How to do social research with...

Methods Lab

Series editors: Rebecca Coleman and Kat Jungnickel

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How to do social research with…

Edited by
Rebecca Coleman, Kat Jungnickel and Nirmal Puwar

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How to do social research with... ghosts

Martin Savransky

Figure 12.1 Spectral presence (image by Junko from Pixabay).

Introduction: Alas, Poor Ghosts!

A spectre is haunting contemporary social and cultural research – the spectre of … spectres, of ghosts and the spirits of the dead. What might it mean to do social research with ghosts? How might one give shape to a form of social research capable of attending and responding to the presence of ghosts in the world? It is these questions and others like them that have animated my own theoretical practices for some time, wagering on the possibility that changing – even in such seemingly impossible and outlandish ways – the kinds of questions that frame and guide our practices might in turn transform as much our modes of sociality as our understanding of what social thought and research is (for). One might be forgiven for assuming that ghosts belong to the exclusive purview of mediums, horror stories and folktales, but this could not be further from the truth. Even a quick overview of contemporary debates in the social sciences and humanities suggests that, contrary to every expectation, ghosts still lurk everywhere. Indeed, the last 30 years have seen a surge of interest in ghostly presences, experiences and practices of haunting across social, cultural and political worlds. Following the landmark book by Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx* (1994), where he sought to explore the phantasmic insistence and persistence of Marxist thought at the end of a millennium that had witnessed the fall of the Berlin Wall and was still coming to terms with the global dominance of capitalism, ghosts and other spectral beings have been invoked to study a whole range of liminal phenomena: forms of social and cultural change; the relationships between history and memory; the intricacies of personal and collective trauma; our complex relationships with diverse forms of data; as well as the uncanny, eerie and phantasmagoric dimensions of contemporary climate change.

In her beautifully composed *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (2008), for example, sociologist Avery Gordon sought to reclaim the language and modality of haunting as a social phenomenon that might render us sensitive to the seething absences and shadowy remnants of a past that remains present in the wake of modernity's violences and wounds. Working at the intersection of sociology and literature, she attended to the afterlives of slavery in the United States, as well as to the social echoes that 'the disappeared' during the period of state terror that governed Argentina under dictatorship make reverberate

in the present. In this way, she proposed that a socio-historical examination of haunting may render perceptible the shadowy formations of the present and the hazy potentialities that inhabit social life. More recently, ghosts have also been invoked by other researchers seeking to articulate generative means of coming to terms with a radically tumultuous present marked by the catastrophe of anthropogenic climate change, as a way of enabling us to attend to the ways in which landscapes of more-than-human life across the Earth carry with them sediments of other forms of life now extinct (see Tsing *et al.*, 2015).

These are just two of the most thought-provoking examples of what has become a veritable profusion of ghostly figurations, modalities of haunting and spectral forces in the critical imaginations of social researchers, a profusion so remarkable that it has been taken as heralding the advent of a 'spectral turn' (Blanco and Peeren, 2013). But if it cannot be denied that there is a renewed interdisciplinary interest in the phantasmatic, it cannot be accepted that any such 'turn' has incited the *return* of the dead. Indeed, the resurgence of attention to ghostly matters in social research has not involved a reclaiming of the fact that, for a long time, and all over the world, ghosts constituted *actual* presences amongst the living, shaping personal and collective experiences, inspiring folktales and forms of storytelling through which social worlds were woven, and intervening in the relationships between the living and the dead. Nor has any such 'turn'recovered the interest and attention that ghosts elicited even at the turn of the 20th century in the West, when a whole array of practices devoted themselves to the possibility of establishing rapports with strange phenomena that intimated the existence of other worlds in this world: as when psychic photographers would point to light traces that remained visible at the end of the electromagnetic spectrum as proof of everlasting life, and as consolation to the bereaved (Warner 2008); or when the Society for Psychical Research in London would conduct experiments on mediumship, phantoms, telepathy and automatic writing, with the aim of revealing dimensions of the world and forms of being that would otherwise remain hidden (Oppenheim, 1985).

If one can say that ghosts still haunt social and cultural research today, therefore, it is not least because this 'turn' has not so much turned to ghosts themselves as presences with whom the living co-inhabit the Earth, but

has turned to the *figure* of 'the ghost' as a conceptual metaphor through which one might come to examine displaced, out-of-place, persistent and shadowy dimensions of social life. These ghostly figurations have proven extremely generative in inspiring researchers to pursue new questions and modes of attention. But if the metaphoric ghost of the spectral turn occasionally 'sets heads spinning', it does not, *pace* Derrida (1994, p. 127), 'cause séance tables to turn'. Indeed, what about ghosts themselves? Social scientists have shown they can do research with ghostly *metaphors*, and they sometimes also do research with *people* so as to find out whether or why they 'believe' in ghosts. But having inherited the modern tale that derided ghosts as mere figments of the superstitious or religious imagination, they would almost never do research *with* ghosts themselves.

What would that entail? This chapter explores precisely this question. By engaging with stories of people who have learned not to 'believe in' but to 'live with' ghosts, and of some social researchers who have accepted the challenge, the chapter addresses the challenge of doing research with ghosts as one which can elicit new questions about *how* social research might be done. Indeed, I suggest that responding to this challenge demands a new ethos or methodology for social research, which I call 'the method of alterity'. In short, the method of alterity consists not in asking what otherness means, or what makes it other, but how others might transform our own ways of understanding and living in the world, were we to take them seriously (Savransky, 2021). This, in turn, transfigures the very purpose of social research. No longer enthralled by the question of what others can tell us about society, social research might instead become a kind of *empirical philosophy*, thinking with 'others' in order to engage in an ongoing experiment with an open question: 'What is reality capable of?'

Beyond Estrangement: Or, How to Do Social Research with Ghosts

Part of the reason why social scientists are often much better at doing social research with ghostly metaphors – or with people who believe in ghosts – than with ghosts themselves, has to do with how they have come to understand the nature of the social world, and their role in it as its students. Irrespective of which specific intellectual tradition social scientists may come from – positivism, interpretivism, Marxism, social

constructivism, post-structuralism and so on – most of them tend to agree that social worlds enjoy a bifurcated existence. That is, they often proceed as if reality – not unlike spoiled milk – always came split, divisible into two separate realms: on the one hand, an immediate realm of semblances and appearances. On the other, a *really real* but less evident realm of causes and forces, one that is deeper than the first immediate realm and which, once disclosed, can allow them to understand or explain the reasons that make the immediate realm appear as it does. Of course, different intellectual traditions disagree passionately about what belongs to which realm. For some, it is people's experiences, values and meanings that belong to the first immediate realm, whereas the really real realm of causes would be composed of hard, objective social facts. For others, it is the very claim to objective facts that is the semblance, an apparent realm whose deeper causes lie in the social norms and conventions that have historically pervaded scientific cultures. But however each intellectual tradition distributes the terms, most of them tacitly accept that the task of social research consists in cultivating what I have elsewhere called 'an ethics of estrangement': the task of becoming *estranged* from the realm of appearances immediately available to our experience, in order to gain access to the deeper realm of causes (Savransky, 2016).

Chased away by the expansion of electrical infrastructures and natural gas pipelines, and disqualified by a modern secular culture which relegated them to the realm of superstition, ghosts are primary victims of the ethics of estrangement (Bennet, 1999, Despret, 2018). For regardless of the specific distribution of the terms, the secular assumptions of modern social science imply that (almost) no social researcher would seriously situate ghosts within the realm of the *really* real, appealing to the existence of ghosts in order to understand or explain other dimensions of social and cultural life. By contrast, the tacit assumption is that, even when some people may believe in them, ghosts don't *really* exist. At best, they're metaphors for something else. Whenever ghosts are in question, therefore, researchers assume that it is their presence amongst people that needs to be explained by some other social or cultural phenomenon or cause. Indeed, if asking what it may mean to do social research *with* ghosts seems bewildering, it is because to pose this question is to challenge two basic assumptions of social research. First, that ghosts are at

best semblances that have no real existence; and second, that the very task of social research is precisely to explain semblances and appearances in terms of what (we have already decided) *really* exists. Learning how to do social research with ghosts, in other words, demands that we take the risk of moving beyond the ethics of estrangement, and that we learn to think of the means and purposes of social research otherwise.

But how? One way may be simply to follow the path of those exceptional cases in social research that make an alternative perceptible precisely by having embarked on the adventure of taking ghosts seriously: asking not why people *believe in* ghosts, but how they learn to *live with* ghosts. One such exceptional case is provided by the anthropologist Heonik Kwon's (2008) ethnographic research with the ghosts of the Vietnam War: spectres of those who suffered violent and tragic deaths during the war and now roam villages and towns, making regular apparitions amongst the living as they search after the same things the living desire: food and money, clothing and shoes, a house, a bicycle or a motorbike. Much of Kwon's ethnography was carried out among the seaside community of Cam Re, which was built in the 1960s by war refugees and sits on a massive cemetery. 'One evening', Kwon writes,

> children returned from playing in the street, shivering from their encounter with the ghost of a one-legged mine victim. Younger boys emulated the ghost's hopping along the ditch without crutches; older ones estimated whether the ghost's mobility was improving as seasons passed. This one-legged soldier was normally alone. Occasionally, he was spotted with an old scholar ghost in full mandarin attire. … Two American ghosts used to appear under the Areca palm tree, whispering in their unintelligible tongue to each other and making the unpleasant noise of what appeared to be a spoon clinking in an empty can for some villagers or a few bullet shells rattling in an empty munitions box for others. These two huge men were always together. They were shy, reserved, slightly nervous. They were prudent and not at all intrusive to the villagers but very talkative with each other. The wife of an invalid gardener, one of Cam Re's veteran peasant guerrilla fighters, regularly burned two incense sticks under the areca tree. Occasionally, she burned a few notes of paper votive money, in US dollars, for their sake. Another ghost, who people believed was an Algerian conscript during the French War, used to frighten young women by touching their shoulders from behind. Several women claimed that they had seen his hairy arms. The neighbors hired a ritual specialist to chase away this troublesome being.
>
> (Kwon, 2008, pp. 36–37)

While these apparitions are very common across a whole number of villages and towns, they are almost never made public in the media. Like any modern nation, the Vietnamese state disqualifies them as 'remnants of old superstitions and a sign of cultural backwardness and moral laxity' (Kwon, 2008, p. 10). Yet Kwon discovered during his fieldwork that these ghosts are not metaphorical devices, allegorical figures through which people would negotiate the trauma of war and the wounds of the past. On the contrary, ghosts are indeed real and present: 'their existence is perceived to be a "natural" phenomenon rather than a cultural symbol' (Kwon, 2008, p. 16).

When people relay their encounters with them, therefore, what interests their neighbours is not whether those who witnessed them *believe* in what they saw, but the details that may enable them to identify who these ghosts are, and the practical implications of their apparition amongst the living. Indeed, while the desire for land was great amongst Cam Re's inhabitants, they hardly ever sought to convert gravesites for cultivation. Instead, debates were often held about how close to a grave one could plant a particular tree, and people were particularly concerned with the possibility that the roots of trees may perturb the tranquility of someone's afterlife. In Cam Re and elsewhere in Vietnam, people *lived* with ghosts, and these in turn were 'attentive to the social affairs in the living world, just as the latter are fond of telling stories of their existence' (Kwon, 2008, p. 19). As such, Kwon learned that doing social research with these ghosts could not be a matter of estranging himself from their apparitions and stories in order to *explain* their existence (away) by appealing to other aspects of the social world of the living. These ghosts, in fact, were *among* the living. A theoretical rejection of their existence would have rendered social life in these villages incomprehensible. Which is why the approach that Kwon learned to cultivate was much riskier and more adventurous: not to provide an explanation for ghostly apparitions, or to turn them into metaphors, but to allow himself to be transformed by their presence. Which is to say, *to give to the presence of ghosts the power to enable him to learn about the social world.*

The Method of Alterity: Social Research as Empirical Philosophy

Kwon learned much about these post-war Vietnamese worlds, about the relationships between the living and their dead, and the ways in which

the dead become part of social life. But he also gained important insights about the mode of existence of ghosts themselves: wandering between worlds, 'they dwell in the traditional cultural habitat in the periphery of ancestors, but this habitat exists within a wider modern and secular political society that negates their naturalist existence altogether' (Kwon, 2008, p. 24). He also learned that ghosts in Vietnam do not always remain such, but can sometimes be transformed into *than*, powerful 'guardian spirits for a community or an individual with whom they have no given connection' (2008, p. 104). Of course, accepting the reality of these ghosts, giving to their presence the power to enable him to learn about social worlds in post-war Vietnam, did not give him licence to establish the existence of every ghost, universally and in general. There are no 'ghosts in general', just as there aren't living beings in general. What his research does intimate is that *some* ghosts *do, in fact, exist* – with their own biographies and necrographies, with their own desires and needs, with their own relationships to the living communities that make worlds with them. As he was told by a member of the community after asking him whether he really believed that Lotus Flower, a young ghost who had long lived in their family, was real: 'if she is not, why are you asking me about her?' (Kwon, 2008, p. 128).

This gesture of refusing to ask what otherness *really* means so as to attempt to *think with* others, to ask how others might transform our own ways of understanding and living in the world, is what I call 'the method of alterity'. This method encourages social researchers to cultivate a radically different set of sensibilities. Instead of associating insightful research with the development of a critical distance, what it requires is learning the art of paying attention to what matters in the situations they're in (Savransky, 2016). Rather than assuming that the task of social research consists in arming oneself with social theories so as to apply them to the worlds we encounter, the method of alterity demands a position of radical exposure and vulnerability: that we enable the worlds we encounter to inspire in us new questions and concepts, ones which no abstract set of theoretical principles could ever anticipate. Above all, the method of alterity requires social researchers to resist the temptation of seeking to explain semblances and appearances in terms of what is supposed to *really* exist. By contrast, it encourages researchers to engage in a permanent experimentation,

learning to make perceptible the possible existences that compose a situation, so that they themselves can teach us what the many social worlds in this world are made of.

If doing social research with ghosts asks us to experiment with 'the method of alterity', this method changes some of the basic questions of social research itself. What it demands is that we think *in the presence* of ghosts. Thus, the method of alterity invites social researchers to work under the question *'what is reality capable of?'* Taken in a purely abstract sense, this is a philosophical question, usually pertaining to the purview of metaphysics. But the truth is that, at its best, *social research is philosophy with 'others' in it*. And when social researchers let go of their trained habits of suspicion, estrangement and critique; when they cease asking what others can tell them about society and instead enable others (living or dead) to tell them what matters to them – how their social worlds are woven, who and what inhabits them, what is at stake – social research might perhaps become an *empirical philosophy*: a practice of conceptual and philosophical creation, thinking with 'others' in order to learn how to inhabit a world that is richer, wilder and more multifarious than any theory could encompass, a world capable of transforming our concepts and our ways of co-inhabiting the Earth (Savransky, 2021). A world, in other words, in which ghosts themselves partake in the making of the social.

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