

WILEY



Political Activist As Participant Observer: Conflicts Of Commitment In A Study Of The Draft Resistance Movement Of The 1960's

Author(s): Barrie Thome

Source: *Symbolic Interaction* , Vol. 2, No. 1 (Spring 1979), pp. 73-88

Published by: Wiley on behalf of the Society for the Study of Symbolic Interaction

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/si.1979.2.1.73>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

Wiley and *Society for the Study of Symbolic Interaction* are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Symbolic Interaction*

Political Activist As Participant Observer: Conflicts Of Commitment In A Study Of The Draft Resistance Movement Of The 1960's*

Barrie Thorne, *Michigan State University*

In studying the draft resistance movement of the 1960's the author combined sociological observation with active and politically committed participation in the movement. The resulting conflicts of loyalty were rooted in basic characteristics of the movement, and of field research as a way of being in and experiencing the world. There were conflicts between political and research goals in daily decisions about how to allocate time and energy, and in larger choices about whether to take risks and to more fully join the community of fate of the movement. The role of researcher became a retreat, expressing limits to involvement and risk-taking, and providing a point of outside leverage which full participants lacked. The movement's ways of defining and interpreting experience ran counter to the more detached and routinizing perspectives of sociology. Conflicts between being a committed participant and an observing sociologist culminated in a sense of betraying the movement, and raised basic questions about uses, organization, and types of knowledge.

PARTICIPANT-OBSERVATION, it has often been noted, involves a problematic balance, a dialectic between being an insider, a participant in the world one studies, and an outsider, observing and reporting on that world. Researchers are cautioned to avoid too much involvement, commitment, or rapport (e.g., Miller 1952; Gold 1958); to strive for neutrality (Gans 1968; Vidich 1955) and for empathy rather than sympathy (Douglas 1972; Johnson 1975). These cautionary statements prescribe a moderate dose of involvement, and like all general prescriptions, they tend to gloss over the varied experiences and possibilities of actual field research (Glazer 1972, is a noteworthy exception).

Field settings vary, for example, in the degree to which neutrality or moderate involvement is possible, and researchers vary in the ways in which they are drawn into participation in the group being studied. My experience as a participant-observer in the draft resistance movement of the late 1960's sharpened my sense of such variation. The Resistance was a strongly partisan social world, and intense commitment was expected from those who participated in more than a fleeting way. I was a participant in the movement, committed to the goals of ending the Vietnam War and the draft, before I decided to also approach the movement as a sociologist gathering data for a dissertation. The conflicts I experienced between my position as an active and committed participant in the Resistance, and as a sociologist studying the movement, point to specific issues bound up in the general problem of conflicting

*I would like to thank Everett C. Hughes and Kurt H. Wolff, whose wise counsel and insight into the vicissitudes of field research helped sustain this project. Peter Lyman, Gaye Tuchman, Murray S. Davis, Charles S. Fisher, and Malcolm Spector also made helpful comments on various drafts of this paper.

loyalties in field research: the issue of how one's daily activities are allocated; questions of risk and the consequences of one's actions; and conflicts over definitions of experience and the casting of knowledge. These sorts of conflicts can never be fully anticipated when research begins; analysis of them may shed light both on characteristics of the particular world one is observing, and on the nature of field research (including the political and institutional context of the social sciences) as a way of being in and experiencing the world.

Studying the Draft Resistance Movement

I initially ventured into the draft resistance movement in Boston in March, 1968, because I was strongly opposed to the Vietnam War and wanted to be part of organized protest. During the previous summer I had been involved in a project called Vietnam Summer, and had helped canvass neighborhoods to discuss peoples' attitudes to the war. I returned to anti-war activities when a friend told me about the draft counseling projects of the Boston Draft Resistance Group, and I started training as a counselor. At the same period of time I was looking around for a thesis topic, and after about a month of contact with the draft resistance movement, learning to be a draft counselor and participating in demonstrations, I decided to become a sociological observer, as well as a participant committed to the goals of the movement. I anticipated conflict between these dual purposes—although nothing as intense as I eventually experienced—but felt good about being able to gather material for a thesis while also acting on my political commitments. My effort to combine political commitment with sociological observing was helped all along the way by the flexible attitude of my thesis advisers, who did not minimize the dilemmas but were always helpful as I tried to sort them out.

As a point of principle, I wanted to avoid disguised research. From the start, I explained my research intentions to those I saw on a regular basis, as well as reassuring them that I shared their political commitments; their responses to my research activity ranged from hostility to mild tolerance. Overall, I was allowed to hang around (often, as will be explained later, under a spectre of suspicion) because I did movement work and professed commitment to the goals of ending the war and the draft.

Two factors ran against my efforts to avoid disguised research. Like other field researchers (Glazer 1972; Gans 1968) I discovered that people I had told tended to forget about my sociologist's role; when I realized this was happening, I felt guilt mingled with relief at the comfort of full acceptance. Furthermore, in the course of draft counseling, going on movement expeditions, marching in demonstrations, and attending meetings, I encountered many people whom I had no chance to tell about my research intentions. In these situations I was, in effect, a disguised researcher; as Roth (1962) observes, secrecy is a matter of degree.

Chronology and Rhythms of Involvement

There were two draft resistance organizations in Boston; they shared a common

origin and ideology, but differed in tactics. The Boston Draft Resistance Group (B.D.R.G.) focused on draft counseling and community organizing; the New England Resistance (N.E.R.) developed around the tactic of non-cooperation with the draft, encouraging registrants to sever ties with the Selective Service, and staging events like draft card turn-ins, demonstrations for those refusing induction, and symbolic sanctuaries for resisters coming to trial (for more detailed comparison of these tactics see Thorne 1975b; on the history of the Resistance, see Ferber and Lynd 1971; Useem 1973; Thorne 1971). From the beginning I sought to be part of both organizations, partly because I was new to intensive movement activity and did not have a preference of tactics, but mainly because I wanted to get a rounded view of the movement and observe the range of its contexts and settings for the sake of my study.¹

In the early stages of my involvement it was relatively easy to float between the two groups, drawing on the license newcomers are often granted as they get established in a new social world. Because newcomers tend to be thrust into a watching and listening role, I also found it psychologically easier to be an intent observer early in the study. For the first few months I found my way around the B.D.R.G. by training to be a draft counselor, going on early morning expeditions to draft boards to talk about the war and the draft with registrants waiting to be transported to the army base for their pre-induction physicals, and by attending weekly steering committee meetings. At the same time, I began hanging around the New England Resistance, helping with typing in the office, attending Monday night dinners which were a regular occasion for sociability among N.E.R. activists, and participating in public events like demonstrations and draft card turn-ins.

As I got to know, and be known by, people active in both groups, I became more fully involved in various projects. My contacts with the B.D.R.G., in keeping with the tempo of the group's activities, tended to be steady and routine, paced around regular stints as a draft counselor, early morning visits to draft boards, and regular meetings. The N.E.R. was less routinized; it moved from event to event in an apocalyptic spirit, building up for periodic crescendos of activity. At such periods, it was almost impossible to be only marginally involved. One of those times of white-heat activity, in which I joined fully, although at night I forced myself to undertake the daily routine of typing fieldnotes, was in April, when a big Resistance draft card turn-in coincided with Johnson's decision not to seek re-election and was followed by Martin Luther King's death. I participated in the daily marches, rallies, and emotional meetings that marked those events, and in spare moments I helped put out special editions of the N.E.R. newspaper; this was the period in which I was most active in the New England Resistance. Over the summer I continued to work on the newspaper, which gave me access to the ongoing office-life and public events of the N.E.R. At the same time, I continued my more routinized involvement in the B.D.R.G.

By the fall of 1968 the newspaper venture had largely folded, and the N.E.R. was in a state of internal dissension. The N.E.R. had gradually moved away from organizing

¹Douglas (1976) notes that the extent of a researcher's participation, which is tied to the question of how representative and contextualized the findings are, is somewhat different from the *degree* or *depth* of one's involvement.

around the draft and had begun to focus on trying to radicalize soldiers and high school students, activities which interested me less (both politically, and in terms of my research focus) than did anti-war work. Through regular stints as a draft counselor at the B.D.R.G., I had gradually become (and become known as) "experienced" at counseling. I felt more knowledgeable politically as well as about draft details, and realized that my sense of strategy, tactics, and political style fit more closely with the B.D.R.G. than with the New England Resistance. By November I had gradually shifted primary affiliation from the N.E.R. to the B.D.R.G., and although I still attended some N.E.R. events, I got more caught up in B.D.R.G. activities such as organizing early morning visits to draft boards.

In the spring of 1969 I became bored with draft counseling. The fact that I had by then accumulated extensive data on the draft counseling process contributed to the lessened interest; in addition, persuaded by movement criticisms of the tactic, I began to doubt its political value. I also tired of my role in organizing visits to draft boards and gradually withdrew from the position of project head. By that time many of the B.D.R.G. old-timers had gone on to other political activities and groups, the N.E.R. had evolved into a small group of activists mainly working with soldiers and high school students, and around both groups there was general talk about the "death" of draft resistance. My involvement tapered off as the movement itself dispersed, though I had contact with both groups until they finally disbanded (the New England Resistance in July 1969; the Boston Draft Resistance Group in October 1969).²

During my daily involvement with the Resistance, I continually faced two problems: first, how to respond in a situation where I wanted freedom of movement as an observer, but was forced to take sides as a member; and second, the related question of priorities, of how, in my daily allocation of time and effort, to balance my political goals with the needs and demands of research.

Partisanship

At every level the draft resistance movement demanded partisanship. Among the active members there was no tolerance for neutrality on the issues of the war and the draft, and the issues assumed crisis proportions. Within the movement individuals were pressured to join specific groups, and, partly because there was disagreement about tactics, multiple membership was difficult to maintain. Only people with valued resources could free-lance (without inciting suspicion) as full participants in the B.D.R.G., the N.E.R., and other organizations in the anti-war spectrum. The notable examples of approved free-lancers were a black man whose race was an asset in such all-white, radical groupings, and a resister who had already served a jail sentence for refusing induction and whose experience and proved commitment became shared resources. My efforts to straddle the B.D.R.G. and the N.E.R. were regarded with mistrust, and I felt constant pressure to take sides.

²When to leave the field is an issue much discussed among participant observers. In this study, when the movement dispersed, the field left me. The quick tempo and rapidly shifting quality of Resistance events made me wish I were omnipresent; I felt anxious when I missed a particular event because the rapid turnover of tactics and membership gave daily movement life a non-repetitive flavor.

Although the B.D.R.G. and the N.E.R. shared an early history, an overlapping set of issues, and a general loyalty when confronting the outside, they differed on points of strategy, tactics, and general style. Relations were competitive and sometimes strained. It was easier to be a partial member of the B.D.R.G. than of the New England Resistance, but even B.D.R.G. people mistrusted anyone who attempted to belong to both groups.

As a newcomer, I could wander in and out of both organizations, but after that phase, I felt continually forced into a choice. People in the anti-war movement often inquired and commented about the affiliations of individual activists. My self-identification shifted as the year wore on. Sometimes I tried a complicated formula which approximated how I felt ("I'm working on the Resistance newspaper and I draft counsel at the B.D.R.G."), but the approved slots were less complex. During the summer several B.D.R.G. people indicated they regarded me as a member of the New England Resistance, even though I was a regular B.D.R.G. counselor. But by the fall, I felt more thoroughly "B.D.R.G." and introduced myself as such. At a demonstration in September, an N.E.R. activist came over and said, "Hello B.D.R.G." In March 1969, I went to a national Resistance conference as a representative of the Boston Draft Resistance Group; people from the New England Resistance also attended.

Conflict Over Priorities

In choosing how to spend each day—what meetings to attend, projects to work on, events to join—I acted not only out of political conviction, but also out of my interest in observing the workings of the Resistance movement. Initially I felt relatively detached and went to every kind of Resistance activity; the goal of observation was primary. But as I became more comfortable with the issues, rhetoric, and style of the radical movement, and as I became absorbed in the goals and strategies of the Resistance, I slipped more fully into the role of participant.

I still observed and recorded whatever I was involved in, but the decision to be *there* (draft counseling instead of planning a draft card turn-in; on an early morning visit to a draft board instead of in the middle of a sanctuary) increasingly involved tension between personal political, and research considerations. There was continuous debate about tactics, about whether draft counseling, draft card turn-ins, and sanctuaries were the most useful activities. I thought through each issue on political grounds, and eventually came to oppose both card turn-ins and sanctuaries and to support draft counseling as a major direction of effort. This position both led to and grew out of my closer involvement with the B.D.R.G. during the late summer and fall of 1968. The B.D.R.G. continually argued against and only minimally participated in draft card turn-ins and sanctuaries, which for a time were the central activities of the New England Resistance. By early 1969, I, along with many B.D.R.G. activists, had also become skeptical about the political effectiveness of draft counseling; our doubts contributed to the demise of the group.

Apart from the larger issues, there were smaller decisions about how to allocate time and effort, and my interest in observing entered into these choices. Wanting to get a rounded view of the movement, to see it from as many vantage points as possible,

I poked in and out of a range of situations. The ongoing life of both the N.E.R. and the B.D.R.G. included many little expeditions: visiting draft boards to try to get information about dates of physicals and inductions; ventures to bus stations and inside the army base to leaflet and talk with soldiers; setting up anti-recruitment tables when the Marines came around to colleges. I was a perpetual and eager volunteer for these expeditions, mainly because they gave me a chance to see the Resistance movement in a variety of situations (and hence, I believed, enhanced the representativeness of my data).

While on these expeditions I participated fully: accosting soldiers to engage them in discussion about the war; doing impromptu draft-counseling on every occasion; debating with the Marine recruiters in front of a group of junior college students. But from the point of view of the movement and its political goals, my time might have been better spent in other activities such as organizing projects at the office. I was more a gadfly than a patient organizer. In my efforts to experience as many different settings as possible, and in my attempts to straddle group boundaries, I was running against the organizational and purposive grain of the draft resistance movement.

My style of participation was partly shaped by my role as observer, and that outlook set me apart from full participants. I was a committed participant, but with limits related to temperament and reluctance to give up my outside involvements; both of these limits were bound up in the way I defined my research role. Throughout the experience I had a residue of safety, a horizon of options that most of the participants lacked. The role of observer provided a defense against experiences I found fearful; it provided me a measure of control in a situation which I was both strongly drawn to and cautious about. My experience might be seen as an example of a general option social scientists have created: fieldwork as controlled adventure.³

Fieldwork as Controlled Adventure: Conflicts Over Risk-Taking

No matter how fully I participated in the Resistance, and even in the final days when I was seen as an experienced draft counselor and old-timer, I still retained a dimension of marginality. In contrast with anthropologists in foreign cultures and sociologists crossing lines of class, race, or deviance, this dimension was relatively small. I came from the native population, the central constituency of the draft resistance movement: white, middle-class, young, college-educated, part of the subculture of metropolitan-hip-university centers. Without these various attributes, especially youth and comfort with the counter-culture, I would not have been accepted in the daily activities of the Resistance.

But in other ways I was marginal, and as my involvement progressed, I found myself relying on this sense of marginality not only to lend a degree of detachment, but also to provide immunity from some of the risks which went along with Resistance activities.

My marginality was based partly on sex. The Resistance had a sexual division of labor which placed women in a subordinate and derivative position (Throne 1975a).

³Larry Rosenberg suggested this term to me.

Exempted from conscription, women did not personally confront choices about the draft, and they were, at least initially, exempted from some of the pressures towards risk-taking that were directed at men. If I had been a male participant-observer, especially in the N.E.R., I would have been under continual pressure to turn in my draft card and risk jail. As a woman, I entered with relative distance and immunity from risk, although not with as much immunity as I had anticipated.

My strongest marginal trait was my position as a graduate student, a role which evoked suspicion and mistrust. In the first place, many of the central Resistance people had dropped out of college and were extremely critical of the careerist, business-as-usual, Establishment overtones of being a student (and especially a graduate student). Some of them had particular mistrust for social scientists. But perhaps most important was the fact that my being a student gave me an outside set of involvements and options which ran against the Resistance sense of collectivity and demand for full commitment and risk-taking.

The central activists of the Resistance movement constituted a community of fate. To varying degrees they had severed other careers or possible futures and come to regard their lot as being cast with the Resistance, or more broadly, with the radical movement. They were enmeshed in a fateful situation: taking the risk of turning-in draft cards, refusing induction, harboring deserters, setting up sanctuaries, aiding and abetting violation of the Selective Service law. They also confronted hostile political antagonists (hecklers, rather terrifying threats from right-wing organizations), and continually suspected the presence of Feds (it was presumed that there were infiltrators from the F.B.I. or the police, that the phone was tapped and the mail watched).

An atmosphere of risk, uncertainty and danger infused the daily life of the Resistance movement, especially the New England Resistance. The B.D.R.G., though also assuming tapped lines and infiltrators and working in possible violation of the legal proscription against counseling to resist, was more bureaucratic, pragmatic, and cautious about taking risks. I felt ready to take whatever consequences might result from draft counseling, proselytizing in front of draft boards, and participating in demonstrations and marches. But beyond that commitment, I did not throw my fate in with the Resistance. Of course, I did not have a draft card to turn in, but I also avoided any activities which appeared to involve uncertain and high stakes (such as the first sanctuary and working with deserters). Nor did I drop out of school, an action which many Resistance people felt should accompany radicalization. Unlike those who faced uncertain futures and probably jail, I could (and fully intended to) go back to having a safe career as an academic. And I always preserved that option; I was reluctant to place it in jeopardy.

The first sanctuary showed me dramatically that I was ultimately in a different world from fully involved Resistance people. The Arlington Street Church sanctuary in May 1968 was the first, not only in Boston, but also the first in the country. It was a new tactic for dramatizing the dilemma of conscience of anti-war draftees and trying to build support around them. A draft resister and an AWOL soldier were declared in symbolic sanctuary, and a large and spectacular, week-long event was built around

the occasion, while everyone waited for the government to respond. It was anticipated that there would be mass arrests, since the sanctuary technically violated laws concerning aiding and abetting deserters, as well as the Selective Service law. The choice of entering a state of risk was suddenly sprung on the mass of supporters who came to the press conference and large public gathering which announced the sanctuary. The resister and soldier marched out, followed by a group of 25 to 30 Resistance people, and it was announced dramatically that this group had vowed to “stand with the two brothers, keeping sanctuary with them and risking possible arrest” and that everyone else who would join the community should come forward. My fieldnotes show the turmoil I felt as I was faced with this public decision:

As M. began the invitation, I felt fear in my throat. Fear, shame, guilt—both a desire to join the group that surged forward after M.’s invitation and a (stronger) reluctance, since I didn’t feel I could risk arrest and realized that the pressures compelling me to go forward were of a group rather than individually-thought-through kind. But that realization didn’t seem to minimize the emotion. People began leaving their pews and going forward. Eventually there seemed to be only a few scattered people remaining in the pews. M. commented over the microphone, ‘There seem to be more up here than down there.’ I felt all eyes were upon me; I was sure my face was flushed; I found myself fingering my purse, almost in readiness to run up. But I didn’t. It occurred to me that I was feeling the way people feel who can’t bring themselves to turn in their draft cards, but who finally do it under crowd pressure.

The group—more like a community given its size and solidarity—stood in a solid bunch, spilling out over the sides of the front of the chapel, but clearly demarcated from those of us, scattered and far from constituting a group, who remained in the pews. The spatial arrangements dramatized the gap between the committed and the uncommitted.

As it turned out, the authorities arrested only the resister and the soldier, although there was a physical confrontation with the police when federal marshals forcibly removed the resister from the church. But I experienced that occasion as a moment of truth about the limits on my participation.⁴

I was drawn to the total involvement and adventuresome spirit of the Resistance. For example, my fieldnotes detail one long, all-absorbing day that began at 5:30 A.M. with an early morning foray to a working-class draft board and animated talk and exchange of gossip with the little band that went; then going to the N.E.R. office, which was at a peak of activity in preparation for a large induction refusal demonstration.

⁴Other participant observers have described similar moments of truth about boundaries between them and the group they were studying. Whyte (1943) describes helping his Cornertown friends cheat at the polls, and later regretting the action, partly because it violated his personal principles. In my case, taking part in the Resistance was in accord with my personal principles (although part of my hesitation at the sanctuary came from not having time to think through the action and its personal and political implications). My main discovery was that I was reluctant to take risks and give up a safe future—a reluctance I had psychologically and structurally tied up with my researcher’s role.

Someone there asked me to drive some resisters and an AWOL soldier who had decided to turn himself in at a nearby army base, and thus began another spirited adventure on enemy territory, with our hippy-looking band enjoying the stares and imagined dangers in the stark, bureaucratic environment of the base. We returned, full of stories to tell the 80 people crowded in the office basement for the weekly N.E.R. dinner. Since the newspaper was due at the printers, I joined in and we worked late into the night, going out for beer, laughing, and reaching a state of heady exhaustion. Finally I was so tired I took my leave and went home. The next morning when I woke up and realized I would spend the day typing fieldnotes alone, I felt quite depressed and almost jumped into my car and headed for the printers, where the gang was.

Throughout my months with the Resistance, I sensed, sometimes guiltily, that I could have my cake and eat it too. I could share in the excitement, the thrills of participating in events that seemed almost magnetic—and be spared the costs: the uncertainty of risk-taking, the possibility of jail.

The ethnographic literature suggests that this is a recurring phenomenon: sociologists and anthropologists venturing into exciting, tabooed, dangerous, perhaps enticing social circumstances; getting the flavor of participation, living out moments of high drama; but in some ultimate way having a cop-out, a built-in escape, a point of outside leverage that full participants lack. The sociologist can have an adventure, but should take it in a controlled and managed way.

Conflicts Over the Interpretation of Experience

As an active and committed participant, I was pressed to allocate my daily time and effort in ways structured by the Resistance, and to join the movement's community of fate. But my other role—as a sociologist gathering data for a thesis—conflicted with the movement's prescriptions for activity, pointing to daily agendas geared more to the goals of observing than to being politically effective, and helping set limits to my willingness to take risks. I also experienced epistemological conflict: the movement's ways of defining and interpreting experience ran counter to the more detached and routinizing perspectives I maintained as a sociological observer.

The Resistance was a sect-like organization, emphasizing conformity of belief as well as external behavior. Movement participants would not have tolerated the intimate presence of an avowed neutral, but I discovered that partisanship and participation are both a question of degree. I believed (i.e., I opposed the war and the draft, shared the movement's analysis of their origins and injustices, and generally supported Resistance strategies of protest), but I also sought to assume psychological distance from the daily life and ideology of the Resistance, and to refer its happenings to an outside, comparative framework. I participated, but I also watched carefully and later recorded and reflected on what had occurred—for purposes that extended beyond the movement and its goals.

In general, at least in this society, people tend to feel uncomfortable if they know a participant in an encounter is also observing, analyzing, and recording the interaction for an outside purpose. But some situations have a stronger proscription against such detached and instrumental activity than others. For example, Riesman, Watson, and

their colleagues (1967) experienced extensive difficulty in doing participant observation in parties and other gatherings of sociability, perhaps because such gatherings presume expressiveness, unseriousness, and a suspension of consequentiality, and these assumptions conflict with the more instrumental and consequential attitudes involved in doing sociological research. (In contrast, participant-observers might experience less epistemological strain in studying a shopping mall or a bureaucracy—settings whose rules for experience are more various, and less distant from the detached and instrumental behavior, and marginal commitment of sociological observing.)

Some of the difficulties I experienced as an observer stemmed from the rules for experience and knowing which are basic to highly partisan social movements: demand for complete involvement based on a totalizing worldview; a sense of crisis and apocalypse; and emphasis on collectivity and control by the group. I discovered the contours and strength of some of these basic assumptions by trying to mix participation in the movement with the detached, routinizing, and comparative outlook, and the instrumental purposes, involved in doing sociological research for a dissertation.

The temporal rhythm of the Resistance was very different from the tempo of observation and research. The movement was infused with a sense of crisis and apocalypse; the present often overshadowed awareness of either past or future. Although demonstrations, sanctuaries, and confrontations were located by calendar time, these occasions, which were central to Resistance life, had their own temporal qualities, well described by Schechner's (1969:74) phrase, "event time." Some events, like the massive response to the assassination of Martin Luther King (which came right after the April 3rd draft card turn-in) emerged quickly and unexpectedly, and had no visible end. On April 11th one resister remarked, "The last week seems like one long day." The sense of being engulfed by the present and uncertain about the future was expressed in leaflets distributed at the opening of the Arlington Street Church sanctuary. "Liberation-Renaissance," one leaflet read, and outlined a long list of political and cultural activities scheduled "to last for the duration." The event was contingent on government response; its timing was uncertain; the experience was sharpened and "heated" (Goffman 1967:261) by the presence of risk. People spoke of being "in sanctuary," a phrase which described the sense of total involvement, of living *inside* an event, bracketed from both past and future.

This atmosphere of shared crisis (fed by risk-taking, intense activity, irregular schedules, and going without sleep) separated the movement from the outside world of business-as-usual and reinforced individual commitment and a sense of shared fate. During the most intense periods of crisis, the Resistance had the flavor of a millenarian movement. The movement chose the omega as its symbol partly because of its apocalyptic reference, and the word "apocalypse" was sometimes mentioned around Resistance circles, often in jest, but capturing a mood which was in the air.

As an active member, I often got caught up in this sense of crisis and apocalypse. I cried with many others as hundreds came forth to turn in their draft cards during the April 3rd demonstration; when we learned of pending government indictments of draft

resisters, I shared the movement mood of anguish and uncertainty about the future. But as a sociologist, I made a continual effort to routinize the sense of crisis through the daily rhythm (often sustained with great difficulty, and occasionally neglected altogether) of recording happenings and sociological reflections in my fieldnotes. As I moved back and forth between these two perspectives—getting caught up in movement events and emotions, and later recording and analyzing them in a more detached and objectifying way—I experienced inner conflict.

From the movement's perspective, "doing sociology" on its activities constituted a sort of epistemological betrayal. There was general hostility to proclaimed neutrals and observers, and social scientists were seen as part of this camp; if the apocalypse is at hand, one should not be watching and taking notes. During an extended discussion of tactics at a gathering during one of the sanctuaries for an AWOL soldier, a fellow stood up and prefaced his comments with, "I'm only here as a witness. . ." He was cut off with a vehement reply: "There have been enough witnesses! There were witnesses at Auschwitz and Dachau—it's time for everyone to stand and act!"

Individuals and groups in a state of crisis may resist not only detached observation, but also the comparative attitude which is basic to theoretical understanding of social life (Hughes 1971; Becker 1964). In comparing the Resistance with other social movements, I implied (and one part of me always believed) that the situation was not unique and final, that it was just another millenarian movement, rather than the millennium itself.

The conflicts I experienced between being a committed participant and an observing sociologist often took the form of great pangs of guilt, and a sense that I was betraying the movement. The issue of betrayal was thrust upon me in a direct and painful way when I eventually realized that some movement members had come to regard me with great suspicion, wondering if I was a "Fed."

Fieldworker as Fed

A common ritual around backstate Resistance gatherings was to play a sort of guessing game: Who's the Fed? It was generally suspected that there were infiltrators from the F.B.I., military intelligence, or the local police; the N.E.R. phone was often answered, "New England Resistance, this line is tapped." Insiders and outsiders said that Resistance people were "paranoid," but it is interesting to note that there is no ready phrase in English for chronic fear which may turn out to be justified ("paranoid" suggests fear with no factual basis). The Resistance anxiety looked and felt like paranoia, since it had no *certain* basis, but the facts just were not known. Although, to my knowledge, specific surveillance of the Boston groups has not come to light, there have been sufficient revelations about government infiltration of other radical and anti-

war groups of the 1960s to make it now seem likely.⁵

There were people around the Resistance who claimed they had a sixth sense for spotting Feds; one spoke of a sort of bell that went off in his head when he encountered an infiltrating spy. Descriptions were offered about typical Fed behavior, and I listened closely, trying to figure out the mores of this invisible, yet possibly present hostile tribe. I was told that Feds could be spotted by “the kinds of questions they ask” and by biographies that did not check out.

There were other types of infiltrators around the Resistance: members of other leftist sects (who did not always reveal their outside allegiance, and who were often present to recruit from the Resistance membership and to steer it to a given political line), and media reporters, who usually made themselves known, but sometimes disguised their purpose. It was discovered that a reporter from the local newspaper most hostile to radical activities had come for draft counseling posing as a law student and had tried to push the counselor into telling him to resist.

This feeling of being spied upon, of having many unfriendly outside groups trying to siphon off information which could well be used to send people to jail, kept the Resistance in a constant state of nerves. The fear of Feds increased the sense of crisis and apocalypse that underscored even mundane activities. One learned to be careful while talking on the phone, to be cautious in draft counseling and in talking about the plans and workings of the Resistance to strangers around the office or outside.

Although the draft resistance movement began in a spirit of openness, with a strategy of turning in draft cards and breaking the law in a public, visible, almost proud way, it was hard to sustain an attitude which seemed almost suicidal, especially as the Resistance began working with AWOL soldiers, and as the possibility of conspiracy indictments (in addition to the charge of breaking the Selective Service law) became real. The New England Resistance, which operated in the sphere of risk more than the B.D.R.G., became more and more secretive, especially when it began planning sanctuaries, which required secrecy in the planning stages to prevent a bust before the event surfaced.

In that atmosphere of uncertainty and suspicion, with a lack of firm factual grounding, my private anxiety and guilt about being an observer took root and flourished. In the late spring of 1968 I began to sense the people in the N.E.R. regarded me as a likely candidate for Fed. When I went to the office, I often received a cold shoulder from people who had previously been warm and friendly. I watched the way they treated other Fed-candidates, and found the same cold reception, an attempt to squeeze the suspected person out of the collectivity. Although several of my trusted

⁵Gary Marx (1974) observes that as government surveillance of radical movements proliferates, as it has in recent times, the movements themselves are changed in important ways. This subject warrants more empirical research, although it is a slippery phenomenon, since surveillance is usually uncovered—if at all—only after the fact. Glazer (1972) adds other issues for social scientists to consider in an era of widespread and secret surveillance: Will research be used and treated as surveillance work, to the detriment of the subjects? How can we reconcile our research probing with the general dangers of increased invasion of privacy?

friends (and their trust seemed increasingly precious) commented that there was a lot of Fed-guessing going on, I found that the game was not often played in my presence. I learned of it second-hand and realized that being included in the guessing ritual of Who's-the-Fed was a proof of trust. Exclusion meant that one was suspect.

I found this attitude of mistrust painful. I also did not know what to do about it because the implicit accusation was hard to shake. If directly asked, "Are you a Fed?" (as Resistance people often did to one another under the guise of humor but also as a vocalization of generalized doubt), what could one reply? Too loud or soft a protestation would be equally telling.

But the fact remained that my loyalty was *not* pure, that I was *not* giving total allegiance to the Resistance. I not only held out from casting my future with the movement and joining the community of risk; I also was myself doing a kind of spy-work not unlike what I imagined a Fed would do. I was systematically observing; I kept my ear out for a range of information and detail that exceeded what was necessary in performing my tasks of being a regular member of the group. I asked the kinds of questions a Fed would also want to know: "When did you turn in your draft card?"; "What led up to that decision?"; "What organizations had you been in?" And I listened attentively, committing the responses to mind for later recording. At demonstrations, in order to get a range of perspectives, I sometimes left the Resistance ranks and walked to the side to stand with spectators or even reporters (later, when I came to realize the strong symbolic import of space in expressing partisanship, I did less of such wandering). My efforts to straddle all the groups in the Resistance orbit made me doubly suspicious (one B.D.R.G. activist exclaimed one day, "Since you jump so much from group to group, all you need is a final tie-up with the C.I.A.") A thrifty kind of Fed, getting double the information).

Although at the time I felt scapegoated in being regarded as a Fed, from a later vantage-point the accusation has a certain plausibility. Although I believed in the goals and basic ideology of the Resistance, and acted as a sincere participant, my loyalty was qualified by four undeniable facts: I had an outside allegiance and tie; I was keeping records (which, in spite of my efforts to keep them confidential and my intention to burn them if they were subpoenaed, could be stolen and used against the Resistance); the records, which were not under the movement's control, would go into a report on the Resistance made available to outside audiences; and I expected to receive external rewards (a Ph.D. and publications) from my participation in the movement. Some movement members realized that I would receive Establishment rewards for activities which in their lives meant giving up safe futures; "I wish I could get a Ph.D. for all this," a woman activist once said to me with an edge of resentment.

Although I always had a strong intention not to let my study damage the movement or its members, I could not be sure in what ways the information might be used. My dissertation would be available to an audience outside the Resistance, and would not be under the direct control of the movement.⁶

⁶These specific worries have lessened with time. The movement had dispersed by the time I finished my dissertation and long before I published anything from the study, although I am still troubled by the possibility that my research may be put to future use by those seeking to suppress other radical movements.

Conclusion

When, near the end of my involvement in the Resistance, I became an active and non-researching member of the feminist movement, I felt great relief. Now and then in a feminist meeting or discussion, I remembered how I felt in Resistance gatherings, and, in contrast, experienced great comfort based on unity of self and purpose. To be fully trusted as a movement activist, and to feel I warranted that trust, was a warming experience which sharpened my memories of what it was like to live with constant ambivalence and anxiety during my days with the Resistance.

Within the women's movement I continued to think and speak in a sociological way and to slip in and out of an attitude of detachment and observation. I kept a diary, which, although briefer, resembled the fieldnotes I recorded during the Resistance. But my sociological insight took place and evolved within a movement context; I didn't intend to refine and use this knowledge primarily within the academic world or to further my own career.

Comparing my experiences in the Resistance and in the feminist movement, I realized that the sociological imagination—the insight that can come from detachment, comparison, and systematic analysis—should be distinguished from other components of the research role. Sociological understanding and information can be organized in various ways, including as part of movements for social change. For example, I believe my contributions to discussions of strategies and tactics in the Resistance (e.g., in our long debates about the efficacy of draft card turn-ins and draft counseling) were strengthened by my ability to think sociologically, and by the systematic observations I had made of the movement over time. However, putting these insights into a dissertation and journal articles, geared for a different audience, was less useful for the movement.

One issue, therefore, has to do with the location and distribution of sociological knowledge and understanding. Hymes (1969) has aptly focused some of these concerns: ethnographers deal with knowledge of others, and that involves special political and ethical responsibilities, especially since social science knowledge is generally more accessible to elites and to those protecting the status quo, than to the powerless or to those working for social change. When the group studied is especially vulnerable to political control, as the Resistance was, these problems become all the more pressing. I emerged from the anti-war movement more keenly aware of the need to create political and social locations for knowledge which will further social change, rather than perpetuating existing structures of domination.

This experience also taught me about the limits of sociological knowledge. Detached gathering and analysis of information, and theoretical reflection, can help inform political action, but such action always involves stepping into the unknown, beyond the boundaries of the predictable. I still think back to the Arlington Street Church sanctuary, and the way I held back from the risk, the plunge into the uncertain, that radical political acts require. Some of this hesitation was because I was not sure that particular action was politically wise, but I also had to confront my personal reluctance to take the sort of risks I believed might be necessary to end the war and bring about social justice.

Others in the movement, e.g., as they anguished over whether or not to turn in their draft cards or refuse induction as gestures against the war, also felt the dilemmas bound up in political action. But my conflicts had a special twist: my research role became a retreat, a justification I used to myself for avoiding risks when activism felt threatening. As I made such retreats, I came to see that strong political commitment and action necessarily involves other outlooks and ways of experiencing the world. I also discovered ways in which academic careers tend to encourage investment in the status quo, and to foster individualism instead of collectivism—they run counter to the commitments and actions basic to radical politics. These issues remain live ones for me; participant-observation in the draft resistance movement taught me as much about sociology as about political activism.

REFERENCES

- Becker, H.S.
 1964 Problems in the publication of field studies. In *Reflections on Community Studies*, A.J. Vidich, J. Bensman, and M.R. Stein, eds. New York: Wiley.
- Douglas, J.D.
 1972 Observing deviance. In *Research on Deviance*, J.D. Douglas, ed. New York: Random House.
 1976 *Investigative Social Research*. Beverly Hills: Sage.
- Ferber, M. and S. Lynd
 1971 *The Resistance*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Gans, H.J.
 1968 The participant observer as a human being: Observations on the personal aspects of field work. In *Institutions and the Person*, H.S. Becker, B. Geer, D. Riesman, and R.S. Weiss, eds. Chicago: Aldine.
- Glazer, M.
 1972 *The Research Adventure: Promise and Problems of Fieldwork*. New York: Random House.
- Goffman, E.
 1967 Where the Action is. In *Interaction Ritual*. Garden City, New York: Anchor.
- Gold, R.L.
 1958 Roles in sociological field observation. *Social Forces* 36:217-223.
- Hughes, E.C.
 1971 The place of fieldwork in social science. In *The Sociological Eye: Selected Papers*. Chicago: Aldine.
- Hymes, D.
 1969 The use of anthropology: critical, political, personal. In *Reinventing Anthropology*, D. Hymes, ed. New York: Pantheon.
- Johnson, J.M.
 1975 *Doing Field Research*. New York: The Free Press.
- Marx, G.T.
 1974 Thoughts on a neglected category of social movement participation: the agent provocateur and the informant. *American Journal of Sociology*, 80:402-442.

Miller, S.M.

1952 The participant-observer and over-rapport. *American Sociological Review*, 17:97-99.

Riesman, D. and J. Watson

1967 The sociability project: A chronicle of frustration and achievement. In *Sociologists at Work*, P.E. Hammond, ed. Garden City: New York: Anchor.

Roth, J.A.

1962 Comments on 'secret observation.' *Social Problems*, 9:283-284.

Schechner, R.

1969 *Public Domain: Essays on the Theater*. New York: Bobbs-Merrill.

Thorne, B.

1971 *Resisting the Draft: An Ethnography of the Draft Resistance Movement*. Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Brandeis University.

1975a Women in the draft resistance movement: A case study of sex roles and social movements. *Sex Roles*, 1:179-195.

1975b Protest and the problem of credibility: Uses of knowledge and risk-taking in the draft resistance movement of the 1960's. *Social Problems*, 23:111-123.

Useem, M.

1973 *Conscription, Protest, and Social Conflict: The Life and Death of a Draft Resistance Movement*. New York: Wiley-Interscience.

Vidich, A.J.

1955 Participant observation and the collection and interpretation of data. *American Sociological Review*, 60:354-360.

Whyte, W.F.

1943 *Street Corner Society*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.