *Art of Research Conference* in November 2017, truth. And indeed, policy and regulatory measures stop way short of what dedicated scholars know is needed, particularly in relation to environmental crisis (Hornborg 2017).

Such political conditions can and often do lead to a kind of academic trench warfare as passionate but also anxious academics urgently promote their own approaches. The same conditions are also, however, inspiring artists, activists, principled architects, and other humans performing political as well as professional identities, to take up projects of sense-making that jostle against and perhaps even threaten social science notions of research. That is how I understand the popularity and growth of some of the artistic practices now overlapping with social science methods such as ethnographic walking, and that is how I believe it could be developed further. It may also reflect a feeling that the very point of research practice in the social sciences is being rethought. Engaging the world through research is no longer the purview of professional researchers alone, perhaps no longer aimed at creating new knowledge even, and certainly not aimed at giving guidance or predictive power to those who would manage the city. And yet cities still require massive inputs of intellectual, esoteric, and technical power. What can be gained and by whom in exercises such as urban hitchhiking, will very much depend upon who, what, where, and with what expectations it is undertaken. Perhaps it would benefit those experts who (even in these experimental times) are still in charge of old institutions like policy and maintenance.

The short accounts of the authors' applications of urban hitchhiking certainly attest to its usefulness in engaging strangers in conversation as part of a shared walk. From the point of view—literally—of the people offering rides (the 'interviewees' or 'strangers') urban hitchhiking is neutral in its effects: it is an unanticipated intervention and yet, since they are in charge of the route and the pace, not a nuisance. Everything is strictly voluntary.

I conclude with thoughts on possible uses to which urban hitchhiking could profitably be put. In Helsinki for instance, which is changing very fast, like so many cities around the world, it could help in training professionals to learn about those social bubbles. Through an urban hitchhiking session, a built environment professional might gain a novel understanding of how today's typically fast, large, and standardized projects shape not just buildings but perceptions, bodies, and subjectivities. A very specific use for the method suggests itself, namely to go hitchhiking during Helsinki's dark months in the vicinity of the vast advertising surfaces with their quickly changing lights that have recently appeared in Helsinki, as elsewhere. In contrast to their financial impacts, their impacts on the senses of passing pedestrians can only be appreciated through bodily practice.

NOTES

1 (http://www.kaupunkitutkimuksenpaivat.net/tyoryhmat/urban-hitchhiking/).

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