SYMPOSIUM

Data from the Dark Side: Notes on Archiving Political Conflict and Violence

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I had interacted with professor Imari Obadele for quite some time at the National Conference of Black Political Scientists (NCOBPS). He is an elder scholar whom I knew had been politically active in the past but I was not aware of his specific affiliations or activities. At the time we first met, Obadele was only known to me as a political scientist at Prairie View. I had just begun my first job at the University of Houston a few years before. As there were not many elder black political scientists that I knew at the time, especially one interested in social movements and revolution, we immediately hit it off. It was not until a year or so after we first met and after I had published some research on the Black Panther Party (Davenport 1998a; Dahlerus and Davenport 1999; Davenport and Eads 2001), that we really started to interact.

At a later NCOBPS meeting, he passed me a single piece of paper on it that said "Classified" along the top. Taking a closer look, I saw that the document came from the Detroit Police Department and that it concerned a group called the Republic of New Africa (RNA)—a black segregationist organization started in 1968 of which Obadele was a co-founder (Imari 1968, 1970; Obadele 1988). The document listed who was present at the meeting (by name—legal/slave [imposed] as well as adopted/African), where the meeting took place (by street address), when it started (by the hour), what they said, what they planned, what other organizations were present, and a listing of license plate numbers of the vehicles in attendance. I was immediately intrigued and when he asked me if I was interested in seeing more, I jumped at the chance.

It would be almost a year before I saw more of the documents. As this was their historical legacy that they were handing over, Obadele had to speak with others in the RNA. The group had to figure out what they wanted to get out of me having the documents; I had to tell them what I wanted to do with them as well as where they would be housed; and we had to work out how I would get them. This went on for about another few months but in the end, I had a new job (at the University of Colorado at Boulder) and approximately 10,000–12,000 pages of information about the RNA. In the pile of boxes that I acquired, there were informant reports, arrest records, logs regarding physical surveillance, and internal police correspondence from federal, state, and local police about what they had done to the RNA as well as what was going on with the organization in different parts of the United States. There were also meeting notes from the RNA, unpublished biographies, pamphlets, fliers, planning documents, and a coloring book.

Once all of the materials were strewn throughout my office (a constant source of fascination for other faculty and students), I realized how much was there and that I seriously needed some help. I found some grad students (the constant resource for assistance) and then some undergrads to assist me. I offered access to the materials for student projects as well as the opportunity to be on the ground floor of the burgeoning effort. Attempting to be as systematic as possible, we first sorted the documents into specific organizations (e.g., Michigan State Police and Detroit Police Department), and then into subdivisions (e.g., tactical reconnaissance, riot detail, detective division, and criminal investigation). Following this, we put the organization-specific records into chronological order. With some idea of what we had and how much more needed to be done before it was useful, I then wrote a grant and got some money to pay the students, scan the documents with the best technology of the day (later to be completely useless), code various events in standard Tillyesque fashion, and conduct some analyses (Davenport 1998b).

After all of this, if you had asked me if I was involved in archival work, I probably would have said no. It wasn't until another organization approached me on a similar topic that I would acknowledge that I collected, archived, and analyzed information on political conflict. In light of this realization, I created the Radical Information Project (www.radicalinformationproject.com). For about 12 years now I have been compiling information about who did what to whom in different countries and concerning various forms of political conflict. In chronological order this includes the United States (specifically the U.S. government's interaction with two black nationalist organizations: the Black Panthers [Davenport 1997] and the Republic of New Africa [Davenport 1998b]), Rwanda (the political violence of 1994 [Davenport and Stam 2003]), India (the government and societal practice of untouchability), and Northern Ireland (political conflict from 1968–1998, otherwise known as "The Troubles"). Most recently, I started a project in Darfur, Sudan, and along with several colleagues we are beginning to discuss data collection in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Compiling this type of information has led me to some interesting insights about what we do as social scientists and about those interested in engaging those concerned with political conflict. In the hope that we may collectively improve our

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ability to collect, analyze, and effectively share our research with others, I discuss several insights below. While the specific types of conflict, geographic locales, types of data, and sources of information have varied across the different projects, it has been interesting that all involve similar processes and stages: (1) contextualized contact, (2) cultivation, (3) compilation and confidentiality, (4) completion, and (5) continuity. I will briefly discuss each below.

CONTEXTUALIZED CONTACT

While all the organizations and individuals that I worked with were interested in eventually depositing their information about conflict with me, it never started that way. The organizations and individuals each had to find their own way to this conclusion. In large part this was due to their other priorities—things generally more pressing than making diverse material available for others (e.g., scholars, journalists, and ordinary students) to examine.

For example, when I began my interaction with the RNA in the late 1980s and early 1990s, several of the members were engaged in an effort to reintroduce discussion about reparations for African Americans in an organization called the National Coalition of Blacks for Reparations in America (N'COBRA). The documents in their possession were basically just sitting around in a garage somewhere and they were not quite sure what to do with them. This is a common dilemma I find for social-movement organizations. These organizations (and other scholars for that matter) need to be reminded that their records have value and that giving outside scholars access would assist them with understanding their experiences.

With regard to Rwanda, at the time I first began to interact with people there (in 1998), they were more interested in continuing to build their country (creating roads, finding the last census, repairing the holes in government buildings, and searching for doctors, lawyers, and those who participated in the genocide—both inside and outside of Rwanda), having been ravaged by genocide, civil war, reprisal killings, random violence, underdevelopment, mass population displacement, and extensive state failure. People were collecting information, as I would soon discover, but a military occupation of the Rwandan Patriotic Front was not quite the time to be giving away documents or engaging in data collection. In some respects, the efforts that were undertaken already (e.g., reports from the Ministry of Education or the Ministry of Local Affairs) seemed to eliminate the need for such a compilation, but these could not readily be found. There was already a crackdown on what was available. Very quickly this changed, however, so by 1999–2000, there was a major push in the direction of openness from a wide variety of organizations both in and outside of government (the Ministry of Justice and IBUKA, the Tutsi survivor organization, from inside the government and Liprodhor and Avega, Rwandan human rights organizations, outside of the government). Indeed, for a while the country became consumed with telling its tale. There were books, pamphlets, magazines, newspaper articles, government and NGO reports, and memorials with very detailed plaques all over the place. In this context, all sorts of raw material could be found. This changed again later. By the tenth anniversary of the genocide in 2004, discussion of what took place had reduced. There was greater control over what information was available throughout the country and the government suppressed or threatened those critical of the situation.

In contrast to Rwanda, India (Gujarat in particular) was a relatively open, democratic, and peaceful society; but it is immediately obvious to those in the political violence field that this is relative. When I first started to interact with people in India (in 2003), there was no recent political crisis at the level of genocide and civil war. There had recently been an earthquake and a riot, however. Fortunately, the former had brought residents of Gujarat together and the latter had been directed against a group other that I wasn't interested in (untouchables, or, as they prefer to call themselves, Dalits—meaning those who are oppressed). What was most relevant for my research was the fact that regardless of the immediate political-economic context, most in the society did not wish to discuss the 3,000-year-old system of caste discrimination. Luckily, the group that I worked with (Navsarjan Trust) and individuals associated with it (Martin Macwan and Manjula Pradeep) were more than willing to share what they had and to collect some new information better suited to what they wanted to know. Indeed, after Macwan (a trained lawyer and unofficially trained political sociologist) won a major human rights award and traveled around the U.S., he became interested in more effectively documenting the abuses that his community was subject to. This made the opportunity for subsequent collaboration ideal. Indeed, without Macwan's background and serendipitous interaction with me at some function in Washington, D.C., we would not have met each other or come to work on the analysis of the 3,000 villages that he dealt with.

Needless to say, the cases identified above present very different situations compared to ongoing conflict zones in Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo. At this point, people are still engaged in violence and I have been dealing with diverse parties on the ground to try and get information out of the country so that we can try to assess what is taking place. These involve somewhat different partners. For example, in Sudan, I am working with the Social Science Research Council, the Genocide Intervention Network, and different UN agencies that produce situation reports on the topic. In Congo, I am working with the International Center for Transitional Justice and the Martus Group/Benetech to develop the infrastructure to engage in data collection. These are still quite preliminary and the problems raised by working in these contexts are quite significant.

CULTIVATION

The contexts within which I was attempting to acquire and archive information are not the only factors that varied. Related to this, the quality and trajectory of my interaction with relevant people and organizations differed as well. The key here was to establish a decent working relationship, revealing that I would be a safe person to distribute information to; a decent, thorough scholar in the analysis of the provided materials; and ambitious enough to aggressively get their information

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out. The groups wanted a champion of sorts as well as someone with some integrity, a decent track record, a door with a lock, and a few ideas about what could be done.

For example, my on-again, off-again interaction with Obadele and the RNA lasted several years before we even talked about the information he and his colleagues had in their possession. I believe this took time because the group needed to get a better sense of who I was. I had not published much on African Americans at the time (largely writing large-*N*, cross-national studies of state repression) and despite my interest I think they wanted to see what I would do with the subject. This differed from my interaction with members of the Black Panthers—in particular David Hilliard, who was chief of staff of the party back in the 1960s. When I first met Hilliard (in the early 1990s), he was in the process of trying to pull together the Panther archive, establish his rights to ownership over items such as the Black Panther Intercommunal News Service, raise awareness of the Panthers through establishing a political tour, and writing some books on the organization, its history, and its contentious interactions with the U.S. government. While he and the Huey P. Newton Foundation that he ran were open to and more than generous with me in terms of access, I found the sheer magnitude of the proposed effort daunting and viewed it as something like a second job. Having just started my first position, this was intimidating and I stepped back from engaging with him and the records that they held. In addition to this, I realized that the politics of working with different Panther factions was very much alive. Repeatedly, I was questioned about whom I interacted with and how I should not believe everything that I was told; if I talked to Hilliard, then I was believed to be a "Hilliard boy," if I talked with Kathleen Cleaver, then I was believed to be a "Cleaver boy," and so forth. There was no easy way to navigate this situation and thus I pulled away from trying to acquire documents directly from the Panthers and instead engaged in a content analysis of newspapers regarding what took place between them and various U.S. political authorities. This was quite different from the RNA. I was more prepared for them, and what they wanted from me readily matched what I was able to deliver.

Given these situations, a large measure of my interaction with individuals who held relevant documents involved the cultivation of relationships. This required somewhat different tactics across cases however. For example, in India my interaction with Macwan began with several days of lectures on the history of untouchability. While extremely informative (indeed, I still return to these notes), at the time it was disturbing because I thought that I was there to help the group analyze some data as well as design a survey. Macwan was not about to hand anything over to me though, at least not until I was properly educated and sensitized to the relevant history. Accordingly, I spent large amounts of time on my first few trips with him talking about what was going on, where untouchability came from, and seeing dozens of rural villages where diverse forms of caste discrimination could be observed. Only after I was properly educated would we move to what his organization had already compiled. It turned out that Navsarjan Trust had 25 years' worth of observations on untouchability. They had information on specific atrocities (i.e., violent actions undertaken by non-Dalit against Dalits). They had information on who died, where, and when as well as who was the perpetrator of the relevant activity. This information was used to pursue legal cases, which Navsarjan Trust brought to the police and shepherded through the court system. Because of these activities, the group also had information on how well the different cases fared at addressing discrimination. Each layer of the organization revealed a new set of materials and each conversation revealed a new set of intersections and questions. The notes from these sessions resulted in a rather detailed survey instrument.

I went through a similar process in Rwanda. Meeting one activist from the Tutsi-survivor organization IBUKA, our interaction began with a series of lectures about Rwandan history. Only after this had taken place as well as numerous visits to different survivors throughout the country and about four trips to the country later did we move to discuss the information that they had (a detailed census of who had died during the civil war and genocide within one prefecture on the western side of Rwanda and where, when, and who was responsible) and the information that they wanted to collect (a detailed census of the rest of the country).

Of course, being earnest was not sufficient for acquiring the relevant information. All the organizations and individuals I interacted with were interested in what research I was doing—all of it, not just on their specific topic area, as well as with whom I was doing it and why. This frequently worked to my advantage. For example, the work I did on the Panthers and the RNA facilitated contact with Rwandese interested in African Americans. This work on black nationalists also facilitated contact with researcher Patrick Ball of the Martus Group and Benetech and human rights NGO director Todd Howland. The connection with Howland directly led to my untouchability project because his organization gave Macwan the human rights award that brought him to the states. Moreover, my research on Rwanda led to an interaction with the International Criminal Tribunal on Rwanda and the Social Science Research Council that directly led to my work on Darfur, and human rights organizations in Northern Ireland were drawn to not only the work on large-scale political violence in Rwanda but also the activity of black power organizations in the U.S. Essentially, I have been able to turn the "curious grapevine" of the human rights and activist communities (i.e., the network of affiliations that connects them to each other) into information streams that yield the raw material for social science data on who did what to whom.

Not all things worked to my advantage. For instance in the mid-2000s, the University of Maryland (where I was employed at the time) won an award to create START—the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism. As many believed this made the university and those affiliated with it employees of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, this did not assist my relationship with organizations who did not hold the American security apparatus in high esteem. Indeed, I had to spend a great deal of time clarifying how U.S. academic institutions functioned and how I had nothing to do with START. This situation was especially ironic

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because the members of different social movements saw that I should have had a connection with the center given my interests in state repression of dissident organizations, but START did not share this opinion.

COMPILATION AND CONFIDENTIALITY

Regarding the actual material collected, there were several elements that were comparable across projects and some that were quite distinct.

All sources of information concerned conflict-related activity (e.g., arrests, beatings, and surveillance) undertaken by some political actor (mostly governments) against some other political actor (ordinary citizens as well as social-movement participants). This information was compiled at the event level, perhaps the lowest unit level explored within conflict studies, noting the specific action (e.g., beatings, rapes, and killings in Rwanda; beatings, harassment, arrests, and court rulings in the case of the Panthers; false letters, the behavior of agents provocateurs, and arrests in the RNA case; preventing temple entry or use of the public water facility in India), date, perpetrators, time, and locale (street address in the RNA case, cell in Rwanda, and village in India). What has been interesting to note is that essentially all the organizations I have worked with and came across compiled information in a similar way. They all were interested in and kept records of varying quality regarding who did what to whom, where, when, and, to a lesser extent, why. Now, exactly what and whom they were interested in as well as how individuals compiled information varied. The objectives also varied.

In the RNA case, the police were interested in identifying who was challenging them, how, and in concert with whom. The RNA was also interested in identifying who was involved, but they were more interested in developing an effective way of bringing about social change. In the case of Rwanda, the different ministries were interested in identifying who was victimized, how, when, and where—covering events throughout the country. At the same time, these sources were less interested in identifying exactly who committed the violence—in part because this information was difficult to come by, but also because the current government might be implicated in some of the activities. Some of the NGOs were interested in perpetrator-related information as they provided the names of the alleged perpetrators in their documents. As these were not vetted through any legal process, I was careful to remove this information from the databases that I created. However, identifying information could be attained by acquiring the original publication that I worked with, but this was increasingly difficult to do. Indeed, only after I had been asked to work with the ICTR and provided with 12,000 redacted eyewitness statements did I again find the names of alleged perpetrators. This was very different from the news media that only seemed to have the names of a few individuals. These sources did not have access to or interest in naming all perpetrators, just a few. In contrast to the efforts noted above, in the Indian case there were a wider variety of actions under examination—from ritualistic behavior after a physical encounter to murder. Additionally, as information was collected through a census in rural villages, the identification of the victim (respondent) was directly compiled but turned into a numerical code that was held by Navsarjan Trust. Perpetrators were not identified by name (on purpose) and thus we did not have that to deal with that issue. They were identified by subcaste, however, and in a relatively small village this could result in a small number of potential actors. Our way around this was to remove identifying information from the data set after information from the census regarding independent variables was incorporated. We then aggregated up to a higher-level jurisdiction before posting and distribution.

The data-collection methods employed also introduced confidentiality issues. For example, in the RNA case, the police acquired data in part because of sympathetic officers who decided to make relevant material available to those who challenged them. In the case of untouchability, confidentiality was occasionally compromised by non-Dalits showing up to Dalit community meetings and no one wanting to tell them to leave. We could not believe that this took place and noted that this might be problematic, but to our surprise the interviewers and community acknowledged that this could just not be helped. We recorded when "outsiders" were present. In addition to this, in illustrating an instance of caste discrimination, a respondent frequently mentioned someone by name. This information is not publicly available.

COMPLETION

A series of databases on state repression and challenges to the status quo, initially with the event as the unit of analysis, emerged from the efforts outlined above. This information was then aggregated according to different needs. Rwandan data were aggregated to facilitate analysis with data at higher-level aggregations (communes and prefectures). As data exist on different units of analysis, individuals are allowed to engage in multilevel types of inquiries, exploring specific hypotheses at the appropriate level. There are several different types of data that were collected from different sources: events-based content analysis of government and NGO records; records from national, state, and local police; demographic information from government ministries; surveys of randomly selected members of the relevant population; a census of Dalit communities and households in rural Indian villages (randomly stratified by age, gender, and subcaste); meeting notes from social-movement organizations; unpublished biographies from dissidents; and, of course, the coloring book from the RNA. Most data are available online at the lowest aggregation level to facilitate analysis at whatever level the researcher deems appropriate. This facilitates exploration of a wide variety of issues in political conflict, from a number of distinct vantage points—accommodating the wide variety of questions that exist within this field. There are still a large number of items that have not yet been scanned; this issue grows alongside the different projects. Additionally, in an effort to distill some general sense of what occurred, within several cases we employed multiple systems estimation to extract information from the different levels and generate a single measure of what took place that utilizes as much of the information as possible. Most material is provided on the project Web page. I have not put up the

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footage of the interviews and focus groups for I have not yet processed all of the relevant material.

Finishing the databases mentioned above and posting them were only two components of completing the relevant projects. Within all cases, there were reports that were submitted to the individuals and groups that I partnered with as well as follow-up meetings about what would be done in the future. The deliverables were a major part of concluding the initial phase of data collection. This allowed wider distribution of the research effort and its methodology and conclusions. Such an effort was crucial because the participating organizations all had constituencies that they knew would be interested in what took place but would not be interested in more academic works utilizing the information. This directly facilitated the initial as well as subsequent organizational buy in. In the Indian case, therefore, we are writing a report that will be distributed throughout the Dalit community and will become part of the international lobbying and awareness-raising effort. The Northern Ireland research will be distributed first within the victim community and then to other academics, the media, and policymakers. Before the negative feedback and threats,[1] the Rwandan work resulted in presentations to students, NGOs, and diverse government officials.

CONTINUITY

Interesting, although each project had specific end products, all research efforts (except Rwanda) have turned into longer-term endeavors where the initial database is serving as the jumping-off point for a time-serial analysis (in the case of India), a preliminary start to several related data-collection efforts (in Northern Ireland), and retrospective analyses where the data are used as a starting point for more in-depth interviews (in the RNA case and Northern Ireland research). In contrast to the other projects, the Rwanda work will not be followed up—at least not in the country—because I was denounced by some former partners as well as threatened by a number of individuals. This is the source of another article (Davenport and Stam 2009). I have continued to explore the Rwandan conflict but only as it involves other countries (for example, prosecution of those accused of genocide and crimes against humanity in Tanzania, those fighting the current Rwandan government and the violence of this government in the Democratic Republic of Congo, and the placement and activity of the Rwandan diaspora around the globe), taking advantage of my contact with individuals outside the country.

It was interesting that most of the efforts have been extended. I think this emerged, in part, because of the mutual investment that each participant put into the project. We have now worked out the kinks and have some general idea of how political scientists, activists, lawyers, and farmers work with one another. Another part of the reason emerges from the fact that diverse issues arose during the research process that everyone agreed would require additional investigation. Brought together for a specific task but with slightly different interests, we came out with greater similarities and a broader conception of what was possible. From the data on the dark side we ended up seeing the light of collaboration.

There are still some frustrations here. For example, there are some issues that we have not been able to figure out. What is the best measure for movement success? Where should one look for an impact? What is the best format for communicating research results to illiterate populations in rural locales? Many of the communities that provided the raw material for research are interested in being provided with periodic updates. What is the best way to do this? Additionally, the pace at which different actors move was a constant source of conversation and occasionally contention; navigating academic schedules, social-movement agendas, journalistic deadlines, and UN meetings schedules are not always easy to do. Regardless of the difficulties, however, information will continue to be compiled by victims, bystanders, and governments around the world about what is done to bring about change and what is done to prevent and constrain these efforts. In this context, researchers will continue to collect such information, analyze it, and hopefully make it available for others to explore. Indeed, this issue of access is something that we need to be more attentive to. Raw material does get us much closer to the truth about events, but it also serves as a much-needed check on what is done in the academy. Unfortunately, not all parts of the social science community view such access as essential. Kicking and screaming, they need to be brought into the new millennium. ■

NOTE

1. See www.genodynamics.com.

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