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*reflections on getting access to the Spanish state deportation field*

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BARAK KALIR

# The uncomfortable truth about luck: reflections on getting access to the Spanish state deportation field

Methodological accounts often deliberately omit the role that luck plays in getting access to challenging research sites. Indeed, it sounds unprofessional and feels unsatisfying to attribute luck to our work. 'I hope to get lucky' will not go down well with most supervisors or as part of any grant proposal. We should, however, consider that luck literally stands for the probability that certain events might take place under certain circumstances. Reflecting on our luck can therefore help us to expound important features that structure the probability of getting access. In my case, getting access to the Spanish state deportation regime could never be anticipated or secured simply in line with the importance of my project or my academic credentials. Obtaining formal approval from the Spanish authorities proved to be impossible, but I eventually achieved access in a messy way that involved many informal interactions and much uncertainty. Accounting for my months-long attempts, I show how luck sensitised me to officials' ample discretionary power and pervasive sense of impunity in producing an image of 'the state' as unpredictable and opaque. This image induced the strong sensation that my fieldwork crucially depended on the whims of particular officials.

**Keywords** state bureaucracy, access, fieldwork, anthropology of the state, deportation

## Introduction

'Can I deport you or not?', Mariano defiantly asked me. 'You have a Dutch passport, right? But can I deport you if I want or not, ah? Tell me!' For a second, all the police agents in the office paused and turned their eyes towards me. Knowing Mariano by then for quite some time, I could tell this was one of his extrovert provocations, so I went along with it. 'Of course, you can, you deport EU citizens all the time', I teased him back, 'In fact, I'd be happy if you deport me so that I can see first-hand how you guys are doing it.' Everyone burst into laughter and Mariano,<sup>1</sup> a veteran police agent in his early 60s, gave me a fatherly pat on the shoulder and triumphantly affirmed: 'You are right. I can deport you as well, if I want!'

My fieldwork among police agents at the Brigade of Foreigners and Frontiers in the province of Madrid (*Brigada Provincial de Extranjería y Fronteras*, hereafter BFF), the unit that executes deportation from Madrid and other parts of Spain, was mostly conducted in a friendly atmosphere.<sup>2</sup> After agents came to terms with my presence as a researcher in their midst, they were mostly affable and responsive. 'We have nothing

<sup>1</sup> Pseudonyms are used throughout the article.

<sup>2</sup> I conducted non-consecutive fieldwork in Spain from 2014 to 2017, as part of my larger project entitled 'The social life of state deportation regimes'.

to hide' was a common phrase among those whose daily work I studied. Once I was 'in', there appeared to be very little control over the access I had to police work at the BFF. I was allowed to shadow agents in their daily work, to look over their shoulders straight at computer screens and paper files, and to ask all sorts of questions about the handling of deportation. I sometimes grabbed a drink with them at the canteen or joined them on a lunchbreak in a nearby restaurant.

Yet conducting research on the Spanish deportation field was not always a success story – far from it. For months, attempts to get formal approval from the authorities to study state bureaucracies were to little avail. It seemed 'the state' was not too impressed by the letters I sent to different officials, emphasising that my project was sponsored by the European Research Council (ERC), that it was part of a comparative study in a number of European and non-European countries, and that any kind of access to the daily work of field units involved in migration/deportation management would be highly appreciated by me, the University of Amsterdam and the ERC. The fact that I adorned my communications, all printed on an official university letterhead, with my titles as professor, principal investigator and head of the Institute for Migration and Ethnic Studies, also appeared to fail in producing a favourable response at the receiving end.

As I shall describe in detail, I eventually achieved access in a messy manner that crucially involved a series of unforeseen and informal interactions and vital assistance from Spanish colleagues. Reflecting on my experiences – moving from nearly categorical rejection to a sudden and exceptional openness – I cannot help recognising, among the many important aspects of getting access, the crucial role that luck has played in my endeavour of 'studying up'. Essentially, as Nader emphasised, 'because the researcher has less power than the researched, studying up challenges taken for granted understandings of the research relationship, and forces researchers to address the interrelated issues of access, methodology, attitudes, and ethics' (1969: 301). While actual fieldwork among BFF agents was more of an exercise in 'studying sideways' (Ortner 2010) – that is, studying people with whom the researcher shares similar socio-economic background, race and middle-class upbringing – the effort involved in getting access to the BFF was a sharp lesson in 'studying up'.

Social scientists who have studied up have reflected in enlightening manners on methodological and ethical difficulties (Aguar and Schneider 2016), on challenges to the researcher's identity (Priyadharshini 2003), on handling suspicion (Gusterson 1993) as well as on 'important changes in the nature and potential consequences of anthropological fieldwork' (Forsythe 1999: 6). Especially in police studies, meticulous attention has been paid to conducive and impeding elements in getting access (Fox and Lundman 1974; Van Maanen 2001; Garriott 2013; Karpiak and Garriott 2018), also from a comparative perspective (Beek and Göpfert 2013). In addition, important advances on Nader's initial call to 'study up' have highlighted the complexity involved in studying powerful institutions and state bureaucracies that can be staffed by diverse actors from different economic, ethnic and racial backgrounds (Gusterson 1997). Thus, expansive calls emerged to study 'down, up, sideways, through, backwards, forwards, away and at home' (Hannerz 2006).

Yet the role that luck might have played in any successful attempt to get access to challenging research sites is usually unconsciously ignored or deliberately omitted from methodological accounts. Understandably, it sounds terribly unprofessional and feels annoyingly unsatisfying to attribute luck to our successes. It is also difficult to

include luck as an ingredient in any research methodology. 'I hope to get lucky' will not go down well with most supervisors or as part of any grant proposal. Talking about luck, so it seems, runs contrary to claims for the scientific merits of ethnographic research. Yet this feeling is arguably rooted in a basic misunderstanding of what luck actually stands for.

There are three important things to consider in acknowledging luck as an integral aspect in the process of gaining access. First, the scientific definition of luck has nothing to do with things like 'destiny' or 'faith', but simply with smaller or higher probability that a certain event might take place under certain circumstances. Thus, luck as an analytical category that pertains to 'probability' should not be confused with emic references to supernatural interventions which migrants in desperate situations often make (cf. Drotbohm 2017: 35).

In other words, the more we know about the circumstances that determine an event, the less luck is involved in predicting the outcome. If requests by anthropologists to study public institutions were always honoured, there would be no luck involved in such attempts to get access. Of course, since public institutions, like all organisations, are inclined to guard their boundaries and treat their professionalism as a form of 'controlled content' (Noordegraaf 2007), getting access is never a straightforward procedure, but instead one that depends on multiple factors, including: the reviewing authority, the essence and timing of the request, the professional credentials of the requesting parties as well as their nationality, race, ethnicity, gender, seniority, past experiences with studying state institutions, etc. Given that we can hardly be aware, let alone know for certain the impact, of all the circumstances that determine any decision on access, there is evidently an element of indeterminate probability in the outcome we obtain.

Second, acknowledging luck takes nothing away from our competency as professional researchers and the need for a robust methodology and much footwork. As will become evident from my experience, to meet my luck in studying the Spanish deportation field, I needed to make unceasing attempts, engage in different methods, deploy various skills, and rely on others to assist me. Thus, while preparation, skills, experience, network and perseverance (emotional not the least, in the face of recurring rejections) are all essential in raising the probability for gaining access, they can usually not fully guarantee it. Working hard and having luck are not mutually exclusive, and successful fieldwork regularly requires both. Here we should also remember that getting access is hardly ever a yes/no binary endeavour, it is rather that the access we eventually get is customarily moulded by negotiations, contingencies and unexpected eventualities (Kalir 2006).

Finally, paying attention to luck in attempting access can potentially teach us something important about the properties of the field we study. The (im)probability of certain events to take place in certain fields can be very telling for a broader understanding of how a field is socially configured and structurally wired. In my case, the ways in which the authorities engaged with me as an academic researcher were conditioned by two key features that also decisively shaped police interactions with illegalised migrants.<sup>3</sup> First, police agents enjoyed ample and largely unchecked discretionary power in performing their job. Second, a pervasive sense of impunity

<sup>3</sup> This category includes undocumented/irregular/unauthorised migrants and rejected asylum seekers who are rendered detainable and deportable.

engulfed their decisions and actions. Clients seemed to have little or no practical means to contest agents' decisions (Vallbé *et al.* 2019). As a result, the treatment one could end up receiving in the deportation field often seemed arbitrary, unpredictable and crucially dependent on chance. This was precisely what I heard from dozens of illegalised migrants who insisted that dealing with the authorities was something like Russian roulette.

Illegalised migrants could hardly know whether and when their deportation might take place. Getting deported depended on multiple factors (many unknown to migrants) including, crucially, on the particular policeperson with whom one interacted. For me, getting access could never be anticipated in line with the importance of my project or existing laws regarding transparency in public institutions. Thus, without equating my academic dealings with state officials to the more existential ones experienced by illegalised migrants, I can nevertheless discern some key features in the *modus operandi* that patterns interactions of state agents in the deportation field with all 'clients'. Just like for illegalised migrants, the opacity and arbitrariness of 'the state', and the impunity with which officials acted, translated into a strong sense that my fieldwork crucially depended on the whims of particular officials.

The article proceeds with an additional theoretical grounding of researchers' need to get lucky in studying up fenced-off state institutions. The subsequent two sections recount my attempts at getting access to the Spanish deportation field. I emphasise how paying attention to the role of luck in our research endeavours can not only broaden our understanding of the organising principles in the field, but also do justice to the 'messy stuff' that gets so often informally discussed among colleagues, who then go on to clean their academic texts of any sign of luck.

## **The importance of face-to-face interactions for getting lucky**

The state that emerges from many insightful accounts within the burgeoning 'anthropology of the state' is customarily a non-monolithic one, fraught with messy contradictions and competing agendas among its different branches and functionaries (Aretxaga 2003; Kalir and Sur 2012; Bierschenk and de Sardan 2014). It is the Janus face of the state that we habitually encounter as we move between the front and back stage of its bureaucracy (Lipsky 1980). Recognising that state power is regularly wielded through effectively and affectively producing confusion and ambiguity among all those who enter its realm (Laszczkowski and Reeves 2017: 3), we must come to terms with the unpredictability that characterises our interactions with state agents.

Dissecting the major difficulty of studying the state, Abrams contended that: 'We seem to have evidence that the state itself is the source of the state's ability to defy our efforts to unmask it' (1988: 63). This 'defying ability' of state agents essentially emanates from the possibility to evoke 'the state' in order to furnish legitimacy, and deflect accountability, for preventing access to those who wish to scrutinise their work. Herein, state security institutions like the police are particularly positioned *vis-à-vis* non-state actors.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> For an extensive account of the police as a particular type of organisation within the state, see Bierschenk (2016).

For starters, the police are invested, literally, with the very task of guarding the (b)order of the state. In their formal training and informal socialisation, in their weapons and the symbolism involved in their costumes and insignias, the police are taught (how) to guard the (laws of the) state. Police agents are thus among the most disposed members in society to truly entertain the notion of ‘the state’ as real. Moreover, maintaining secrecy and collecting intelligence, which are part and parcel of police work, obviate the need to protect police work from outsiders. Finally, as members in an institution that is grounded in discipline, built on hierarchy and charged with a monopoly of violence, police agents are firmly drilled to believe in the importance of (protecting) ‘the state’.

Ostensibly, one of the internal risks to the facade of ‘the state’ can come from those, like academics, who wish to scrutinise the actual work of state actors. While such scrutiny can arguably lead to improvements, many police agents maintain the ‘fetishistic assertion of expert judgment’ (Masco 2013: 263) and the idea that no outsider knows better than them how to do their work. The inclination of many officials is therefore to decline formal requests from external investigators into state practices. Officials have ‘better things to do’ and can easily evoke ‘the state’ to explain why they cannot accommodate the request of academics. In this sense, ‘the state’ has been perfected in providing immunity from potentially risky intrusions.

As I shall describe in the next section, while it was never exactly clear how I eventually got access to the Spanish deportation police, it clearly had much to do with informal face-to-face interactions with officials. Such interactions, as I learned from previous experiences in similar studies I conducted in different countries (Kalir 2012, 2017a, 2019), can dramatically increase the chances for, if not instantly facilitate, at least some access to the field, even when formal requests had been previously rejected via other lines of communication.

In accounting for this apparent inconsistency, a number of factors stand to reason: first, state officials want to see who they might collaborate with in order to have a ‘feel’ regarding the potential risk involved in approving research for a particular project; second, in informal face-to-face interactions one can agree on certain conditions for allowing research that are difficult to formulate in a formal written agreement (for example: ‘first you talk to x and then we’ll see’); finally, in a direct interaction compassion can be elicited for the cause and importance of one’s project or some other personal appeal might come into play (not least sexualised interest). All these and possibly other factors surely played a role in my attempts to get access to studying state security institutions. But it is to another factor that I wish to draw attention here; one that relates to the manner in which the spectre of ‘the state’ might work on state officials in an unexpected way.

Bureaucrats, as convincingly shown by Lipsky (1980), regularly use the discretionary power that is invested in their position to satisfy various kinds of interests and ambitions they have in and around their job (cf. Kalir *et al.* 2012; Blundo *et al.* 2013). The deportation field is fraught with discretionary power, since many of the practices necessary for securing deportations cannot be articulated in formal laws, as they would clash with all kinds of human-rights conventions and standards (see Ellermann 2005: 1220). It means that in face-to-face interaction with state officials who are in a position to facilitate research, a new and largely unpredictable dynamic kicks in.

Endowed with ample discretionary power, certain state officials may feel compelled to show (off) that they cannot be reduced to a cog-like functionary of ‘the state’.

Failing to exhibit the power to take important decisions can be interpreted by ‘significant others’ as if, rather than being the masters of ‘the state’, officials are in fact themselves subjects of it. I use the phrase ‘significant others’ here to stress that researchers must have certain status, credentials or public exposure, to an extent that calls on officials’ sense of importance or trepidation from losing face. As will become clear in this article, my identity as a white, middle-class, male anthropologist from the Netherlands, who can manage well a ‘security talk’ given my personal experience as an officer in the Israeli army (a fact I selectively made known in face-to-face meetings), disposed me to intrigue state officials in ways that put their own identity and status on the line during our mutual performances of *à la* Goffman (1959) ‘impression management’.

In sum, when engaging ‘the state’, as personified by officials in a position of potential gatekeepers, some might be triggered to demonstrate their discretionary power rather than to hide behind ‘the state’. Needless to say, some officials might prefer not to bother with researchers and, instead, to use their impunity to simply evade or reject researchers’ requests. Whether officials act in one way or another depends on their seniority, personal character, mood, ethnic/regional/educational background, evaluation of the possible implications of a specific research, etc. It also crucially depends on the specific personal and professional characteristics of the researcher who lodges the request for access, and on how his/her characteristics match up in face-to-face intersubjective exchanges with officials. It is literally impossible for researchers to know, let alone to account for, all the intervening factors that may influence a decision to grant them access (or not). This highly contingent zone of indeterminacy is often, as I argue, what we more colloquially call ‘our luck’. Yet there are good reasons to address ‘our luck’ in a serious way, as I will show in the next section.

## **The sealed-off Spanish deportation field**

Being traditionally an emigration country for the best part of the 20th century, Spain has turned since the early 1990s into an attractive European migratory destination. Authorised and unauthorised migrants were drawn to Spain by its booming economy, flourishing informal economic sectors (mostly in construction and agriculture), lenient visa and residency regime (especially for people coming from countries in Latin America and, until 2005, also from Morocco), and relatively easy access, regardless of status, to medical services and education for children (Calavita 2005; Aja and Arango 2006; Moffette 2018).

Like many other countries in Europe and beyond, Spain systematically turned a blind eye to the entrance and permanence of unauthorised migrants, especially during periods of high demand for cheap labour (Martínez 2004; De Lucas 2008; Kalir 2010). In the mid-2000s, the number of undocumented migrants residing in Spain was guesstimated at around 1 million (González-Enríquez 2009). Notwithstanding this leniency, since it joined the European Union in 1986, Spain has increasingly aligned with a sweeping move towards approaching migration as a security issue (Moffette 2018: 95–9). In the past two decades, Spain fortified physical borders (notoriously in Ceuta and Melilla, the two Spanish enclaves in Morocco), restricted visa and residency regimes, and illegalised and dehumanised migrants (Calavita and Suárez-Navaz 2003; Andersson 2014; García 2016).

With respect to deportation, since the early 2000s, Spain has consistently been among the top EU states in issuing deportation orders to non-EU citizens and in executing a high proportion of ‘enforced returns’ (Eurostat 2018). Although the number of deportees fluctuates yearly, since 2000 Spain has executed between 10,000 and 15,000 deportations each year (Ministerio del Interior 2015). Since 2013, the number of deportees has been decreasing to around 7,000–8,000 per year (Ministerio del Interior 2015) as a result of an economic slowdown that reduced the number of newcomers and pushed some long-term migrants to independently leave the country or accept ‘voluntarily return’ programmes (Kalir 2017b).

The Spanish media frequently reports on incidents concerning police mistreatment of illegalised migrants, mostly during street arrests, in detention centres and on deportation flights. In recent years a number of migrants have died inside detention centres, leading to formal investigations by the Spanish court and the Ombudsman, as well as public protests regarding police violence.<sup>5</sup> There are organised campaigns in Spain, initiated by different activists and civil-society actors, calling for the closing of all detention centres and abolishing deportation flights.<sup>6</sup> The Spanish deportation regime thus constitutes a heated and sensitive political field.

Early in my fieldwork, I talked with a few academics working in Spain on and around migration/deportation. I quickly realised a consensus existed on the impossibility of getting access to study the deportation apparatus that was mostly run by the National Police (*Policía Nacional*). In 2012, Margarita Martínez Escamilla, a law professor at the Complutense University in Madrid, managed to get formal permission to interview deportable female detainees. Yet three months into fieldwork her access was abruptly revoked. When we met, she despondently told me the reason for discontinuing her fieldwork was never provided by the authorities. ‘There was a change of personnel at the ministry’, she recounted, ‘and they just used it to make me request permission anew, meanwhile blocking my access. I wrote [to the General Director of the National Police] a few times to ask for explanations, but they didn’t even bother to answer.’<sup>7</sup> Asking if she had any tips for me, Margarita discouragingly said I would need some ‘good contacts’, and on a positive note added that: ‘Maybe the fact that you come from Amsterdam would help. Maybe they let in someone who is not from Spain.’

Having no ‘good contacts’ in the Spanish police force or the government, I resorted in the early phase of fieldwork to sending formal letters to different high-ranked state officials in key institutions asking for access to any unit in the deportation field. A few weeks passed without a single response. While waiting, I decided to start where I believed it would be easier to enter the field. I contacted civil society actors and activists who were mostly involved in campaigns against detention/deportation in Barcelona and Madrid. It proved to be relatively easy to get in touch with those who positioned themselves as working parallel to or against the state. Herein, my identity as a white,

<sup>5</sup> See, for example: <https://www.lavanguardia.com/local/barcelona/20131204/54395186987/defensor-del-pueblo-investiga-muerte-cie-barcelona.html> or <https://www.elperiodico.com/es/sociedad/20120113/la-jueza-abre-una-investigacion-por-la-muerte-de-un-joven-en-bcn-1320415> (accessed 29 January 2019).

<sup>6</sup> For more on this, see Campaña Estatal por el Cierre de los CIE (2014).

<sup>7</sup> Access was never awarded again, and a year later a book based on the three-month fieldwork was published (see Martínez Escamilla 2013).

male anthropologist from Amsterdam, who writes critically on migration/deportation policies, clearly helped to facilitate access. As I quickly learned, some of my interlocutors, who often had an academic background in the social sciences, searched for me online and found some of my writings on deportation. They responded very positively and were happy to collaborate with my study. And though sceptical, they hoped I would get access to state institutions for doing some critical research.

I sent polite reminders to state officials by electronic mail, thinking my letters might have not arrived at the desired destination. Again, most of my requests went unanswered and those who replied simply dismissed politely the possibility of allowing any fieldwork among their unit. I managed to have two formal interviews with officials in key positions, and while the interviews were interesting, my main goal in conducting them was the opportunity to persuade these officials to allow me some fieldwork in their respective units. Both officials turned down my request, with the common reason being a lack of time in an overworked bureaucracy, as well as security issues in exposing me to operations. They recommended asking permission from those higher up in the state bureaucracy. I explained to them that I had done so already and tried to contest the grounds for rejecting my requests, but to no avail. In the weeks thereafter, the communication channel was silenced. Unlike in a Kafkaesque story, the state I was approaching loomed at a distance as a castle with no doors to knock on.

### **The (in)formal way in**

I shared my growing worries regarding access to state authorities with some academic colleagues in Spain. Everyone reaffirmed that chances were ‘practically zero’ that officials would answer my requests positively. One of the Spanish colleagues, now working at a law department, had previously been working for a few years at the Ministry of Interior under the former government. Luckily for me, this colleague knew one of the high-ranked officials whom I had interviewed (a police officer in charge of a key unit in the detention/deportation field) and was willing to put in a good word for me with him. The police officer then agreed to meet me once more. This was a clear example of the pertinent importance of being *enchufado* within the Spanish context, which literally means *plugged into* the system. Without falling into gross generalisation, and just as in many other states worldwide, widespread and longstanding dynamics of clientelism and patronage exist with the state bureaucracy in post-Franco Spain (Hughes 2011). My *enchufado* colleague managed with one phone call to arrange for me the kind of access I could not achieve for months.

My second meeting with the police officer was conducted in a more informal atmosphere and went extremely well. His initial suspicion seemed to fade away, and at the mentioning of my background as an Israeli officer, he openly praised me: ‘Someone like you understand what I’m talking about, right?’ The officer seemed to be very open and did not hide his own criticism about some of the ways in which the state was dealing with illegalised migrants. Our conversation was pleasant and cordial, and it lasted much longer than planned, with the officer making extra time in his schedule to stay and talk to me. Feeling upbeat, I asked him again his permission to conduct some fieldwork with the unit he was in charge of. The officer said he would not mind me doing some research there, but an approval should be given to me by the National Police headquarters in Madrid. Unlike before, this time the officer offered me the personal

email address of the commander of the Central Unit of Expulsions and Repatriations (*Unidad Central de Expulsiones y Repatriaciones*, hereafter UCER) and promised to put in a good word for me with his old-time colleague. I followed his instructions and this time, majestically, I not only received a response within two days but it was a formal invitation to meet with the commander, a brigadier and one of the top state officials in the deportation field. Once more it became sorely evident that informal contacts were extremely important in a context that was allegedly transparently regulated but traditionally wired by an 'old boys' network.

At the meeting on the fifth floor of the National Police headquarters, the brigadier made no secret of meeting me out of respect for his good friend's request. He spoke with a deep voice, and provided a bird's-eye view on how the authorities dealt with issues such as border controls and the identification, detention and deportation of illegalised migrants. Towards the end of the one-hour interview, I verbally repeated my written request for access to the daily work of field units. The brigadier said he would not oppose it, but then literally pointed his finger towards the ceiling: 'For this you have to go one floor up', he grinned, 'you'll need an approval from the Chief of the National Police.' The next day I wrote (again) a formal letter to the highest police authority in Spain, having an informal promise from a high-ranked officer and the brigadier to support it.

Concurrently, an activist I met in Madrid introduced me to Elena Sainz de la Maza Quintanal, a Spanish-native sociologist who also studied deportations and managed to interview some police agents in Madrid, including in the BFF. After Elena had completed her doctoral dissertation, I employed her as a research assistant. She had a good contact at the UCER, from whom we now requested permission to conduct fieldwork among police field units. Meeting with Elena's contact, it was obvious the officer was fond of her and impressed by my personal meeting with the brigadier (his direct superior). The officer was soft-spoken, hesitant and clearly uncertain about whether and what kind of access he could facilitate for us. We finally managed to convince him to put in a good word for my running request to conduct fieldwork at the BFF with the commander there. He agreed, and, unexpectedly, also offered to set for us a meeting on that same afternoon with a deportation unit at another location. He made a phone call to the head of that unit there and, after receiving confirmation, asked one of his subordinates to drive us there in a police car 'because otherwise they will never let you in'.

An hour later we were shown into the office of the commander in the other location, a lady in her mid-40s with a warm voice and very energetic demeanour. This was the first woman I met in my months-long attempts to get access to the state deportation regime. She invited us to sit by her desk and ordered us some coffee. I explained about my research project in some detail and we started discussing the work of the unit. The commander elaborated on the goals and procedures that guided deportations and then presented some statistics regarding the unit's recent performance. When I asked about an issue that was possibly sensitive in the work of the unit, the commander first told me it was not the kind of information that could be shared with outsiders. She kept looking at me and then started to smile and said: 'You'd really like to see these data, wouldn't you?' I nodded my head, smiled back and said: 'Yes, I really would appreciate that.' The commander stood up, went to one of the cabinets and pulled out a heavy folder. She placed it in front of me on the desk, flipped it open and started pointing out some tables and graphs with answers to the questions I had posed.

The meeting lasted for a good hour and towards the end I asked whether it would be possible for us to conduct some fieldwork into the daily work of the unit. The commander said it might be possible, although she thought that the things that can actually be observed around the unit were 'quite routine'. I said that following a routine was perfectly in line with my project's aim. At the end of the meeting the commander personally showed us back to the parking lot where the car and the driver were waiting for us. As we exited the building, she paused, pulled out a pack of cigarettes and asked me if I smoked. I said I had given up some years ago; the commander laughed in sympathy while lighting up a cigarette. It felt slightly odd, but it was clear that the commander was up for a small chat. She asked me something about my university and position in a friendly manner, before finally saying goodbye and agreeing to receive us again for some fieldwork in her unit. I thanked her warmly and we jumped into the police car. We had a nice conversation with the driver about his job at the UCER and he offered to drop us at any place in the city: 'I'm not in a rush and the commander said I should take you to wherever you were heading next.'

The week after our meeting at the new location, I had to be back in Amsterdam and so we agreed with the commander there that Elena would be visiting the unit in the meantime. Yet after two visits, Elena told me that the atmosphere there was a bit awkward and agents did not collaborate with her attempts to observe their work. The same week, the commander also decided to discontinue the access to her unit for unclear reasons that were never spelled out. I could not help thinking that things might have happened differently if it had been me who had showed up for the fieldwork, as the commander might have also been expecting.

## **Lucky strike**

The experience with the police unit in the other location gave me hope that getting access was a difficult, complicated and hyper-sensitive task, but not an impossible one. I thus decided on a concerted effort to get access to the BFF. I wrote yet another letter to the director, and together with Elena we activated all our contacts to put in a good word for us. I also wrote another email to the brigadier, mentioning that access to similar units like the BFF was granted in all other countries that participated in this ERC-funded project, and that if Spain prevented such access, I should at least receive a detailed explanation of the reasons, as I needed to report back to 'Brussels' about any failure in my project.

While waiting for an answer, I decided together with Elena to pay a visit to some police stations in Madrid, without pre-arranging a meeting, and simply ask on the spot to meet with the commander and request some access to deportation work on a local level. In the first station the commander was not present and I was told to come again another day. In the second station the receptionist insisted that they had no involvement with deportation operations, although it was located in a renowned migrant neighbourhood. Luckily, in the third station the commander agreed to see me in his office. I was shown into a waiting room at the second floor of the station and after a few minutes a secretary came out and invited me to enter an impressively spacious office with the commander seated to his desk at its far end. We shook hands and I immediately offered the commander my visiting card, which I specially designed for this occasion. It was printed both in English and Spanish and carried my personal

titles and a distinctively large logo of the ERC. The commander offered me his card in return and we sat down for a talk.

I presented my project and the main goals to be achieved in conducting fieldwork with police units implementing deportation policies. The commander appeared to be interested and sincere as he explained that, unlike a few years ago, 'there are no longer operations around deportation these days'. I said that it would also be of much value for my project to talk to agents who had such experience in the past. To my surprise, the commander, a kind old man with a thick white moustache, an elegant appearance and a very polite manner, agreed to me talking to his agents on the topic. He called in his secretary and gave her instructions. I thanked the commander and was shown to an office on the ground floor where the field units were located.

I was introduced to two energetic agents who seemed to have all the time in the world to receive me and patiently answer all questions. At one point, the agents invited me to sit next to them so that we could all look together at the computer that was running the online system that allowed street agents to solicit information from the station about apprehended migrants. They did not seem to bother about data protection and confidentiality issues regarding the information I was allowed to see. The agents further recounted some stories from their past experiences with deportations, but then reconfirmed that currently there were only sporadic incidents concerning 'illegals' and that most such operations were by now coordinated by the BFF. It looked as if roaming the streets of Madrid from one police station to another was not going to yield much.

Luckily, the following week I got a message from the UCER that a meeting with the BFF director was scheduled for me and Elena. On the day of the meeting, we arrived early at the BFF and sat anxiously in the waiting room outside the commander's office. Around the time of the meeting, the secretary came to inform me that it would take a few more minutes and kindly offered another round of coffee and cold water. Half an hour later, the director opened the doors, turned straight to me, extended his arms wide open and exclaimed: 'Professor Barak, right? From Amsterdam! Come in, please. It is so good to meet you.' The director was a flamboyant man in his late 40s, wearing a flashy three-piece suit with a bright pink tie, his long hair greased and neatly combed back. He seated us at his huge desk, which was adorned with stylish objects and showcased numerous medals and diplomas, as well as one outstanding sculpture of a raging bull.

The BFF director started off paying me a complement: 'I was expecting an old professor, you know, somebody with grey hair', he laughed, 'but you look great! It is a pleasure to meet you.' In the meeting he basically asked nothing about my research, but instead explained his views on migration and refugee flows in Spain, Europe and beyond, and on the risk of terrorism. After nonchalantly voicing his approval of my fieldwork at the BFF, he asked if I enjoyed bull fighting, proudly telling me that next to his police job he acted as the honorary president of the bull fighting association in Madrid. Showing us out of his spacious office, he shook my hand warmly and reassured me: 'If you have any issue with anyone during your project you come to me, my door is always open to you. We should go out for dinner one evening.' I was out of the director's office and in the heart of the state deportation apparatus.

To date, I am not entirely sure what, from all my attempts, led to the granting of permission to conduct months-long observations, interviews and focus groups in the heart of the BFF. In fact, I am not even certain that I ever received formal permission.

I certainly did not receive any formal approval letter and was never asked to sign a confidentiality agreement or do any other paperwork. In the following months I had unrestrained access to the practices, routines, operations and views of police agents at the forefront of the Spanish deportation field. Elena, too, was allowed to come there every day, including in periods that I was back in the Netherlands. There could hardly be a more striking difference between having no access for more than six months to having exceptional access at once. Obviously, some agents felt more comfortable than others with my gaze and curiosity for details, but none ever shunned me or attempted to question my presence.

My fantastic access to the BFF also gave a positive spin to all my other attempts to get access to supplementary state institutions that were part of the deportation field. For example, my requests to conduct fieldwork or just some interviews at the Government Office (*Delegación del Gobierno*), where deportation orders were administratively issued, was never honoured. However, BFF agents collaborated closely with civil servants at the Government Office in implementing deportation, so after a few weeks at the BFF I asked one of the police agents if he could put in a good word for me with a colleague there. Once again, it appeared to be a matter of one phone call to arrange for me a meeting at the main office of the Government Office in Madrid the next day. That first meeting led to a number of others and to some vital observations of the work done by bureaucrats issuing deportation orders.

Finding it difficult to believe that I finally got such unique access to the Spanish deportation field, I occasionally tried to recount the sequence of events that led to it. I realised that getting access largely depended on my 'foreignness' as a professor from the Netherlands, with an air of a big international project that was funded by the European Union. In managing face-to-face interactions with officials, it also seemed advantageous that I was a white middle-aged man, with a security background from Israel, who could play along with the hyper-masculine (*macho*) police culture. Then there was the largely unknown, yet obviously decisive, role that was played by 'good contacts' who put in a good word for me at the right time with the right official.

Notwithstanding these reflective attempts, there were many questions I struggled to answer: Would I have ever gotten access if it wasn't for the unexpected contact I made with an *enchufado* academic colleague who had happened to previously work for the Ministry of Interior? Would the high-ranked police officer I met be equally intrigued by me and willing to provide the personal email of the brigadier if I hadn't mentioned my background as an Israeli army officer and he hadn't been the type of officer who would appreciate it? Would the BFF director have agreed to let me in without the good word from Elena's 'good contact' at the UCER? I truly cannot be certain that access would have been given without these several totally unexpected interventions that were impossible to plan for. Being unable to answer intelligently any of these questions, I mostly concluded my reflections on getting access with a strong sensation that I was immensely lucky.

## **Conclusions: when luck is on your side**

If my experiences of getting access to difficult research sites have taught me something important, it is that anthropologists should not try, at least not too hard, to minimise the role of luck in their fieldwork endeavours. It should not be seen as if giving luck its due

place will take something away from our professionalism, hard work or creativity. Luck and robust methodology are not competing elements in a zero-sum game for managing successful fieldwork. As the old saying by Seneca goes: ‘Luck is what happens when preparation meets opportunity.’ Luck is what you hope and need to have on the side, next to all your carefully thought-up plans and your unceasing attempts to get access to difficult research sites. Acknowledging luck can bring with it a healthy sense of humbleness about our (almost always partial) successes or a comforting sense of relief and avoiding self-blame when things do not go too well. Yet, if we pay close attention to how luck intervenes in our success and failures, we might also learn something important about the key features that characterise the field we seek so hard to get immersed in and to ethnographically document.

In my case, scrutinising my luck offered me another important take on the vast discretionary power that officials exercised in the (Spanish) deportation field and on the sense of impunity that engulfed their actions. Officials could clearly engage with my requests for access by exercising ‘pragmatic improvisation guided by judgments about the perceived moral worthiness of clients’ (Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2012: 16). This ‘pragmatic improvisation’ replaced, in practice, any transparent protocol or formal procedure. Getting access, thus, had not only to do with the importance of my study or the alleged secretiveness that surrounded police field operations. It also had much to do with finding *enchufados*, people who were ‘plugged in’ and, given unbridled discretionary power in a hierarchical organisational structure, were able to facilitate access by putting in a good word for me in the right places.

The Spanish state I studied remained for me opaque and capricious, as I encountered it prior to my fieldwork. It is telling that I never could learn how exactly I eventually got access to the BFF; who took the decision and whose ‘good word’ made the difference? Having gained a better understanding of the Spanish deportation regime from the inside, I can reaffirm its prevailing image among all outsiders as unpredictable. Yet rather than resulting from any master plan (i.e. no conspiracy theory is necessary), this face of the ‘state’ came into being from the same key features – ample discretionary power and pervasive sense of impunity – that conclusively moulded interactions with all ‘clients’, including anthropologists.

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## La vérité qui dérange à propos de la chance: réflexions sur l'accès au régime étatique espagnol de l'expulsion

Souvent les comptes rendus méthodologiques passent délibérément sous silence le rôle de la chance dans l'obtention de l'accès à des sites de recherche difficiles. En effet, caractériser nos travaux en termes de chance semble peu professionnel et peu satisfaisant. « J'espère avoir de la chance » ne plaira pas à la plupart des directeurs de recherches ou dans le cadre d'une demande

de subvention. Toutefois il faudrait envisager que la chance représente littéralement la probabilité que certains événements se produiraient dans certaines circonstances. Réfléchir sur notre chance permet donc de nous aider à exposer d'importantes caractéristiques qui structurent la probabilité d'obtenir un accès. Dans mon cas, l'accès au régime d'expulsion de l'État espagnol n'aurait jamais pu être anticipé ou obtenu simplement en fonction de l'importance de mon projet ou de mon expérience universitaire. Obtenir l'approbation officielle des autorités espagnoles s'est avéré impossible et c'est de manière désordonnée que j'ai finalement réussi à obtenir un accès, à travers de nombreuses interactions informelles et beaucoup d'incertitude. En rendant compte de plusieurs mois de tentatives à cet effet, je montre de quelle manière la chance m'a sensibilisé au pouvoir discrétionnaire et au sentiment d'impunité qui règnent largement parmi les agents officiels et créent une image imprévisible et opaque de « l'État ». Cette image m'a donné la forte impression que mes enquêtes dépendent particulièrement des lubies de certains agents.

**Mots-clés** bureaucratie, accès, travail de terrain, anthropologie de l'État, expulsion de migrants