On the Difficulties of Conducting Ethnographic Research: A Case Study of a Kazakhstani International School

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A compromise is always weak and revocable, but it is the only way to aim for the common good. We only reach the common good through a compromise, between strong but rival references. [...] The compromise is a barrier between a deal and violence. It is in the absence of a deal that we make compromises for the good of civic peace. We could also say that a compromise is our only answer to violence in the absence of an order recognized by everyone.¹

Introduction

¹ A month after the first bell had signaled the start of the 2018-2019 academic year, I arrived in one of Kazakhstan’s regional capital cities, populated by approximately 250,000 Kazakhstani, where I had been lucky enough to land a year-long internship as a French teacher in one of the country’s recently opened international schools. This, I thought, would be a rare opportunity for in-depth participant observation for my master’s thesis in social anthropology on Kazakhstan’s pedagogical system. My scientific eagerness, and candor, however, were quickly matched by the strategic ambiguity of my colleagues regarding my research. These were colleagues with two
very different backgrounds: Added to the large group of mostly young, female Kazakhstani English teachers working in the school, a much smaller group of equally young and mostly male Western expatriate teachers had been hired to teach their native language, English, as well as scientific subjects such as chemistry, biology, and physics, also in English. These two types of teachers collaborated throughout the academic year as co-teachers, with their respectively diverse educational backgrounds, teaching 15- to 18-year-old teenagers. Almost all the school’s students were of Kazakh origin, had been duly selected by the school’s entrance exams and had received scholarships for the duration of their secondary studies.

Well aware of the ethical implications of my research, I immediately laid out my ethnographic intentions to my colleagues. I quickly realized, however, that the social science project I was pursuing durably modified the mood of the field. Indeed, as I explained my research interests, I understood that being too keen on the facts scratched the surface of dense political and economic ramifications, making my informants uneasy about what they could and could not tell me. As I will try to show here, this pressure on academic freedom, i.e., the conjoint Humboldtian and American Association of University Professors’ (AAUP) “freedom to do research”, “promote inquiry and advance the sum of human knowledge”, made practicing ethnography quite the challenge. In the light of this, I realized that as far as deontology goes, I should begin my thesis by analyzing where these limitations to academic freedom came from and attempt to explain how they partly shaped my ability to access information on the field. In other words, rather than the introduction of new conditions from the outset, constraints to academic freedom while practicing ethnography in this Kazakhstani school originated from making evident existing conditions that were purposefully evaded and kept quiet. As philosopher Judith Butler argues:

If there are conditions without which there can be no exercise of that right [of academic freedom], then those conditions ought to be understood as components of the right itself. In this way, the right to academic freedom presupposes a right to education, and a broader social commitment to making educational institutions accessible, affordable, and durable.

To comprehend some of the difficult conditions encountered while conducting ethnographic research in this Kazakhstani international school, this paper will examine the question of academic freedom, or absence thereof, to identify some of the conditions referred to by Butler and how they informed both teaching and ethnographic research conditions.

Because of its quasi-complete political and economic dependence on the authoritarian Kazakhstani regime, the school administration this article considers strictly follows contemporary governmental decision-making on both national and international levels. These decisions directly inform the content of the contract signed between the school and its employees, and their behaviour both at work and, indirectly, outside of it. This conditioning can hinder, and at times exclude, the practice of academic freedom. Indeed, and perhaps even more so in the field of education, “Academic freedom is not an abstract right, but a constant struggle to establish academic independence in the midst of both economic and political dependency”. Although the different professionally trained teachers at this school, working at the lower end of the statutory scale, do have their own ways and ideas on how it should function and how to conduct their work, their voices are rarely considered by the school’s high officials, working in the administrative offices in Kazakhstan’s capital, Nur-Sultan. This top-
down situation, although not exclusive to Kazakhstan or Central Asia, is particularly salient in post-Soviet spaces, inherited from a 20th century when the objectives fixed by the Soviet apparatchiks of the federal capital, Moscow, did not match the reality of the field in the provinces. This promoted the falsification of results by local workers, to contend with the unrealistic quotas dictated by the civil servants higher up in the Soviet hierarchy. Moreover, in a state where censorship is omnipresent, actions can supersede writings, even with regards to the production of knowledge. It has also been argued that in many countries, but particularly in developing ones, freedom of research, publication or commentary are often restrained in fields considered politically or socially sensitive. These include ethnic or religious studies, research on the environment and studies on social classes or conflicts – among others. Consequently, academics who risk formulating critical analyses on these subjects can run into serious sanctions – destitution, imprisonment, or exile – although less severe sanctions or informal warnings are more frequent.

This paper will outline and analyse some of the difficulties encountered while conducting ethnographic fieldwork as a Western expatriate teacher in an international secondary school in Kazakhstan, difficulties posed by the compromise between national and international authorities that conditioned access to ethnographic data. By remaining in the field for the larger part of an academic year, as other school ethnographers before me, I could nevertheless endorse several insider postures: of an employee, a colleague, at times of a friend and confident, and of a neighbour, but seldom of a social anthropologist or ethnographer. Despite restrictions on social science practices, this subjective, multi-layered approach permitted me, as I hope to make evident here, to observe and see through the status quo as it was before I arrived. Indeed, it has been argued that being embedded enables one to seize ordinary scenes from the inside and the many contradictions between practice (what individuals do) and story (what they say they do). Considering these conditions, a central question this article asks is to what extent has ethnographic research been shaped by the conditions it seeks to describe?

To begin answering this, a first section opens with a comparison of the direct observation method I had to follow, as an insider researcher, with some of the authorised and mandated approaches conducted in other schools since the country’s independence in 1991. It will then present more formally which nomenclature this first methodology nevertheless fits into, as I tried to make up for the ambiguous communicative setting, I worked in.

A second section focuses on some of the conditions I was compelled to negotiate with to access the field ethnographically, a first illustration of the compromise implicitly elaborated between local employees (Kazakhstani and expatriate) and uncensored ethnographic research.

To evaluate this aspect more specifically, a third section analyses the in-situ compromise between language and information, which, as I try to make evident, conditioned one another according to the school’s adaptation to the Kazakhstani government’s economic development aims, by means of its trilingual pedagogical policy (Kazakh, Russian and English) officially adopted in 1998.

A fourth section considers some of the impacts this compromise has on the state of communication and cooperation inside and outside the school between locals and this ethnographic research, but also among local themselves.
A fifth section focuses on the practical aim of this compromise, namely, the preservation of the habitual balance of ordinary life, which, fittingly, makes up a large part of social anthropology’s locus of interest.

Finally, a concluding section will open a discussion on some of the challenges of voicing a trilingual education system in Kazakhstan. Perhaps, the ethnographic reflections that follow will further demonstrate how this social science discipline is able to get closer to the ‘unconditioned’ aspects of ordinary social life, and promote further collaborations between social anthropology, educational sciences, and international relations.

Direct Observation

In Kazakhstan, significant science of education studies have been conducted since 1991, as part of the country’s collaborative education reform project. As opposed to this ethnographic study, however, the aforementioned science of education contributions have benefited, and still do, from official, international, academic, and governmental support. These institutions fund these studies, since their results interest their foreign and domestic policies according to today’s international pedagogical and economic canons, which serve as a model for Kazakhstan’s economic development aims. The bilateral recognition of these contributions has thus permitted these researchers to fill an accepted position as researchers among the educational networks they surveyed, and conduct socio-pedagogical studies sustained by the compilation of numerous individual interviews with Kazakhstani and expatriate teachers alike.

The work I present here pays a great deal of attention to these pioneering studies, while adapting to the research conditions I was in while simultaneously working as a teacher. It also shows the other side of the coin, making more evident the yet unexplored perspective these mandated projects might have missed. Here is what one scholar in communication sciences remarks about this:

When [...] the sponsor finances the research, or even funds it, he holds the keys to the field. His engagement letter, his order gives him open access to more or less secret and confidential, private and professional compounds: access to professional reunions, the right to consult archives, and conduct interviews. This letter validates and recognizes, in the field, the status of ‘actor researcher’. Identified in this way, he will be able to blend in the action while keeping his mind free, the ambiguity of distant engagement, of distance with empathy, of critique with solidarity and responsibility. Numerous actors see, as the vague but precious opportunity is offered, a testimony of trust, or even, if needed, of warning. Others perceive this same opportunity as a potential risk, threatening the secrets of the organisation.

Indeed, where the interviewees in the mandated studies tend to rely on euphemisms to alleviate the potentially jeopardizing impact of their narrative, with phrases such as “this is not a criticism, it is an observation”, the direct observation method I had to use for fieldwork has been, from an ethnographic perspective, advantageous: By its discursive discretion and immediacy, it limited the transformative effect of scripted scrutiny, witnessing social scenes closer to how they might have habitually unfolded in the absence of an investigative eye. By “direct”, I mean recorded observations limited to retrospective annotations from memory and the discrete description of situations as they unfolded, when they justified the use of a notebook, smartphone, or computer. In this sense, the method could perhaps better be termed as immediate observation, since no artificial recording technology mediates the relationship between the observer and
the observed. Fittingly, observation is a social practice before being a scientific method. By being on the field five to six days a week as both an ethnographer and a teacher, organising individual interviews and investigating too formally or outside of the school's habitual pedagogical context clearly impaired and silenced the state of social relations with my colleagues, with whom I had to collaborate efficiently in a normed and controlled professional environment, with the delicate responsibility of educating the local youth. By its potentially public authority, particularly when the objective is official reform, academic scrutiny can add tension, rather than reveal it, and modify the normal, routine quality of social interactions, which is precisely what social anthropology is most interested in witnessing and understanding, by blending into the habitual course of events. The practice of direct observation presented here adds its “embedded” perspective to the results obtained for the purposes of reform and contributes to a novel and more thoroughly informed picture of Kazakhstan’s secondary schools and pedagogical landscape.

Another example of this methodological conundrum is well illustrated by an official, week-long visit in May 2019 of a group of external school examiners, representing an international organisation. Several parallels and contrasts can be drawn from the position of the social science researcher and that of these external school inspectors. Indeed, both recall the domain of analytical observation. The coming of these examiners, however, was known in advance and the entire school, its body of teachers and students, were neatly prepared and briefed to reach this organisation's standards and receive international accreditation. During that week, although lessons followed the same timetable, the entire atmosphere of the school had changed. A palpable tension and quiet rush, similar to that experienced by students during examination periods, animated the school. This tension was exacerbated by the fact that the brief, but authoritative presence of these inspectors reduced the possibility for usual stress outlets. Again, contrary to the swift and condensed appearance of these school inspectors, long-term fieldwork in the school did not have such a disruptive, intimidating, formalizing effect, and could witness the social context as it unfolded habitually. In this regard, it is worth adding that:

If the authorities, in the plural, are neither undisputable nor all powerful, they are, however, easily identifiable and hardly avoidable. They sign the contract, the engagement letter, and mandate the researcher’s salary. They authorize access to the field, as the employers of the paid actors and guardians of beneficiaries or ‘users’. They are either the owners of the establishments, fields or materials, or the holders of public authority over the material realities. They can be subject to conflict – political, ethical, of work, of usage and consumption – and expect ‘tools’ and ‘results’ from the research to better ‘govern’ these conflicts.

Indeed, as this passage suggests, the excessive use of official authority coupled with the expectancy of specific results modifies the state of social relations in the field, tendentially restricting the ethnographer to witness only what local authorities wish to show and tell, or even stage what the researcher wishes to see. Thereof, it is in adaptation to these conditions that I compromised the well-established method of participant observation with recorded interviews, favouring, as if by default, the method of direct observation.

Finally, it is worth noting that this constrained situation on social research is quite the norm in any social context closely connected to public policy. Unsurprisingly, this research was greeted with the same reserved, if not silent, distance by the different
Embassies I tried to question further regarding their respective pedagogical and economic investments in Kazakhstan. Considering these conditions, direct observation did prove efficient in unveiling some of the practices at work behind the facade of discourse and, in a setting shying away from unscripted communication, preserve the ethnographer’s long-term presence without disruptions.

The Condition of Information

Largely due to Kazakhstan’s recent past and geopolitical heritage, one can find what has been described as an ambiguous culture of opacity and “suspicion”\(^\text{21}\), a durable “memory of trauma”\(^\text{22}\) and “regime of disavowal”\(^\text{23}\) throughout the country’s contemporary social landscape and, by repercussion, in the current school system, regarding independent social science research and mediation.\(^\text{24}\) This suspicion is differently cultivated by Kazakhstanis and expatriates alike. Most of the school’s teaching and administrative corps remained dismissive of my ethnographic queries, particularly when they ventured outside of what is accessible to the public, on the school website or in the press. Quite typically in post-Soviet fieldwork sites, as mentioned above, this politically and economically induced fear of jeopardizing their careers by disturbing the status quo led most of my colleagues to consider me as “French spy”, forcing me to compromise the traditional ethnographic method of participant observation with recorded interviews. Moreover, it seemed to me that being too insistent with the facts would have excluded the few informants I could access, as well as cooperation in my work as a teacher. Notably, questions of salary, gender, and ethnicity, heavily, and quite immediately, burdened the relationship between investigator and investigated. Because of this, I had to renounce asking questions too directly. Indeed, since sociology produces results that often contradict common sense and contribute to unveiling things that are hidden, it can kindle suspicion or even hostility when the interests of science and those of the investigated have a small chance of converging entirely.\(^\text{25}\) It is worth adding that in the case of this international school environment, the notion of ‘common’ sense is a very exclusive, economically informed, and polarised one. When I presented myself as an ethnographer, the information I received was heavily conditioned by the developmental objectives of the school, which paradoxically conflicted with those of an academically free social science body of knowledge. Indeed, as Butler argues:

> One cannot talk about rights of cultural exchange when laws and walls restricting mobility make those issues abstract... If those preconditions are not met—a nonhostile and nondiscriminatory educational environment—then the exercise of academic freedom is impossible.\(^\text{26}\)

Some of the “laws and walls”, or glass ceilings between “a deal and violence” (cf. epigraph) conditioned by this type of school environment can prevent close communication in an international work context which it nevertheless officially promotes.

The Language of Information

Despite these restrictions, the trilingual policy adopted by the Kazakhstani government in 1998 allowed me to establish a somewhat ‘privileged’ relationship with locals in and
out of school. As an uncommon example, in this medium-sized city, of a decent Russian and native English speaker interested in Kazakhstan’s everyday life and history, Kazakhstani locals were generally very enthusiastic to communicate with me. On numerous occasions, however, the goal of these conversations seemed more to be a rare opportunity for English-speaking practice with a native speaker, usually only available at a high price. Adding to this, my anthropological queries allowed a great deal of space and time for reciprocal self-expression, regardless of language. This, however, mainly happened in English, the mastering of which is lived by some as a unique chance of survival, by others as a necessary chore, or not lived at all. On several occasions, although I had initiated a conversation in Russian, it suddenly took on an agonistic form in which one tried to impose one idiom over the other. In these economically compromised communicative instances, competition took over competence, as the pressure to practise English superseded the communication of information, according to the local rules of this new “Great Game”, which the locals rule, in adaptation to the global values they strive for.27

To illustrate this point ethnographically, I was often solicited throughout the school year by one of the members of staff, who regularly invited me to “have some tea”, first in the school cafeteria, then in the city after our working hours. This administrator and teacher, in his late thirties, had recently begun learning this economically strategic language with a private Kazakhstani teacher from outside the school, much less expensive than the school’s native English teachers.28 I accepted these pleasant, informal conversations in English, hoping they would also give me a chance to better understand how the school functioned. When too specific, however, my questions usually went unanswered. Because of this linguistic selection, most of my social encounters in the school, but to a lesser extent also outside, had to be done in English. This proved a double-edged sword since it made me, as a native English speaker, an interesting interlocutor for Kazakhstanis wishing to develop their language skills on the one hand, while limiting, on the other, our conversations to indirect communication patterns such as stereotypes, jokes, and language practice in motherese, rather than the direct sharing of information. The opportunity cost of this market-led communicative compromise, however, was complete silence, in other words, communication in quasi jeopardy.

Compromised Communication

As highly paid, licensed/certified and experienced English teachers, the school’s expatriate community was at risk of being targeted by such economic maximization strategies, tending to push them to avoid closer contact with Kazakhstanis so that they would not “feel at work” outside of their contractual hours. Due to their double and unilateral responsibility as both direct teachers and indirect school reform agents, their status was somewhat in balance between schoolteachers (Rus. “uchitelya”) and spiritual teachers (Rus. “uchiteli”).29 On the contrary, anthropological research interests allow more time and multilateral attention to these sociocultural conditions, albeit, when unrecognized, at the cost of a great deal of personal energy, to see through dense sociocultural conditionings and access information which usually transpires between the lines.
Thus, as a Western expatriate teacher on an intern’s salary, much closer to a local salary than an expatriate’s, I found myself sitting on the fence between the economic interests of both Kazakhstani and Western teachers, as they collaborated as co-teachers, on very unequal professional terms. In both cases, the observed behaviour at the microsocial level of the school was conditioned by the safekeeping of respective national interests, a reflection of the state of international relations negotiated at the macrosocial level. For social anthropology, and semiotics, however:

Communication, to an extent, always involves communion. That is, communicating with others entails some measure of [...] ‘becoming with’ these others.

In other words, the problem of compromise in communication inevitably informs the dialogue and the behaviour of those who participate in this type of communion. The compromise between what speakers communicate to one another manifests itself, first and foremost, in the very language used in the discussion: Through the choice of words and tone in which they are uttered, or whether words are even uttered at all. This also goes for the setting in which certain words can and cannot be spoken. In this sense, questions find corresponding answers according to the reciprocal understanding of the interests and intentions of each communicant, or, in other words, according to their state of trust in one another, and the feeling of security. As some of my Kazakhstani colleagues gradually understood, I suppose, that my academic intentions were not against their interests, they did gradually open up to me, although mostly with the safety valve of English language training in mind, and outside the school grounds. As a patient listener, I eventually learned that the school’s expatriate teachers where gradually being replaced by Kazakhstani teachers, the former leaving behind their lesson plans for the latter to work with. The principal added that should he open his own school, he would exclusively recruit those expatriate teachers motivated by cultural interest, rather than financial, or do without them completely. In contrast, at another restaurant, I was fiercely told off one night by two of my expatriate colleagues, as they vehemently tried to make me understand that “the money is not a thing”.

Thus, with the less unilaterally partial interests of an ethnographic approach looking to see things as they are from other perspectives than its own, I let the field speak for itself, rather than authoritatively try to impose a national or disciplinary monologue that would conflict with another. This, as mentioned above, was not done entirely intentionally: Since social sciences’ interests were such a minor party in and out of the school, I had very little democratic authority to express this broader, academically free research agenda over the nationally bound pedagogical ones I had been authorized to participate in. This compromise in communication between academic freedom and two national internationalisms, or in other words, between ethnographic freedom and two versions of Paul Ricoeur’s “common good” (cf. epigraph), was the norm throughout my ethnographic fieldwork both in and out of school.

Preserving the Everyday

By following this less invasive and petrifying methodology of direct observation, I was able to preserve the everyday exchange of information and remain in a minimal zone of trust and reciprocity necessary for both my teaching and ethnographic work, the former being the sine qua non condition of my year-long work visa. More than any other method, the practice of direct observation enabled me to keep the researcher on
the same level as the researched, and the ability to converse and chat normally, without the overhanging pressure or stresses caused by, in this particular context, numeric research tools such as a recorder. Moreover:

In field sites that appear closed, be it for institutional reasons or other, the direct observation of practices is [...] the most efficient way to make up for the faults of methods founded on the collection of discourses such as the interview or questionnaires. Direct observation is particularly adapted to enquire about 'behaviours which are not verbalized, or which are too verbalized' [...] and where one risks to only access conventional answers.\(^{33}\)

Indeed, this method is also highly adapted to grasp informal practices, be they occulted or very visible, even if they are perceived by the surveyed as either too poorly legitimate or ordinary to be mentioned.\(^{27}\)

In addition, the fact that the school had more than partly taken upon itself to provide me with a work visa, a teaching position, a local salary, accommodation, and the very social context in which I operated during the academic year, strongly pressured my ability to freely practise ethnography. Consequently, this research would probably have been more independent and academically free if more of the above-mentioned conditions had been supported by an external research organisation. However, being embedded in such a way, respectful of the limitations imposed on academic freedom, did help witness the social context from the inside with less disturbance than those of a punctual observer. These limitations were hard to measure and quantify. In terms of verbal communication, they are best described as a quite sudden silence, unresponsiveness, or irony. In terms of non-verbal communication, however, they are enacted by a frown, at times quite stern, and mounting blood pressure, signalling the end of the line. Finally, it is worth pointing out that introducing social science findings and perspectives in everyday situations and conversations is still very challenging, but particularly so in authoritarian contexts, such as Kazakhstan, where the economic and political spheres of power closely control academic freedom. Interestingly, this contemporary situation recalls the times of the Tsarist Empire’s Academy of Sciences, particularly with regards to the Russian Imperial Geographic Society, founded in 1845 in Saint-Petersburg, almost a century before the Soviet regime’s existence. This influential institution initiated ethnographic research throughout Siberia, the Balkans, and Central Asia. For Kazakhstan, one of its most recognized ethnographic authorities was the Russian educated Kazakh Chokan Valikhanov (1835-1865), widely celebrated as being both a native and a colonist. Isabelle Ohayon, however, argues that the greater part of the editors of this learned society were, in fact, poorly trained scientifically and ordered to serve the colonial objectives of the times.\(^{34}\) These characteristics of a politically oriented scientific body in Kazakhstan, it seems, have partially survived into the 21\(^{st}\) century, resulting in a tendentially ethnocentric relationship between political power and social science disciplines and research.\(^{29}\)

Along a comparable line of thought, the social conditions towards anthropological research and inquiry in this particular school, carried out as both a recognized teacher and an unrecognized ethnographer, have both benefitted and hindered the input and output of data, designed to apolitically contribute to further academic understanding of Kazakhstan’s pedagogical system. Indeed, although the school policy contractually authorised my access to and participation in its pedagogical perspectives and enactments, its economically and politically driven agenda made analysis impossible without referring to it anonymously and compromise aspects of its public visibility, its
prospects for further development and collaboration along the lines of facts, rather than interpretations. In this learning environment where access to ethnographic data could be austerely normed and negotiated:

Like any guest, I was a prisoner of my hosts. Unless I decided to be a bad guest, I could only see what they wanted to show me.  

To Conclude: The Challenges of Voicing Trilingualism

Entitled “We Have a Window Seat”, this direct quote from an interviewed expatriate teacher working in a similar type of school demonstrates the symbolic integration, but pragmatic disempowerment, tendentially experienced by many expatriate teachers in Kazakhstan. As far as the ethnographer is concerned, the risk was to be reduced and confined to the proverbial armchair. Indeed, to expatriate teachers, these types of schools appear more as a symbol of facade modernity, at the expense of the qualitative international integration and cooperation they promote. As they signify the state of global internationalism, the resulting dialectic of these hieratic pedagogical outlets are a fitting illustration of what Guy Debord wrote of the spectacle:

The spectacle is the uninterrupted discourse that the present order harbours about itself, its laudatory monologue. It is the self-portrait of power in the epoch of its totalitarian managing of the conditions of existence.

This further explains why ethnographic fieldwork is particularly difficult to conduct in an economically, nationally, and politically oriented pedagogical framework, in which the different parties are unwilling to interrupt their respective laudatory self-discourses with academic considerations from “another world”, unbound by the interests of a particular nation-state.

Also, the brief, anonymised ethnography presented here shows some of the epistemological differences between Western and Kazakhstani work regimes, as they collaboratively teach their young groups of students in Kazakhstan. These social, cultural, and national differences in the conceptualisation of the common good, at times, result in internalised misunderstandings, burdening professionalism, and preventing teachers and students from reaching informative international communication. For both schools and academic freedom, this is unfortunate. Indeed, as sociologist Jean-Miguel Pire recalls, the first meaning of “school”, the Ancient Greek skholè, designates a suspended time, freed from the performance of vital and servile activities. A parenthesis in the ordinary flow, it allows reflection, study, meditation, contemplation, without any other objective than their deployment. This practice later gave rise to the otium studiosum, as the roman literati termed it. As this paper tries to show, however, the influence of economic and political development interests which shape school curricula, prepare future generations to compete in a world of nec-otium, that is, of negotiation and business. In terms of reaching political development, the lack of academic freedom appears to be a counterproductive strategy, considering that critical review is indispensable to the development of civil society. Moreover, general comparisons have shown that universities benefiting from the greatest rates of academic freedom also obtain the best results in terms of innovative and groundbreaking research. On the contrary, thrust by this fast economic modernization and catch-up state of urgency, developmental objectives and interests can negatively
impact academic freedom and research input and output, particularly with regards to social sciences.

33 On the one hand, this compromised ethnographic freedom had certain methodological advantages: Having to adapt its disciplinary integrity to the local political context promoted the use of other disciplines, such as history, sociology, communication and political sciences, philosophy, and literature, to charter novel pathways toward sensitive data. Despite the high rate of intellectual isolation from being the sole ethnographic perspective on the field, this also promoted thorough bibliographic input as compensation for the silent cautiousness. This undoubtedly enriched the analytic potential of the ethnographic data, as well as keeping alive a scientifically balanced relationship between both emic and etic interpretations and practices in and out of the field. Although unfunded, the little, academically bound data presented here remains founded in the rich and little-known ethnographic well of information hoarded by its political and economic context.

34 On the other hand, these constraints to academic freedom did present drawbacks to ethnographic practice. By working in such narrow isolation, having to constantly adapt the work method to the conditions of the field required a lot of retinue, personal engagement and energy to incessantly think up locally acceptable witnessing postures, at times very costly and austere, to access information and knowledge as they are, rather than how they are presented or wished to be. However, perhaps more out of astonished curiosity than suspicion or defiance, the usual answer to my ethnographic queries, before turning into a silent, and, at times, knowing smile, was also a question: “Why Kazakhstan?”

35 Finally, this resounding silence that compounded ethnographic research to direct observation and this compromised publication, recalls anthropologist Eva-Marie Dubuisson’s study of the Kazakh art of aitys. In it, she discusses the dialogic relationship between the voice of Kazakh poets channelling the will of the people, locally referred to as a “democracy of the steppe”, and the economic sponsors who authorize and organize their expression. In this dialogic context:

“Voicelessness” ([Kaz.] unsızylk) is one of the harshest criticisms poets hurls at politicians, particularly seated senate members. What they mean is the practical inability to effect change – impotence. The insult is loaded because poets throw it from the relatively powerful position of inhabiting “the voice of the people”, weighed with the authority of the ancestors, such as the poets of old, khans, and warriors, as well as the various figures assembled at performances. To call leaders “voiceless” is to call them powerless – individuals who cannot effect any real change. It is a move that radically inverts the actual structure of power in Kazakhstan: poets are speaking as and/or on the behalf of those who are more literally “voiceless” or powerless and condemning leaders who wield wealth and authority on a day-to-day basis. In the light of a broader political context of media restrictions, though, there is another meaning of “voiceless” – a more literal form of political silencing.

36 As this passage suggests, there are strong similarities between the artistic freedom of poets looking to perform uncompromised poetry and the academic freedom of social scientists and teachers looking to perform uncompromised ethnography. In both instances, observing and describing the dialogic “voice of the people” must struggle with the tendentially silencing, authoritative tutelage, and sponsorship of a monologic political regime. With regards to Kazakhstan’s ambition of implementing a trilingual and international education system for the purposes of achieving economic and
political development, the ethnography of some of its secondary schools suggests that the current communicative compromise lies in the middle of trilingualism and voicelessness, or, as Ricœur put it, “a deal and violence” (cf. epigraph). In this regard, a nation-state’s ability to vocalise reliable social science research is a significant indicator for NGOs to evaluate its degree of political, academic, and democratic freedom.

In the case at hand, however, as Kazakhstani scholar and pedagogue Gulzhan Kuzembayeva and her collaborators conclude, there are multilateral benefits in reaching a trilingual education standard:

Knowing three languages would prepare youth for their future professions and enhance their social experiences. [...] Academic staff can gain access to the vast scientific literature and can communicate with other scientists anywhere in the world. So, implementing trilingualism in Kazakhstan may be a challenge, but it is the challenge worth pursuing.

Worth pursuing, social anthropologists might add, in an ethnographic key.

NOTES

1. “Le compromis est toujours faible et révocable, mais c'est le seul moyen de viser le bien commun. Nous n'atteignons le bien commun que par le compromis, entre des références fortes mais rivales. [...] Le compromis est une barrière entre l'accord et la violence. C'est en absence d'accord que nous faisons des compromis pour le bien de la paix civique. Nous pourrions même dire que le compromis est notre seule réplique à la violence dans l'absence d'un ordre reconnu par tous”. Paul Ricœur, Pour une éthique du compromis. Interview de Paul Ricœur [For an ethic of the compromise. Interview with Paul Ricœur], Alternatives Non-Viéntes, no. 80, 1991, p. 2. I thank Sandrine Ruhlmann from the CNRS for bringing philosopher Paul Ricœur’s working definition of the compromise to my attention. In this paper, unless mentioned otherwise, all translations are my own.

2. According to the World Bank, the average rate of female secondary teachers in Kazakhstan was 76% in 2020, 75% in all 15 ex-USSR countries combined between 2009 and 2020, compared to 54% worldwide in 2019 (worldbank.org, accessed on 25/11/2021). In Kazakhstan, the high rate of women working in the education sector could be a result of the combination of their still strong traditional roles as “nurturers” and the numerous Communist policies to promote women’s education and access to scientific work (for some of these policies, see for example Kristen R. Ghodsee & Julia Mead, What Has Socialism Ever Done for Women?, Catalyst, vol. 2, no. 2, 2018, pp. 101-133. These important gender issues, however, are beyond the frame of this paper.

3. Without exceptions, the expatriate teachers came from countries where English is either the official language, or one of the official languages. I call them “Western” with reference to the neo-liberal cultural values they adhere to the most, with some exceptions, both at work and outside. By “expatriate”, I mean a mostly endogenous group of skilled professionals working outside their country of citizenship, usually for financial gain.


9. Philip G. Altbach, « Périphéries et centres: les universités de recherche dans les pays en développement » [Peripheries and centers: Research universities in developing countries], Politiques et gestion de l’enseignement supérieur, vol. 2, no. 19, 2007, p. 141. The NGO Freedomhouse website, for example, reports that in Kazakhstan “[a]cademic freedom remains constrained by political sensitivities surrounding certain topics, including the former president, his inner circle, and relations with Russia. Self-censorship on such topics is reportedly common among scholars and educators” (Freedomhouse.org, accessed on 25/11/2021). Another issue that has been raised concerns the lack of academic integrity and academic corruption, such as bribes from student to teacher during exam and admission periods (Natalya L. Rumyantseva, “Higher Education in Kazakhstan: The Issue of Corruption”, in International Higher Education, no. 37, 2004, pp. 24-25).


13. The studies led by Olena Fimyar have thus conducted no less than 262 interviews with Kazakhstani and expatriate teachers from the Nazarbayev Intellectual Schools (NIS) and the eponymous university, named after the first President of independent Kazakhstan (Fimyar & Kurakbayev, “‘Soviet’ in teachers’ memories”, p. 86).


15. Fimyar, “We have a Window Seat”, p. 9.


24. This political self-silencing, or “refusal of the subject to acknowledge the reality of the traumatic perception” (Kevin M. F. Platt, “Idti v nauku – terpet’ muku. Travma i ditsiplina v rossiskoj shkole” [Official trans. No pain – no gain. Trauma and discipline in the Russian school], Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, no. 124, 2013, pp. 37), in which “disciplined speech” conditions “social belonging” (Platt, Secret Speech, p. 667) seems to be a constant throughout the post-Soviet space: “The public ritual of knowing silence was itself inherited from the Stalinist era, when [...] similar institutions and the associated habits of mind were characteristic of stances towards Russian and Soviet history and the ongoing violence of Stalinist terror” (Platt, “Secret Speech”, p. 664). See also Kazakhstani First President Nursultan Nazarbayev (Kazakhstanskij put’ [The Kazakhstani way], Karaganda, online version, 2006, p. 269), for whom economic development policies in the early 1990s are referred to as a “choc therapy” (Rus. “shkovaya terapiya”).


28. English as a Second Language (ESL) is commonly referred to by expatriate teachers and trainers as an “industry”, suggestive of its underlying economic incentives. Indeed, certain ESL recruitment agencies, particularly for private schools in Asia, eagerly reference “cheap living expenses” and the possibility to save good money to pay back student loans. Moreover, according to recent contributions to the anthropology and sociology of education, “the trend in the United States and other Western countries since the 1990s, in part due to neoliberal ideas of education as a marketable commodity, has been to de-professionalize teaching, making it more about following preordained scripts that will result in higher student performance on standardized tests” (Rosemary Henze, “Anthropology of Education”, Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Anthropology, Oxford University Press, 2020, p. 9; cf. also Kathleen D. Hall, “Science, Globalization, and Educational Governance: The Political Rationalities of the New Managerialism”, Indiana Journal of Global Legal Studies, vol. 12, Issue 1, 2005, pp. 153-182; and Oana M. Panait & António Teodoro, “Vers l’analyse des résistances aux normes éducatives issues de la globalization” [Towards the analysis of resistances to the educational norms of globalisation], Éducation et Sociétés, vol. 39, no. 1, 2017, pp. 5-18). Considering Kazakhstan’s Soviet heritage, such market driven approaches to pedagogy may very well be ill adapted to, as Dell Hymes puts it, “the rules of appropriateness” (“The ethnography of speaking”, in Thomas Gladwin & William Sturtevant (eds.), Anthropology and Human Behavior, Washington, DC: Anthropological Society of Washington, 1962, p. 28) of its own educational context and speech economy.
29. In Russian, the difference between these two nominative plurals of the singular “учитель”, marks the difference between a school and a spiritual master. In the first instance, the teaching responsibility is limited to the professional frame of the school, formally agreed upon in the bilateral work contract. In the second instance, the teaching responsibility tends to overlap institutional frames, and invest what can be considered as the informally regulated and subjective aspects of personhood.

30. Usually referred to as “интернашналз” by the Kazakhstani teachers and students, a Russian neologism for “internationals” used by and for expatriate teachers, this positive symbol of globalisation could slip down, in times of harsh disagreement, to the less inclusive “foreigners” (Rus. “иностранные”).


32. This perspective strongly resonates with the recent contributions to the anthropology of hospitality, understood, in general terms, as a “social philosophy of access” (Giovanni da Col, “The H-Factor of Anthropology”, in Adam Yuet Chau & Giovanni da Col (eds.), Cumulus: Hoarding, Hosting, Hospitality, L’Homme, no. 231-232, 2019, p. 29). In more particular terms, indicating interesting leads for more collaborative research in both social anthropology and education, “[h]ospitality allows sharing to take place and the potency of a person to be deployed in concrete material exchanges which extend the intersubjective spacetime” (Matei Candea & Giovanni da Col, “The return to hospitality: strangers, guests, and ambiguous encounters”, Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute, vol. 18, n°. 1, 2012, p. 59, original emphasis). In a contemporary science of education perspective, see also pedagogue Claudia Ruitenberg’s notion of a “hospitable ethic and curriculum”, which “pays explicit attention to the voices that have been excluded from its development, and the effects of their absence. Furthermore, it asks how it can give place to, or would be undone by, the arrival of new ideas — for new ideas do not necessarily sit comfortably in the existing home of the curriculum. [...] Hospitable education actively contributes to the erasing of the line between those who are at home in the socius and demos and those who are its guests, and offers all students the opportunity to reimagine the socius and demos of which they, and unforeseen others, will be members.” (Ruitenberg, “The Empty Chair: Education in an Ethic of Hospitality”, Philosophy of Education Archive, 2011, pp. 34-35, original emphasis).


34. Isabelle Ohayon, “Parcours de l’ethnologie au Kazakhstan, anciennes contraintes, nouveaux travers” [The routes of ethnology in Kazakhstan, old constraints, new biases], Le journal des anthropologues, no. 87-88, 2001, pp. 39-64.


41. This positive yet ambiguous sense of patriotism has been well documented and analysed by Dina Sharipova, see “Perceptions of National Identity in Kazakhstan: Pride, Language, and Religion”, The Muslim World, Vol. 0, 2019, pp. 01-18.

42. Eva-Marie Dubuisson, Living language in Kazakhstan. The dialogic emergence of an ancestral worldview, Pittsburg, University Press, 2017. Aitys stems from the Kazakh verb aitsu, meaning “to talk to each other”. It is a “performative tradition in which the relationship between people and
their ancestors is performed and embodied in another kind of dialogue: a live duel between two poets” (p. 84).

44. Dubuisson, *Living language*, p. 112.

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**ABSTRACTS**

This paper asks how limitations to academic freedom conditioned ethnographic research in an international school in Kazakhstan. Although these restraints made it difficult to practise participant observation, I argue that the method of direct observation nevertheless helped preserve the “little true facts” of everyday life as they could be in the researcher’s absence. A first section compares this approach with others currently practised in similar types of schools. A second section considers the conditions of access to information in the field, illustrating the compromise between local teachers (Kazakhstani and Western expatriates) and ethnography. A third section considers the compromise between language and information, in the frame of the Kazakhstani government’s trilingual policy (Kazakh, Russian, and English). A fourth section analyses some of the impacts this compromise has on communication, between locals and researcher, and locals themselves. A fifth section analyses the aim of this compromise, namely, preserving the everyday. A concluding section opens a discussion on some of the challenges of voicing a trilingual educational regime in Kazakhstan.

Cet article interroge comment les limites posées à la liberté académique dans une école internationale au Kazakhstan ont conditionné la recherche ethnographique. Bien que ces restrictions aient rendu difficile la pratique de l’observation participante, j’argumente que la méthode de l’observation directe n’a néanmoins permis de préserver les « petits faits vrais » du quotidien tels qu’ils pourraient l’être en l’absence d’enquêteur. Une première section compare cette approche avec celles ayant cours dans d’autres écoles similaires. Une deuxième section porte sur les conditions d’accès à l’information sur le terrain, illustrant le compromis entre locaux (kazakhstanais et expatriés occidentaux) et ethnographie. Une troisième section se concentre sur le compromis entre langue et information, dans le cadre de la politique trilingue (kazakh, russe et anglais) du gouvernement kazakhstanais. Une quatrième section analyse certains des impacts qu’a ce compromis sur la communication, entre locaux et chercheur, et locaux eux-mêmes. Une cinquième section analyse l’objectif de ce compromis, à savoir la sauvegarde du quotidien. Une section conclusive ouvre une discussion sur les défis posés à la vocalisation d’un régime éducatif trilingue au Kazakhstan.

**AUTHOR**

**MAXIME CORRON**

Maxime Corron has a master’s degree in Social Anthropology and Ethnology from the Advanced School of Social Sciences (EHESS) in Paris. His current research interests concern hospitality.
practices throughout Eurasia and its central regions, particularly in the frame of international education and pedagogy.