1 Introduction

Collaborative event ethnography (CEE) builds on a series of paradoxes. It is a collective research practice in a field that values individualism and autonomy; it uses a mode of inquiry designed to highlight local situatedness to study world events organised by international bureaucrats in anonymous conference halls; it relies on focused short-term observation missions in highly complex, multicultural environments instead of long-term immersion in a given cultural context. And yet, as we hope to show in this Element, collaborative event ethnography has a unique potential to critically analyse global governance.

Its origins can be traced back to two parallel developments. On the one hand, throughout the 1980s, ethnographers developed new methodological approaches attempting to respond to an increasingly globalised world. Ethnography went global, crafting tools to study transnational elites and circulations. This 'methodological turn' (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019) also reflected broader developments in political, social and anthropological theory that crystallised around the analysis of networks or the study of governmentalities, and that aimed at uncovering the complex socio-material relations and assemblages that compose world society. On the other hand, the same decades also saw the creation of international organisations and regimes to tackle cross-boundary environmental problems like acid rain, the destruction of the ozone layer, or climate change. Following the 'Earth Summit' in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, environmental mega-conferences became the format of choice in environmental governance. Global climate conferences in particular attracted an ever-growing number of increasingly diverse actors, including scholars of global environmental politics and other social science fields.

CEE as a research methodology emerged at the confluence of these developments. This Element retraces its genealogy, explains its conceptual and methodological foundations and presents insights into its practice. It is meant as an introduction for students, an overview for curious newcomers to the field, and an invitation for experienced researchers wishing to experiment with a new method. A word on terminology: the label *collaborative event ethnography* (coined by Brosius & Campbell in 2010) is today broadly used by scholars who collaborate as a team in order to investigate large but not necessarily 'global' events. However, as we explain in the following chapter, the realm of global governance has emerged as a key site for conducting collaborative event ethnography.

Global environmental conferences bring together a diversity of actors to perform different policy tasks. They are a 'facilitative practice' that holds international regimes together (Lövbrand et al., 2017), as well as temporary interfaces that constitute and represent world society and thus may act as spaces for the co-production of futures (Ibrahim et al., 2024). Observers characterise

them as an 'archipelago of meetings' and as 'fuzzy objects' (Dumoulin Kervran, 2021, pp. 82–83). During a climate or biodiversity COP,[1] for instance, no single person can possibly take in all topics and spaces. This makes these events particularly challenging, but also exceptionally interesting sites for ethnographic fieldwork. Of course, these remarks do not apply to all global environmental conferences. Meetings under the umbrella of the Vienna Convention for the Protection of the Ozone Layer and similar treaties are much smaller than climate COPs. Until recently, even biodiversity COPs were much more manageable in terms of participants, side events and accompanying civil society activities. However, climate COPs have come to constitute a focal point of broader environmental debates. To some extent, they provide a model for other global conferences. Throughout the book, we therefore chose to use examples from our fieldwork on climate conferences, especially the COP26 in Glasgow in 2021, to illustrate the practice of ethnographic research on global environmental governance.

Following this introduction, the second section focuses on debates in anthropology and sociology that have informed the emergence of an interest in ethnographic observations of global environmental conferences. This history starts with a diversification of ethnographic approaches. The adoption of some of these new approaches in global governance studies and international relations (IR) expanded the methodological discussion in these communities. Collaborative event ethnography then evolved into an adaptive but recognizable, fully fledged research methodology. Alongside specific practices for data generation and analysis – such as ethnographic observations and qualitative interviews – its research posture aligns with ethnography's traditional self-understanding in terms of a broad and holistic epistemological perspective, grounded in traditions of phenomenology and constructivism.

Section 3 addresses a number of recurring and interconnected conceptual problems and illustrates them using examples from ethnographic fieldwork. UN environmental conferences are global events, and they are also shaped by the culture of a specific host city. They are characterised by mingling and continuous face-to-face interactions, while also constituting mediated 'world events' that synchronise political, science, business and public spheres across the world. They have clear temporal and spatial boundaries, but also constitute condensations of wider developments, and moments in a larger governance process with

[1] COP is shorthand for Conference of the Parties, and refers to the regular meetings of the signatories of international treaties such as the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD). In the UN context, COP refers to many conventions and is not restricted to the sphere of environmental governance. In this book, if not indicated otherwise, we use it in reference to climate COPs.

intersessional meetings and preparatory activities. Finally, they represent events with a certain unity, including a well-defined group of accredited attendees, an overarching internal dramaturgy and a corporate design, while also consisting of highly differentiated collections of social spaces with distinct activities and social practices.

In Section 4 we show that, mirroring the complexity of its object of inquiry, collaborative event ethnography is neither an inflexible, monolithic method nor a simple toolbox. It is 'shaped by iterative refinement', through constant exchange among team members (Dumoulin Kervran, 2021, p. 95; see also Corson et al., 2019). In this process, researchers can draw on a set of methodological building blocks, which are each used to a different extent, and with varying accentuations, by different research teams. We identify four key building blocks that adapt traditional ethnography to the specific circumstances and problems associated with studying world events. *Focused ethnography* is used to conduct observations in a short period of time in the field. *Team ethnography* adapts the ethnographic method to larger research collectives, to capture the scale and density of activity of the event. *Digital ethnography* accounts for the fact that events have expanded in physical space and number of attendees, but also into digital spaces. Consequently, it is no longer possible to think about, talk about, and investigate conferences without paying attention to what goes on in the digital sphere. A *dramaturgical perspective* is often used to unearth theatrical elements and performative dimensions of climate conferences and UN summitry.

Section 5 introduces the practice of collaborative event ethnography. Many authors writing on collaborative or team-based approaches in ethnography have emphasised that realising the potential of these approaches is no easy task, and that there is no simple, step-by-step recipe. Collective research stands and falls with the quality of collaborations, and the ability to create a team spirit. It also requires a productive and trusting atmosphere within the collective, in order to enable team members to share experiences and reflect on their emotions while observing. We propose to capture this feature of collaborative event ethnography by identifying a series of collective research practices. Beyond the simple sharing of data and observation notes, these aim at developing capacities for *preparing*, *working*, *thinking*, *experiencing* and *writing together*. Based on a literature review and our own ethnographic experiences, we derive a list of Dos and Don'ts to enable readers to start their own collaborative ethnographic practice.

In Section 6, we illustrate the benefits of collaborative event ethnography with two examples in the form of vignettes, which focus respectively on movement-media interactions at the Glasgow COP conference and the evolution of the Climate Action Zone over several climate COPs. The vignettes were chosen to illustrate two core elements of collaborative event ethnography.

The first is the *principle of many eyes – many minds*, as the presence of many observers and the discussions among them allow researchers to arrive at a richer and more complex picture of a world event. The second is the *principle of repeated observations* within a given global forum, used to identify changes in governance practices that would be invisible to a one-time observer. Both cases also illustrate the capacity of ethnography to capture the emotional and embodied dimensions of global politics, which other approaches struggle to identify and engage with analytically.

In conclusion, we highlight the integrative potential of collaborative event ethnography. Research on global environmental negotiations tends to be separated from studies on transnational governance networks or social movements. Collaborative event ethnography as a methodological approach and collaborative research practice has the unique potential to integrate these fields in observing and writing on environmental world events. It is our hope that this Element inspires its readers to try out and further develop this approach, and in so doing to contribute to a better understanding of the practice of global environmental governance, from its local embeddedness to its overarching social, spatial and temporal dynamics.

2 Ethnography Meets Global Environmental Governance: History and Theory

2.1 Ethnography Goes Global

Historically, ethnography has been associated with qualitative approaches that focus on understanding the meanings and contexts of human behaviour and social interactions. Hallmarks of ethnographic methodology include 'being there' to do first-hand observations (Watson, 1999), 'thick description' of events and situations to add context and meaning (Geertz, 1973), and reflexivity in terms of disclosing subjectivity and working with the positionality of the researcher (Burawoy, 2003). But there has been significant change in what is to be observed, where, in what context, by whom, and how ethnographic work can and should take place, as ethnographic approaches have travelled through disciplinary, geographical and conceptual spaces (Muecke, 1994). These developments have been connected to changes in both the types of social worlds that ethnographers study and changes within those social worlds themselves. At the basic level, ethnography rests on *participant observation*. By immersing themselves in a specific cultural and social context and spending time with people, ethnographers get an 'insider's perspective' on what is happening there. In their seminal introduction to the field, Hammersley and Atkinson (2019, p. 3) write that ethnographers study '[p]eople's actions and accounts [. . .] in everyday

contexts'. Ethnography is a field approach, as opposed to a laboratory approach, or to an approach that rests on studying in the office or the library. Often a variety of data sources is used, ranging from fieldnotes on observations and reflections to interviews and documents, as well as audio and video recordings. Traditionally, data gathering is weakly structured at first, meaning that often the research plan is not fully fixed beforehand, but adjusted progressively, in the course of the research. Data analysis is generally inductive and interpretative, while quantification is not commonly used. Typically, ethnographers look at a small number of cases in depth. As a qualitative social science methodology, ethnography is not a fixed or rigid method, but is most commonly described as an analytic sensibility.

Interestingly, early ethnographic accounts rarely foregrounded methodology or contained explicit discussion of research methods. Rather, good research rested on implicit craftsmanship and embodied skill (Goffman, 1989). Accordingly, in recent decades, the embodied and sensual aspects of fieldwork have come into view as part of ethnography's reflexive repertoire. Ethnographers in both anthropology and sociology have respectively argued for 'thick participation' (Spittler, 2001) and 'observant participation' (Honer & Hitzler, 2015, p. 552), emphasising the need to include an observation of one's own participation in accounts of fieldwork. Moreover, ethnographers writing about their field often refer to an *ethnographic tradition*. This vague outline of features of ethnography, either as something to identify with, continue and develop, or as something to distance oneself from and break free of, comes out of the origins of ethnography as a methodology in early twentieth century anthropology and sociology (Wolcott, 1999, Chapter 5). Defining features of this tradition include that the work is done by a lone researcher, takes place in a specific, locally bounded space, including an extended stay in this *field*, usually of a year or more (see Fine & Hancock, 2017, for an appraisal of the status of this tradition). This approach has at times been tied to a positivist project of capturing the *essence* of people who are very different from the observer, either because of cultural and spatial distance, or because they belong to another social class or cultural milieu. One way of understanding the evolution of ethnography is to explore how conceptions of the field, participant observation and ethnographic writing have changed over time (see Atkinson et al., 2011; Emerson et al., 2011; Markham, 2013; Van Maanen, 2011). We will not explore these developments in depth here, but we do want to highlight three intellectual movements in the history of ethnography that contributed to the emergence of collaborative event ethnography: (1) the call to *study up* towards elites 'at home' in the West; (2) the adaptation of ethnographic work to a globalised world through *multi-sited ethnography*; and (3) the use of *nonlocal*

ethnography to bring socio-material constellations and political formations into focus as *apparatuses*.

Studying up

While the origins of ethnographic methodology lie in anthropological research, other social sciences, notably sociology, soon followed suit. Participant observation within rapidly growing and increasingly diverse urban societies was first practiced by members of the Chicago School of sociology in the early decades of the twentieth century. After the Second World War, sociologists like Erving Goffman, Howard Becker, Harold Garfinkel and Anselm Strauss contributed to refining these approaches, giving shape to symbolic interactionism, ethnomethodology and grounded theory as ethnographically inspired sociological approaches to studying Western societies (Fine, 1995). But these early approaches were criticised for their focus on studying groups at the margins of Western society, such as criminals, drug addicts, racial minorities or jazz musicians (Gouldner, 1968). These debates echoed discussions happening in anthropology around the same period. Social anthropologists had begun to criticise the discipline's tradition and practices in colonial and postcolonial societies in Africa (Evens & Handelman, 2006). Members of the Manchester School, for instance, challenged the focus on isolated 'traditional' societies and pointed to the importance of larger political contexts, historical legacies of imperialism, and global interconnections. Within this dynamic of real-world developments and academic debate, Laura Nader's (1972) constructive critique of the ethnographic tradition stands out. Instead of focusing on places far removed from the researcher's experience, located either on the confines of Western imperial geographies or at the inner margins of Western societies, she makes the case for an ethnography of elites. Nader calls for 'studying up' rather than 'down', in order to examine the core institutions of modernity such as police forces, state administrations, insurance companies and commercial practices. In her view, these institutions should be approached with an ethnographic sensibility, combining participant observation with critical examination of the ethnographer's own role. However, Nader also notes the challenges of this endeavour – most notably the problem of field access, for instance in cases where elite communities are closed and unwelcoming to researchers, or reluctant to be the object of investigation.

Sociologists have carried out such ethnographic studies, starting with Garfinkel's (1967) studies on US legal and psychiatric systems, to Becker and colleagues' (1977) work on medical education, Strauss's (1985) writings on hospitals and the medical profession, and Hertz and Imber's inquiries into

corporate, professional and political elites (Hertz & Imber, 1995). Influential examples of studying up also include anthropological studies of transnational elites (Marcus, 1983) and so-called *laboratory studies*, which ushered in the formation of the new research field of science and technology studies (STS): Collins & Pinch, (1982), Knorr-Cetina (1981) and Latour & Woolgar (1986). But two decades after Nader's call, anthropologist Hugh Gusterson (1997) noted that ethnographic studies of Western elites and institutions still constituted more of a niche within sociology and anthropology, rather than a broad movement transforming these disciplines. To overcome obstacles to accessing certain fields and popularise studying-up approaches, Gusterson suggested de-emphasising participant observation in favour of 'polymorphous engagement', which for him 'means interacting with informants across a number of dispersed sites, not just in local communities, and sometimes in virtual form', 'collecting data eclectically from a disparate array of sources in many different ways' (Gusterson, 1997, p. 117). Gusterson's re-appraisal of Nader is symptomatic of a turn in sociological and anthropological ethnography in the 1990s towards finding new ways of approaching a globalised and rapidly changing world. Other disciplines also took up Nader's call. Following pioneering work by Fenno (1990) 'watching politicians' in US Congress, ethnographic observation of political elites became a recognised approach in political science, although it continues to sit uneasily within the wider discipline (Schatz, 2009).

Multi-sited Ethnography

Ethnography has traditionally been seen as a methodology to study spatially confined communities and distant cultures. Growing global interconnections, facilitated by waves of economic and political globalisation in the second half of the twentieth century, challenged this focus, which for many constituted the methodological core of ethnography. But globalisation also represented an opportunity to renew ethnographic methods and reaffirm their relevance. As Burawoy points out, 'globalization as the recomposition of time and space – displacement, compression, distanciation, and even dissolution' presents an obvious 'connection to the ethnographer, whose occupation is, after all, to study others in their "space and time"' (Burawoy, 2000, p. 4). *Multi-sited ethnography* emerged as a means to take up the challenge of globalisation and adapt the ethnographic approach to a rapidly changing world (Marcus, 1995). This happened against the backdrop of debates in anthropology about the discipline's historical relation to colonialism, reflexivity, and about textuality, narrative and rhetoric of and in ethnographic knowledge production. George E. Marcus, a key protagonist in these debates (Clifford & Marcus, 1986), points

to the need to broaden our understanding of what ethnographic research can and should be, adapting it to what is framed in contemporary discourse as globalisation. Multi-sited ethnography 'importantly [. . .] arises in response to empirical changes in the world and therefore to transformed locations of cultural production' (Marcus, 1995, p. 97). Contrary to conventional wisdom, Marcus argued that within the very core of the ethnographic tradition, there had already been numerous instances where ethnographers went beyond the local, as they discovered that the communities and cultures they were studying were not as sedentary as they had assumed. Outside of more obvious examples such as migration and diaspora studies, he points to work at the very beginnings of contemporary ethnography, when Malinowski (1922/2004), in a seminal study, accompanied the Trobriand Island 'Argonauts' on their cyclical voyages. Building on this tradition, Marcus argues that following the people, the thing, the metaphor, the conflict, etc., across multiple sites within a connected world is an imperative for ethnography. Crucially, however, this does not necessarily mean constant mobility on the side of the ethnographer. Multi-sited ethnography is not the polar opposite of 'strategically situated (single-site) ethnography' (Marcus, 1995, p. 110). Instead, it involves identifying nodal points in networks, 'system-awareness in the everyday consciousness and actions of subjects' lives' (Marcus, 1995, p. 111), and overcoming distinctions between the local site and the global system, or the ethnographer's 'field' and its political and social 'context'.

Nonlocal Ethnography

Marcus' proposal to adapt ethnography to a world of increasingly complex sociospatial constellations has been exceptionally influential (Coleman & von Hellerman, 2011; Falzon, 2009; Hannerz, 2003). Gregory Feldman (2011) takes some of its core ideas one step further in his plea for a nonlocal ethnography. A scholar of Foucauldian governmentality studies, Feldman argues that it is not enough to follow the movements of actors, ideas or artefacts across different physical sites. Some of the phenomena worthy of ethnographic attention, he points out, are held together not by direct material connections between different localities, but by less tangible ties: symbolic, organisational or social relations that are much harder to observe or follow. To characterise these ties, Feldman uses the notion of the *apparatus*, a term widely used to translate Foucault's concept of *dispositif* (Rabinow, 2003, pp. 49–55). The term denotes 'a thoroughly heterogeneous ensemble consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions [. . .].