THE NIETSCHMANN SYLLABUS: A VISION OF THE FIELD

BERNARD Q. NIETSCHMANN

Editor’s Note: Few geographers have attained legend as did Barney Nietschmann. From the late 1970s to 1999 he taught and inspired a generation of field geographers at the University of California, Berkeley; before that, he was a distinctive force at the University of Michigan. He died of cancer in 2000, at the age of fifty-eight, but he left behind his students, his family, his writings, and more: indigenous and traditional peoples around many parts of the world who both learned from Mr. Barney and, as he said, taught him, whether in Central America, in the Torres Straits, in Mexico, or in his work as a political geographer among Fourth World peoples everywhere. For Barney the field was, matter-of-factly, where a geographer works, and always there was good work at hand. Although he would be loath to use the word “his,” with its near echo of the colonial, the people he worked with were always implicitly his people; he was, when and however he could be, their defender and their champion. His books—Between Land and Water, Caribbean Edge, and the Maya Atlas, the last of which was produced collaboratively with the Maya who reside in what the supporters of nation-states would call southern Mexico, Guatemala, and Belize—are an inspiration to many. But they are also polemics of the first order. He believed in what geographers can do, and he believed in an obligation to do what you can.

Nietschmann lacked faith in the acts of many a field-worker in the social or environmental sciences. Pioneering intellectual-property arguments, he came down strongly for the unique rights of indigenous peoples, even against the state. In the field or at home he savored deep relationships, and with those came a broad range of responsibilities. He found quite risible the practice of some of his colleagues, who directed group readings of a nearly sacred political writ, and his disapproval put him decisively at odds with many on the cultural left. The public disputes this led to in Berkeley and elsewhere were—predictably—difficult, unpleasant, and confrontational. The commitments of fieldwork, as many an author in this collection makes clear, do not halt with completion of a dissertation or article manuscript.

The materials that follow are all Barney’s work, parts of his Field Methods or Field Research seminars at Berkeley. For the most part, what is reproduced below is from 1995, when the most complete set of papers was available. That said, handouts on “Mickey’s Golden Rules for the Field,” “A Moral Geography: Research Conduct and Conducting Research,” and “The Beverly Hills Geographer” were often passed from hand to hand by the graduate students of many a department, including students who never had the chance to take a Nietschmann course. The reach of these broadsides for an ethical and efficacious field practice would in time span the Berkeley campus and later spread across much of academic geography. As Barney taught and practiced, the precepts evolved, increasing in number or building in forcefulness, but the underlying principles remained the same: Respect those with whom you work, honor knowledge, and be ethical. Along those lines, thanks are owed Francis Smith, Seth Macinko, Stan Stevens, Thom Eley, and, especially, Angelina Nietschmann, each of whom provided useful material.

—Paul F. Starrs, Editor
One of the major tasks of a graduate school is to train students to be professional academics. A professional academic is supposed to have the training and experience to be able to do original research, to produce new knowledge, and to be able to communicate that new knowledge to other academics, students, and, sometimes, the public. A professional academic should be able to design and fund a research project, use a variety of research methods and skills during the project, and be able to communicate and disseminate the results to a wide range of people.

The Geography 204 seminar helps prepare beginning and advanced graduate students for field research. Field research means leaving the university, the library, and the laboratory to go somewhere—near or far—to obtain firsthand information from firsthand investigations. To do this requires experience with research methods, theories, and ethics, and considerable skills, equipment, and money. Seminar participants will examine and use a variety of research methods, skills, and equipment to survey, interview, photograph, and map; learn how to design and fund a research project; and learn how to present and publish research.

Seminar participants will do weekly readings and discussions, and there will be frequent assignments and presentations. Both beginning and advanced students are encouraged to take the seminar.

Textbooks:

**Schedule of Seminar Topics by Week**

**I. Introduction to Field Research**
August
29 Geographic Field Research

**II. Geographic Field Methods and Skills**
September
5 Geographical Research Theories and Methods
12 Geographic Surveys
19 Geographic Research
26 Photography in the Field
October
  3  Video and Computers in the Field
  10  Field Mapping
  17  Mapping
  24  Mapping
  31  Research Ethics: Who Owns the Research?

III. Designing and Funding a Research Project
November
  7  Designing a Research Project
  14  Why and How Research Is Funded
  21  Proposal Writing

IV. Presenting and Publishing Research
November
  28  Talking Research: Collaboration, Seminars, Meetings
December
  5  Writing Research: Seminar Papers, Professional Journals, and Books

Mickey’s Golden Rules for the Field

1. Prior to leaving for the field, carefully draw up a plot plan, list of materials, etc.
2. Immediately upon arriving at the field, throw away item No. 1 above. Now that you’ve seen the field, it obviously won’t work anyway.
3. In order to improvise your new plan of action, you must now find out who really runs the fieldwork. This is never someone with a Ph.D. You can usually identify this individual as the one who is laughing the loudest. Whatever he/she says—do it—even if it doesn’t seem right. Nothing else will work anyway.
4. Never ask anybody to do anything for you. The only person who could possibly do anything for you is the guy who really runs the fieldwork—and he’s too busy.
5. When, foolishly, you decide to break Rule No. 4, remember that repeated “yesses” and enthusiastic head nodding mean that you are totally confusing the guy you’re talking to. Always repeat everything at least three times. It doesn’t help any, but it makes you feel better.
6. When you come back to the field, hope the guy in No. 5 was so confused that he didn’t do anything. Missing data are always easier to deal with than fouled-up data.
7. Don’t worry about it when none of your results are significant. Remember that life is a random process anyway, and it’s foolish to try to improve on the odds.
A Script for Field Research

I. The Research Topic
   - The first step is to sit down and evaluate your interests and abilities
   - General interest → concept → preliminary thesis / topic / hypothesis
   - Preliminary objectives

II. Collecting Information
   - Most information doesn’t have a library call number
   - Libraries and archives
   - “The literature” (inside & outside geography)
   - Private collections
   - Computer searches
   - Computer bulletin boards
   - Newspaper files
   - Subscribe to a local newspaper
   - Telephone
   - Organizations
   - Write, call, fax people who might help
   - People in area
   - Academics
   - Other grad students working on topic
   - Potential funding sources
   - Find out about research requirements in proposed study area or country
   - Find out about research requirements at Berkeley (Committee for Protection of Human Subjects, UCB)
   - Investigate what kinds and types of equipment you may need

III. Collecting Visual Information
   - Geography is the most visual of the sciences: Use this
   - Nongeographers expect geographers to explain how and why things are as they are in different places
   - Maps
   - Air photos
   - Satellite imagery: Landsat, SPOT
   - Photo collections (e.g., Smithsonian, museums, libraries)
   - Private photo collections
   - Overseas sources and collections
IV. Getting Invited

Into each life, it is said, some rain must fall. Some people have bad horoscopes, others take tips on the stock market. McNamara created the TFX and the Edsel. Churches possess the real world. But Indians have been cursed above all other people in history. Indians have anthropologists.

Every summer when school is out a veritable stream of immigrants heads into Indian country. Indeed, the Oregon Trail was never so heavily populated as are Route 66 and Highway 18 in the summer time. From every rock and cranny in the East they emerge, as if responding to some primeval fertility rite, and flock to the reservations.

—Vine Deloria Jr., 1988 [1969]

• We are in the last of the Imposed Research Era
• How will you get permission to do research?
• How will you be invited to do the research?
• Find out what groups, organizations, local people, and academics are doing in the possible research area
• Write, call, fax, visit, find out more
• Orient the potential project so that it may be of interest to both local people and organizations as well as academia
• Write, call, fax, e-mail, visit people in the local area and discuss the preliminary research topic . . . ask if this would be of interest, and, if so, what organization or group would be good to sponsor the research
• Communicate with academics and students in local colleges and universities and arrange a formal or informal relationship (visiting scholar, research counterpart, collaboration)
• Discuss general research objectives and how research results will be used. Find out what problems might occur due to the research. Design research so ethical problems are not created or can be avoided.
• Ask for letters supporting you and your research

V. Funding

• Write letters of inquiry to potential funding organizations briefly describing your research and asking for application materials
• A good proposal is a major project and takes time and several drafts
• A yearlong project might require a $20,000–$30,000 budget, which works out to $1,000–$2,000 per page with the first two pages worth 50 percent if funded.
• Write a distinct proposal to each organization
• Some research can be done without funding
• Some research should be done without funding
• Who are the funders and funding organization?
• Much, much more on this later
VI. Getting Prepared

- Language training
- Physical conditioning
- Inoculations and special medicines
- Extra glasses, contact lenses
- Permits (USDA, etc.)

VII. Who Are the People?

- Are the people you may do field research with/to/on to be identified as informants or peasants or class or members of an ethnic group, or . . . ?
- What do they call themselves?
- What do they call their place?
- What are your concepts of society, culture, culture change, culture persistence, identity, and class?

VIII. Research Methods

*If you want to understand what a science is, you should look in the first instance not at its theories or its findings, and certainly not at what its apologists say about it; you should look at what the practitioners do.*

—Clifford Geertz, 1993

1. Is your proposed research of interest and use to the local community, or to academics in the country?
2. What will be your role and relationship in the community and within the region?
3. What skills do you have that will be useful in a community or region?
4. Will you be working with people you consider to be informants or research colleagues?
5. Language training: Find someone to help you with daily language study.
6. Collection of information: Gather information yourself? Work with people in the community?
7. How will you treat change and variation?
8. Information methods
   - interviews: formal, informal
   - “participant observation”: What is that?? Examples. . .
   - questionnaires
   - surveys
   - walkabouts
   - personal biographies
   - community biographies
   - regional biographies
environmental histories
photography (more on this later)
air and satellite photos (more on this later)
mapping (more on this later)
map named places
land use
types of environments
vegetation transects
soil samples
daily information gathering
sampling time and spatial limits to study

IX. Reevaluation and Analysis of Research

- Don’t get locked into a preliminary research angle
- You will need to reevaluate your original assumptions, concepts, and proposal as you begin to learn more about the topic
- New knowledge comes from reevaluation

X. Research Obligations and Ethics

Neither of these anthropologists [Derek Freeman or Margaret Mead] is “right.” Societies are not fixed in atemporal states of objectivity waiting to reveal their truths through the anthropologist’s impassive questioning. The society, whatever that is, shifts and changes according to the way in which the analytic gaze is directed. And then the anthropologists must speak, almost confess, in the halls of Western imperial power and tell the story of what they have seen. If what they say pleases, they will be rewarded. So what they say about the Others must be relevant to their own society. Margaret Mead’s art and virtue was in her text; a utopic construction of a future Western society. Derek Freeman can reread her text if he wishes, but without basing his argument on a transcendent reality of Samoan society.

—Krim Benterrak, Stephen Muecke, and Paddy Roe, 1984

A Moral Geography:
Research Conduct and Conducting Research

Consider that journalism has a code of ethics but geography does not. Journalists are to ask permission to quote and to take and print photographs. They are to protect their sources and to respect confidentiality. They are supposed to get confirmation from more than one source. Photojournalists must get signed permissions from people who may appear in published photographs. Geography requires nothing similar of geographers. Standards of research conduct in geography are personal ones. Why is this so?

As members of a profession, we should conduct research and writing with the highest ethical as well as academic standards.
Here are some first questions and statements:

1. Who owns the information? (intellectual property?)
2. Should one write as an expert on an activity without being physically capable in the activity?
3. Should you invite or impose yourself to do field research?
4. Is it necessary to balance the imposed concerns of academia with the people's concerns with whom you work?
5. Imperialism in the name of science is imperialism.
6. Research is reciprocal: People from local communities and universities should be invited to participate and be recognized as much as possible in the visitor’s research.
7. Who should you give your research results to?
8. Is there such a thing as scientific malpractice?
9. Understanding the values of a people with whom one studies should be a precondition for any fieldwork.
10. What do we need to consider in thinking about interventionist research?
11. Don’t blame your research shortcomings on the people you worked with or the situation you worked in.
12. Research implies ethical choices, and research with local peoples on development and conservation likely will produce many difficult ethical problems.
13. There is no neutral way in science.
14. What do you want to accomplish with your research?
15. How will your research affect the host community, or individuals or groups within the community or country?
16. Just because someone tells you something does not in itself give you the right to write about it.
17. Permission is to be obtained to quote people and to publish photographs of people.
18. Entire peoples should not be characterized by what you found out from a few people (e.g., “The Americans believe that white sugar will cause brain damage”).
19. Entire places should not be characterized by what you think about one place (e.g., “American summers are foggy and cold”).
20. Confidentiality and protection of sources are to be respected. Tweedledee told Alice: “If it was so, it might be; and if it were so, it would be; but as it isn’t, it ain’t. That’s logic.”
XI. The Beverly Hills Geographer

1. *Ivory tower building*. Research is often done to advance a theory (theory building), a career (career building), and scholarship (discipline building). Research is rarely done to further understanding, to solve social justice problems, or to benefit the people studied.

2. *The wrong end of the telescope*. Most research is not about the world outside the university. The world outside the university is treated as the place where theories and explanations manufactured in the university can be tested and verified. The world outside the university is seen as being a “living laboratory” or the “field,” inhabited by “actors,” “informants,” and “subjects.”

3. *We are the explainers; they are the explained*. Our explanations and theories are as culturally embedded as are those in other societies. “Ethnogeography” is redundant. “Ethnoscience” really translates as a lesser version of “real” science. When the theories of non-Western peoples about how and why the world and society operate as they do contradict sharply with our own theories, their theories and explanations are reduced to “data,” opinions, cognition, myths, beliefs, ethnoscience, world views, informant responses, and so on (Witherspoon). In a time when diversity in biological and cultural systems is understood to be beneficial, and obtaining and managing information is the basis of the new information economy, it would seem counterproductive (if not arrogant, provincial, or racist) to reduce the world diversity of knowledge to but “data” for one system of knowledge.

4. *Beverly Hills geographer*. Who studies and who gets studied reflects power, economics, status, class, color, and identity. Research is done on “informants” who can’t say no. Research is done “with” those of approximately the same social or economic status as the researcher. Research is not done on people who can call the cops. Try moving into Beverly Hills to do a community study of American Caucasian ethnicity and household production strategies based upon interviewing key informants and door-to-door questionnaires. Geography is not done among the rich and famous but on the poor and unknown.

5. *Academic geography is a product and advocate of the state*. The earth has two mappings for much of the same space: 192 mostly non-nation-states, and more than 6,000 non-state nations. Would a geographer from and trained in Palestine, Kurdistan, Khalistan, Kawthoolei, West Papua, or East Timor use the same concepts, theories, and methods about identity, place, territory, and resources as do geographers from Israel, Turkey, India, Burma, or Indonesia? Most academic research reaffirms the legitimacy of the states that in turn fund and support academia.

6. *A double standard of accountability*. Academics judge the reliability of an “informant’s” information, but the people studied have no forum to judge the accuracy of the researcher’s study, recall defective interpretations, or
counter what may be outright fabrication. What constitutes “malpractice” in geography?

7. Ethics and geography. Journalism, medicine, and law have basic ethical standards to regulate professional behavior and to protect sources, patients, and clients. Similar to most academic disciplines, geography has no code of research ethics, nor professional standards for studying and reporting on people.

8. Intellectual property rights and academic espionage. Does an academic own knowledge provided by people and communities who receive no benefits, and no credit? Claiming someone else’s knowledge as one’s own is called plagiarism if it is from a book, industrial espionage if it is from a corporation, and research if it is from a community.

XII. Research Results

1. Often it is appropriate to ask people you’ve worked with to read and comment on the first draft.

2. Copies of reports, papers, theses, dissertations, or books must be sent to communities in the study area and to those who have helped you in your work.

3. Copies of tape recordings, maps, photographs, and drawings should be given or sent to people and communities who helped.

4. Give seminars and lectures to local colleges, community organizations, and groups on the results of the research.

Further Reading


