

# Seats of power: ethnographies of constituted space (ICON-S 2019)

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## Constitutional ethnography

In a lead article for a special issue of *Law & Society Review*, Kim Lane Scheppele (Scheppele 2004) brought together a number of contributions that focused on the particularities of state-specific and transnational constitutional phenomena as 'comparative constitutional ethnography'. Unlike constitutional theory that often universalises its claims beyond plausibility, Scheppele claimed that the issue's contributions expanded from their concrete (and often national) objects of study towards more general definitions by contextualising the phenomena in question both comparatively and historically. So the defining characteristics of, say, a national constitutional court would stand out better against contrasts that comparative and historical insights can provide. At the same time, we gained a better understanding of the institution of constitutional review in general and how it can be implemented in different environments. For Scheppele, such a methodological ethos could be dated back to many socio-legal classics ranging from Montesquieu to Weber, but it had later been abandoned in favour of more nationalistic and state-specific research agendas. The aim of constitutional ethnography was to reclaim some of that lost tradition.

What could, then, such a constitutional ethnography be? Provisionally Scheppele defined it as 'the study of the central legal elements of polities using methods that are capable of recovering the lived detail of the politico-legal landscape' (Scheppele 2004: 395). As provisional as that definition was, it was one of the few attempts in recent times to focus on what ethnography as a method may be able to offer the study of constitutional phenomena (see also Bevir - Rhodes 2010).<sup>1</sup> For now, I am mainly interested in the latter part of Scheppele's definition and will consider some methodological options that may be appropriate for the study of that 'lived detail'.

Quite a few years later, Scheppele (Scheppele 2017: 56-59) returned to constitutional ethnography and its compatibility with a phenomenological sociology of constitutions. In her second instalment, Scheppele mentions three specific ethnographic approaches. First, in traditional fieldwork, the researcher immerses herself into the environments that she wishes to study by, for example, observing

particular constitutional actors and institutions (e.g. Schatz 2009; Greenhouse 2010). Second, immersive archival work is a form of historical ethnography involving the analysis of historical records in more or less the same way as in historical research proper, but with the addition of an identification with historical actors through the records that they have left behind. If successful, archival immersion allows the researcher to consider meanings that the historical actors themselves may have given to their own practices, albeit as approximations at best (e.g. Merry 2002; Zeitlyn 2012). Scheppele calls her third ethnographic approach the study of 'traces', that is, of non-curated cultural 'raw material' such as popular artefacts (e.g. commemorative coins as in Gorski 2000), affective objects invested with special meaning (e.g. gifts that heads of state receive as in Ssorin-Chaikov 2006), as well as specific linguistic practices (e.g. professional jargon as in Mayr 2008). While Scheppele's two first mentioned approaches are more or less in line with ethnographic conventions, her third approach, the study of traces, may be offering something new (see however Geiger - Ribes 2011). I propose to call this third approach *ichnography*, a term appropriate in terms of both etymology (*ikhnos*, meaning 'track' or 'footprint') and, in light of this particular paper, its architectural reference (Vitruvius's 'ground-plan', see Vitruvius 1931: 25 [i.2.2]).

The aim of this paper is to consider Scheppele's three approaches as parts of a more focused method suited for studying the ways in which power is experienced as the 'lived detail' of a constituted space. Individuals namely experience the constitutional arrangements under which they live as, among other things, spatial contours within which they negotiate their relationships to power and domination (e.g. Elden 2009; Crampton - Elden 2007). These power-related spatial contours are especially discernible in the architecture and urban planning of cities that are specifically designated as *seats of power* (e.g. Gordon 2006). What can these spatial contours, the architectural solutions and city plans, understood now as the containers and conduits of our lived experiences of politico-legal power, tell us about the constitutional arrangements themselves?

## **Constituted space**

In her original article, Scheppele insisted that what made ethnography a distinct field of research was its commitment to collecting *whole specimens* of social life, that is, particular phenomena, but fully contextualised into unitary wholes (Scheppele 2004: 397). Henri Lefebvre has created a heuristic outline, his well-known 'spatial triad', that allows us to consider the spatial contours of constituted power as such a whole specimen. The triad requires a brief description here. Its three dimensions are, in phenomenological terms, *conceived space*, *perceived space*, and *lived space* (Lefebvre 1991: 38-39).

*Conceived space* is the dimension that best reflects the official order of the state. As such, it also offers the most convenient starting point for any power-related analysis. It refers to the way in which space is imagined by scientists and technocrats, by urban planners and architects, that is, to the space of all who conceive it with the help of science and knowledge. The technocrat's conceptions support notions of space that can be rendered into an image such as a map, a blueprint or a floor plan, but also an organisational chart representing, for example, a particular constitutional design. *Perceived space*, on the other hand, refers to the everyday practices with which social actors position themselves into capitalist relations of production as they regularly work and consume. Regularity provides continuity and reinforces positions until action stabilises into something with a perceivable spatial outline. For the most part, such action follows the conceived designs of spatial technocrats in the sense that space is usually used for its designated purposes and in designated ways. Finally, *lived space* is the counterpoint to, or possibly even a contestation of, the technocrat's spatial conceptions, that is, of the urban plans, the architectural designs, the cartographer's maps, and so on. As such, it refers to the real-life experiences of users and inhabitants, their manifold ways of 'existing' in space and giving it their proper meanings in spite of the sometimes overpowering conceptions and perceptions that might be attached to it. These are undoubtedly the most difficult aspects of Lefebvre's triad, but politically the most important.

If we adopt Lefebvre's triad as an ideal-typical matrix for an ethnography of the spatial contours of constituted power, our methodological shopping cart may include both familiar and more exotic items, but all finding an appropriate counterpart from Scheppele's three approaches. The study of conceived space would most likely resemble an archival immersion in which the ethnographer qualitatively analyses document sets such as Pierre Charles L'Enfant's plan for Washington DC (see Gutheim - Lee 2006; Glazer - Field 2008) or the 'Plano Piloto' of Lúcio Costa for Brasília (see *Plano Piloto* 1991; Holston 1989). As designs for capital cities, both plans are attempts to conceive of constituted power in spatially relevant ways. Fieldwork, on the other hand, would seem to be best suited for, for example, 'tracking and tracing' the ways in which civil servants, citizens and other actors go about their daily routines within the conceived outlines of constituted power in, say, Washington or Brasília. Through observation, the ethnographer may be able to verify whether and how these positions gradually coagulate into the regularities of perceived space (see Bernstein et al 2011; Shore et al 2011). Finally, Lefebvre's lived dimension of space, perhaps best reflecting Scheppele's more general notion of the 'lived detail of the politico-legal landscape' as a whole, allows us to develop the ichnographic idea of studying traces further. What I have in mind as traces in this instance are, for example, Brazilian *pichação* graffiti that, especially in a UNESCO world heritage site

like Brasília, can only exist strained either as a stain in a protected patrimony or as state-sanctioned 'street art' (e.g. Zanella 2017).

### **Embodied engagements with power**

How does one, then, retrace the outlines of the spatial contours of constituted power?

As lived experience, these outlines are in no way exclusive to someone or something external in relation to the researcher. Indeed, the epistemology of contemporary ethnography is mostly of a 'non-positivist' or 'interpretive' character (e.g. Geertz 1983; Bevir - Blakely 2018) in the sense that the ethnographer is always embedded in the world that she studies. So no radical separation between ethnographer and her object of study is either possible or desirable. Even so, the starting point of most ethnography, 'interpretive' as it may be, still differentiates the researcher from an *étnos*, if you will, albeit both belonging to a shared world.

Charlotte Aull Davies (Davies 1999: 14-15) uses the term 'de-differentiation' to describe the gradual process in which the ability to separate observer from observed, researcher from world, has been increasingly questioned. De-differentiated ethnographies are less likely to make strong claims about the ability of fieldwork observations to represent a reality that is radically external in relation to the observer. Ultimately, as the distinction between observer and observed becomes ever more difficult to make, ethnographers can be said to create their objects of study rather than to discover them. Unable to make claims about phenomena that are sufficiently external in relation to herself, the ethnographer as author is also more intimately bound to her particular ethnographies. The resulting self-reflexivity produces research that is more about the ethnographer herself than her alleged object of study ridding her of the privileged voice of scientific authority.

To a large extent, this discussion about ethnographic self-reflexion was triggered by the challenges that so-called 'poststructuralist' positions presented the social sciences more generally (e.g. Van Maanen 2011). Perhaps the discussion was also evidence of a more general tension between the Anglo-American tradition of anthropology and its 'ethnological' variation in France.<sup>2</sup> But rather than trying to somehow appease possible tensions by synthesising interpretive starting points with poststructuralist critiques into an epistemologically more acceptable midway position — Davies herself attempts this through Roy Bhaskar's 'critical realism' (Davies 1999: 17-24; see also Aunger 2004: 130-144) — the self-reflexivity can also be embraced and developed into a fully conscious 'autoethnography' that 'blends the practices and emphases of social science with the aesthetic sensibility and expressive forms of art' (Ellis 2004: 30).

A shift to more autoethnographic positions has, of course, raised further concerns

about the traditional virtues associated with 'scientific' inquiry. Autoethnography is, namely, neither 'objective' nor 'controllable' in conventional ways. But, on the other hand, it:

brought heightened attention to human suffering, injustice, trauma, subjectivity, feeling, and loss; encouraged the development of reflexive and creative methodologies through which to navigate the landscape of lived experience; and legitimated unconventional forms of documenting and expressing personal experience in literary, lyrical, poetic, and performative ways. (Bochner - Ellis 2016: 45)

So while the ethnographer 'navigates the landscape of lived experience', she refers to her own embodied engagements within sensory environments requiring her to 'reflect on these engagements, to conceptualise their meanings theoretically and to seek ways to communicate the relatedness of experiential and intellectual meanings to others' (Pink 2009: 25-26; also Fasula 2013). The spatial contours of constituted power are a good example of such sensory environments. If its lived experience is accessible through the ethnographer's own embodied immersion into spaces of power such as, for example, the Federal Triangle in Washington DC (e.g. Tompkins 1993) or Brasília's Praça dos Três Poderes (e.g. Jenkins 2008: 38-39), then the communication of that experience should somehow reflect the sensory nature of the experience itself. In this sense, Scheppele's third, trace-related approach, in this case a spatial ichnography, would call for a self-reflexive and sensory ethnography, perhaps even an expressive rather than documentary visual ethnography (e.g. Pussetti 2018).

### **Construct and constellation**

By keeping a sufficient distance in relation to the conventions of political anthropology, Scheppele's constitutional ethnography includes echoes of what Foucault called his 'local critiques', that is, 'decentralised' theoretically oriented research 'that does not need a visa from some common regime to establish its authority' (Foucault 2003: 6). But the Lefebvrian triadic perspective to constituted space, with each dimension examined through one of Scheppele's ethnographic approaches, may call for some additional remarks. How will the three approaches be able to gel together into a single interpretation without a unifying 'visa'?

Usually results reached by using different approaches are triangulated because the reliability of an interpretation made using one method is expected to improve if the same research question is examined using a second method. So in this case, the reliability of interpretations made by analysing documents on the spatial planning and design of seats of power could, perhaps, be improved if those interpretations

were supported by photographic evidence collected 'on site'. But in this project, the motive for triangulation is the very specific way in which, for example, architectural designs and imagery complement each other rather than whether the latter can improve the reliability of the interpretation of the former.

We can try to bring our three approaches together in at least two ways. We can follow Claude Lévi-Strauss's sequencing and proceed from an *ethnography* where data is first collected and recorded, through an *ethnological* synthesis of that data, to a more general *anthropological* theorising of the studied phenomenon (Lévi-Strauss 1963: 354-356). But even if this seems like a sound way forward, synthesising possibly disparate data from three different approaches into a single interpretation will not fit comfortably into the 'constructionist' ideal that usually informs the social sciences. Rather, the three approaches, that is, archival immersion, field observations and the ichnographic study of traces, each corresponding with one dimension of Lefebvre's triad, cascade into each other in ways that suggest tension, friction, or even incompatibility. Following Walter Benjamin (Benjamin 2009: 34-35) and Theodor Adorno (Adorno 2004: 162-166), such an interpretation should be seen as a *constellation* (see also Lewandowski 2001) rather than a construct. Viewing the triad as a constellation reflects well the necessarily critical nature of any ethnography of power (Yanow - Schwartz-Shea 2015). As such, each of the three approaches can retain some degree of autonomy, but without being cornered into an isolated and self-sustaining entity either. Juxtaposing the approaches in a constellation may reveal aspects which in a constructionist classification might appear as 'either a matter of indifference or a burden' (Adorno 2004: 162), nuances which would otherwise be disregarded as insignificant or deemed superfluous. So in conventional models of triangulation, a visual perception of space may all too easily slip into a comfortable relationship with, say, photographic documentation where the image is reduced to functioning as proof. But in a constellation, one can, for instance, explore the more challenging questions that address the relationship between the observer's subjective sense perception and its self-expression through the imagery of photographic art.

### **Having 'been there'?**

Finally, what would the outcome look like? What type of scholarly constellation can we expect to achieve by bringing together possibly disparate parts with allegedly low scientific credibility?

I doubt whether the polemical interventions of a Michael Taussig can be regarded as a constellation in this sense. Although many similar ingredients are present, including references to both Walter Benjamin and the constellation as a method (Taussig 2003: 184-185), the interrelations between the individual parts seem too forced. They do not 'fall into place'. To me, a much more appropriate example would

be W.G. Sebald's *The Rings of Saturn* (Sebald 1998). In the novel, the author's unreliable narrator explores a North Sea coastal environment while meditating on issues such as memory and identity. Text and image, different literary genres like prose, essay and travel journal, fact and fiction, all intermingle to produce meaning (on Sebald as an ethnographer, see Long 2011). In the well-known words of Clifford Geertz:

The ability of anthropologists to get us to take what they say seriously has less to do with either a factual look or an air of conceptual elegance than it has with their capacity to convince us that what they say is a result of their having actually penetrated (or, if you prefer, been penetrated by) another form of life, of having, one way or another, truly "been there." And that, persuading us that this offstage miracle has occurred, is where the writing comes in. (Geertz 1988: 4-5)

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Jo Shaw (Shaw 2007) is one of the few who has actually taken Scheppelle to task and has applied Scheppelle's notion of constitutional ethnography in her analyses of European citizenship.

<sup>2</sup> I am here thinking of ethnologists like Pierre Clastres (Clastres 1989; Clastres 2010), as well as Roger Caillois, Michel Leiris and other 'sorcerer's apprentices' associated with the 'College of Sociology' (Hollier 1987; see also Caillois 2001; Leiris 2017). Paul Rabinow being the clear exception in the Anglo-American camp (e.g. Rabinow 2003; Rabinow 2008).

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