

## Art and Conflict

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### Researching Conflict and Ruination through Photography: A Personal Reflection

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*'But the photographic image, even to the extent that it is a trace (not a construction made out of disparate photographic traces), cannot be simply a transparency of something that happened. It is always the image that someone chose; to photograph is to frame, and to frame is to exclude.'*<sup>1</sup>

This short piece seeks to put forward a reflection around the usefulness of photography for fieldwork research in conflict situations. In October 2017, I was able to visit the city of Aleppo for the first time since the war in Syria started back in 2011. Since I am half-Syrian myself, and part of my family still lives in Aleppo, I found in photography an essential method to navigate, research and document the current war space of Aleppo. The crucial aspect in such a perspective is to understand photography as a relational process that breaks several traditionally conceived dualities such as researcher vs. researched, discourse vs. materiality, aesthetics vs. politics. I would argue that photography can be relevant throughout the three stages of research: data collection, data analysis, and communication.

First, photography can be used as a data collection method in fieldwork research. Alongside central methods of research in the field such as conducting in-depth interviews or writing a fieldwork diary with observations, the use of photography is helpful in capturing material configurations and gestures that might otherwise pass unnoticed. In this regard, I believe photographic images can

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<sup>1</sup> Suzan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (Penguin Books, 2004), p.41.

help to document the non-discursive elements that configure a space of conflict.

The photo below is from the Old City of Aleppo. In it, a former balcony of a majestic room is turned into a position for snipers near one of the frontlines that characterised the Aleppan warspace for more than five years. Wooden doors and windows have disappeared from all old houses of the city. Sandbags and rocks are being used to build fortified positions in virtually any elevated place. Pictures of houses with big holes in their walls are distinctive of contemporary urban wars. Militias crossed houses and walls in order to avoid moving through the dense and narrow alleyways of the Old City. Hence they did not surrender to the cityscape; they treated the city as a flexible medium of warfare and smoothed space out when necessary.<sup>2</sup>



Photographing these elements helps data collection to be more accurate and attentive towards the specific materiality that configures a space of conflict. Such changes have crucial political impact, they are not simply 'background' information. Accounts of lived experiences of war and trauma (mostly captured through in-depth interviews) can be supplemented with photographic material in order to document the relationship between material ruination or

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<sup>2</sup> Eyal Weizman, 'Walking through Walls: Soldiers as Architects in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict', in *Radical Philosophy*, Vol. 136, No. 8 (2006), pp. 8-21.

violent alteration (especially in the intimate space) and subjectivity. Photographic material can also be used during interviews (photo elicitation).

Second, the use of photography is also an exceptional self-reflective method of data analysis. This is, I believe, the most relevant contribution photography can perform in fieldwork research. Instead of taking photographs as representational objects, and paying attention only at the image itself, the crucial element here is to reconstruct and explore the photographic event. The photographic event thus encompasses more than the final product of the image: it incorporates the researcher's own subjectivity into the research economy and forces a self-reflection around the role of research amid conflict, the relevance of affective atmospheres in the field, and the nature of war itself.

Let me bring a brief personal example. The photo below shows the state surrounding the al-Hatab Square, one of the most famous public squares in Aleppo, located in the traditionally Christian neighbourhood of al-Jdeideh. Our house in Aleppo lies at the heart of this neighbourhood, and in order to access what is left of it one has to walk through this ruined street.



It is worth reconstructing the photographic event. I was visiting the neighbourhood for the first time after the war had started. My body was first affected by the material devastation: tears, goose bumps

and dizziness. The previous versions of this picture all appear blurry because of that. Only after this somatic reaction, memories started flooding: through them, my subjectivity as Syrian Christian was enacted in the photographic event. The event also required a negotiation: Syrian security forces inquired about my presence there with a camera, which prompted a reflection about the deep mistrust and huge security concerns that characterise the post-hostilities scenario in Aleppo. These elements are all part of the photo event and reconstructing them adds richness to the data analysis process.

Certainly, one of the challenges here is how to manage and account for the photographer's subjectivity. Susan Sontag reminds<sup>3</sup> us of the 'violence' a photographic image entails: the act of framing is an exclusionary practice and angle choice, lighting, shutter speed and other technical decisions are certainly part of this composition and exclusion. A self-reflective approach recognises the centrality of the subjectivity of the research to the production of photography and analysis of the photographic event. Embracing self-reflexivity is not simply recognising 'bias' and will certainly not neutralise the researcher's subjectivity as data collectors. Nonetheless, self-reflexivity should be engaged with in order to keep awareness of how different elements of one's own identity affect a) the production/selection of photographic images in the field, b) the textual analysis produced to explore experienced realities, and c) the relationship between the researcher subjectivities and those of the informants.

Third and finally, the use of photography in conflict research can be a very helpful tool to communicate research findings and to seek engagement from the wider public. Photographies, in the words of Azoulay, are not representational objects but political artefacts: they must trigger a 'civil political space' around them<sup>4</sup>. This space allows for the debate about the subjects and elements that appear in the photograph and, more crucially, allows the wider public designate and interpret their meaning. In this vein, this space of debate around photographs of conflict seeks to generate civic debate and awareness about the concrete effects of violence and contemporary conflicts.

The setting of this final picture is in front of the Citadel of Aleppo, arguably the main spatial marker that divided government-

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<sup>3</sup> Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*.

<sup>4</sup> Ariella Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography* (Zone Books, 2008).

controlled western Aleppo and rebel-controlled eastern Aleppo. In it, there are several elements useful for public political debate such as the representation of sovereignty (the Syrian flag and the portrait of Bashar al-Assad in the middle), the role of conflict propaganda (#Believe in Aleppo hashtag), the relationship between state, society and religion (four Muslim women sitting) and even the role of private actors and neoliberal modes of urbanism (AMAN Holding Group and the Aleppan branch of the Junior Chamber International).



Questions of research ethics are crucial for the correct use of photography in social research and they take an even more critical relevance when conducting fieldwork in a conflict zone. There is no enough space here to explore these concerns, but take for instance ethical debates around dignity, power and consent. What is the responsibility of the photographer when capturing human suffering? What responsibilities do the researcher has towards the subjects and spaces photographed and the audiences that receive such photos? Does photo editing, arguably a potential form of deception, have political consequences in this case? How can we operationalise consent when photographing in places ripped with violence?

Hence, I believe that the use of photography can enrich the process of data collection in the field, complexify data analysis, accounting for the researcher's subjective position in the whole

'research economy', and help communicate research findings as well as generate larger political debates. The Syrian conflict, as many other conflicts in the last decades, has generated an incredible amount of images. As citizens, it is important that we do not take these images for granted. As researchers, it is crucial to produce them in a responsible, conscious way.

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