



Researchers and Lab Rats: Reflections on Fieldwork in Sarajevo
Workshop on Field Research and Ethics in Post-Conflict Environments

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In this paper I reflect on the many challenges – methodological, ethical, and personal – of conducting fourteen months of ethnographic fieldwork in Sarajevo, Bosnia-Herzegovina (BiH), from 2006 to 2007. BiH is a challenging “fieldsite:” contemporary social and political problems are complicated and easily misunderstood, confounding simple efforts of diagnosis and prescription; and social contexts across the country are highly emotionally charged, fraught with unresolved grief, anger, and disappointment. War brought such massive destruction and violent social change to BiH that the end of open hostilities in 1995 was merely the beginning, for most Bosnians, of new day-to-day struggles to get by.

Meanwhile foreign governments and NGOs have played a key role in the political process and in the provision of services, making BiH the object of a series of international experiments, still ongoing, in post-war, post-socialist state-building and market reforms. This “experimentation” contributes to a sense among Bosnians that for the last 15 years their country has been a laboratory for foreign powers, with little consideration given to the fact that the stakes and unintended consequences of these experiments, for local people, can be enormous. The sense of being “lab rats” dovetails with the experience of having been photographed, filmed, and written-up, in all their struggle and suffering, for three years – watched passively by the world, like animals in a zoo – before effective intervention to halt the slaughter finally came.

The fact that BiH has been deluged by foreign researchers since war’s end – young master’s and doctoral candidates, confident of the value of their fieldwork and resulting knowledge – further compounds the problem. In short order following my arrival I found that as a foreign researcher, I was often initially perceived (and resented) – like the war photographer and foreign policy-maker – as yet another kind of international zookeeper or lab scientist, come to casually study, offering nothing in return, Bosnian lives and communities already under enormous strain.

My paper thus reflects on my experience of this pre-scripted encounter and subsequent efforts to re-craft the role of foreign researcher. I discuss what might be learned from my attempts to ensure that my fieldwork became not just another exercise in knowledge acquisition (so easily, and often rightly, perceived as exploitative or condescending) but a mode of ethical, humble engagement with people who have for too long been simply observed, recorded, and experimented with in the course of their wartime and post-war struggles.