

Article

Sabotage of Development

Subverting the Censorship of Renegade Research

Japhy Wilson

The University of Manchester

Abstract In 2014, a prominent radical publishing house released a book about the influential development economist Jeffrey Sachs. The published version was one chapter shorter than the final proofs. This chapter had been removed after the publisher sought legal advice on content pertaining to fieldwork conducted in Uganda on Sachs's Millennium Villages Project (MVP), an international development programme financed by some of the wealthiest individuals and most powerful corporations in the world. In contrast to the MVP's extravagant claims of success, the censored chapter documented allegations of mismanagement and corruption, and told the story of the author's detention, his pursuit by secret police on suspicion of 'sabotage of development', and subsequent threats of legal action made against him by Sachs's philanthropic foundation. This article reproduces the censored chapter in its entirety, as an example of the stakes involved in transgressing 'ethical research' protocols that function to shield power from scrutiny. The chapter is prefaced with a discussion of the MVP and the state-capital-academia nexus, and is followed by a postscript, which sets out the principles of 'renegade research'.

Keywords research ethics, capital-state-academia nexus, politics of development, Millennium Villages Project, critical research methods, renegade research

Preface

In 2014, Verso published a book of mine about the influential development economist Jeffrey Sachs (Wilson 2014a). The published version, however, was one chapter shorter than the final proofs. The majority of Chapter Six, entitled 'Sabotage of Development', had been removed at the last minute at Verso's insistence, after the publisher sought legal advice on content pertaining to my fieldwork in Uganda, where I had conducted research on Sachs's Millennium Villages Project (MVP). The MVP was a high-profile international development project, with the public support and financial backing of some of the wealthiest individuals and corporations in the world. In contrast to Sachs's extravagant pronouncements of the MVP's success, the censored chapter describes the profound dysfunction and widespread allegations of corruption that I discovered in the Millennium Village in Uganda. It also tells the story of my subsequent detention by local police, my pursuit by the Ugandan secret police on suspicion of sabotage, and threats of legal action made by Sachs's philanthropic foundation, which ultimately succeeded in suppressing the story. At least until now.

This article reproduces the censored chapter in its entirety, as an example of the stakes involved in transgressing the 'ethical research protocols' that function to shield power from scrutiny, and as contribution to this journal's exploration of 'extreme' situations



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and practices.¹ This preface to the chapter provides some context on the MVP and the capital-state-academia nexus, and outlines the unusual circumstances of my fieldwork. The chapter is followed by a postscript on the anti-method of ‘renegade research’.

The Millennium Villages Project was launched in 2006 by Jeffrey Sachs, the notorious architect of neoliberal shock therapy in Latin America, Eastern Europe, and most catastrophically Russia. In my book on Sachs, I interpret the MVP as the staging of a fantasy of harmonious capitalist development far removed from the Real of Capital – the vortex of economic collapse, social disintegration, and venal corruption unleashed by his Russia experiment. In contrast to the brutality of shock therapy, the MVP aimed to demonstrate Sachs’s solution to extreme poverty in a series of model villages across sub-Saharan Africa, through the transformation of ‘sub-subsistence farmers’ into ‘small-scale entrepreneurs’ (Sanchez et al 2009, 40). As such, it was central to his own remarkable transformation from the dastardly ‘Dr Shock’ into the magnanimous ‘Mr Aid’. The project was financed by Millennium Promise – a philanthropic foundation created by Sachs, and funded by multi-million-dollar donations from the likes of George Soros, Tommy Hilfiger, Madonna, and a host of hedge fund managers and multinational corporations including Facebook, General Electric, GlaxoSmithKline, Goldman Sachs, KPMG, Merck, Monsanto, Nike, Novartis, PepsiCo, Pfizer, Sony and Unilever (Millennium Villages Project 2011, 36). For these individuals and companies, as for Sachs himself, the MVP offered an opportunity to burnish their egos and sanitize their images by playing a role in nothing less than ‘the end of poverty’ (Sachs 2005).

The MVP was implemented in 12 countries across sub-Saharan Africa. I chose to focus my field research on the Millennium Village of Ruhiiira, Uganda, which had been described by Sachs as the ‘flagship’ Millennium Village (quoted in Divon and Bergstrom 2012, 88). According to the MVP, by 2010 maize yields in Ruhiiira had increased from 1.8 to 3.9 tons per hectare, the proportion of children receiving free school meals had increased by 69 per cent, malaria prevalence was approaching zero, and the proportion of households with ‘access to improved drinking water’ had almost quadrupled (Millennium Villages Project 2010, 63). These dramatic claims of success led to Ruhiiira being selected as the symbolic location of Tommy Hilfiger’s ‘Promise Collection’ – a charity fashion line launched in 2012, the proceeds of which were donated to Millennium Promise. The picturesque mud-hut poverty of Ruhiiira served as an emotive backdrop for the promotion of the good deeds of the company, which was mired in controversy at the time, after being implicated in the deaths of twenty-nine workers in a fire in a garment factory in Bangladesh in 2011 (Ross *et al* 2012).

Having selected my research site, I began the task of gaining ethical approval for my research. It quickly became clear that this would be impossible. Approval from the Research Ethics Committee of my university would require approval from the Uganda National Council for Science and Technology, which would in turn require approval from the Millennium Villages Project itself. Such approval was conditional on the

¹ I would like to thank the journal's editor, Tereza Kuldova, for creating a scholarly space outside the capital-state-academia nexus in which work like this can be published. This article is dedicated to my Ugandan research assistant and ‘fixer’, who cannot be named. The fieldwork presented in this article was very much a joint effort, and I am unquestionably Robin to his Batman in terms of renegade research!

research being approved by the Institutional Review Board of Columbia University, where Sachs is Director of the Earth Institute at which the MVP was based. According to documentation included in the appendices of a Masters dissertation on Ruhiira from the Norwegian University of Life Sciences, the MVP also demanded exclusive access to all research findings for a period ‘not usually exceeding a year’; and insisted upon the signing of a ‘Confidentiality Statement’ including the promise: ‘I will only discuss the data with which I am working for purposes related to the work I am assigned by the MVP staff, and I will not discuss or disclose any information related to this data for purposes other than completing my assigned tasks’ (quoted in Divon 2009, 235-236). These legal restrictions were combined with extensive control over the research process itself. Access to the MVP was ‘granted’ by Jeffrey Sachs’s wife, and the researcher was ‘allocated’ a translator and research assistant by the MVP, as well as a ‘community facilitator’ for focus group discussions and visits to project sites (Divon 2009, ix, 58, 109).

Independent research is obviously impossible under such circumstances. This may help to explain why, prior to my investigations, no such research had been conducted on the MVP, despite its status at the time as one of the most ambitious and widely publicised development projects in the world. The scenario demonstrates the ways in which the interests of neoliberal academia, state power, and private capital are intertwined within the supposedly neutral and objective criteria of ethical research protocols. According to the so-called ‘triple helix’ model developed in the USA in the 1980s, and subsequently rolled out around the world, the fostering of competitive knowledge economies depends upon the collaboration of business, government and universities in the financing, conduct and application of academic research (Vallas and Kleinman 2008, Zucker et al 2002). In the British university system, the adoption of this model has been accompanied by the application of the private-sector-inspired principles of ‘new public management’, which has involved the proliferation of ethics review committees (Hammersley 2010). These committees have tended to prioritise ‘the reputational protection of their host institution over and above academic freedom and the protection of research subjects’ (Hedgecoe 2016, 486), and have been identified as ‘the latest in a series of legislative and institutional measures in which the state has... exerted greater control over social science research’ (Travers, quoted in Calvey 2008, 907).

Equally, for ‘semi-authoritarian regimes’ like that of Uganda (Tripp 2010), ethical approval procedures function as a convenient mechanism of political censorship and the surveillance of ‘foreign activity’ (Shrapel 2015, 33). Indeed, in the case of Uganda, permission for research is conditional upon the approval of the Office of the Prime Minister (Park 2015, 23). Sachs had been a staunch supporter of the Ugandan President, Yoweri Museveni, prior to the MVP (Wilson 2014, 85-88), and Ruhiira was a flagship project of both the Ugandan government and Millennium Promise, which had a team of New York lawyers ready to prosecute any violation of MVP research protocols that might compromise the Project’s dramatic claims of success.

I decided to sidestep this seemingly insurmountable series of obstacles by going to Ruhiira without telling my university, the Ugandan government, or the MVP. At first, this did not appear to be a very promising strategy, given that I would be arriving in a remote village on the border of Tanzania, where I was unlikely to pass unnoticed. But it turned out that Ruhiira was not a village after all, but a loose collection of towns,

hamlets and homesteads scattered across 140 square kilometres of mountainous land. On my arrival, in February 2013, I based myself in a town several kilometres from the project office, and about an hour's drive from the city of Mbarara, where the main Uganda MVP office was located. I found that the project office was deserted, as the administrators preferred to spend their time in the comfort of the city. Rather than reporting my presence to the administration, many local implementers sought me out to provide me with their testimonies, relieved to finally have what they perceived as an opportunity to tell the world the truth about the Project.

With the help of a Ugandan research assistant, I conducted in-depth interviews with thirty-five households throughout Ruhiiira, and nine interviews with employees of the MVP and its partners in the Ugandan government, including five health workers, two teachers, a civil engineer, and an agricultural extension officer. Although I was open with my interviewees about the subject and purpose of my research, I did not apply the officially sanctioned procedure for acquiring informed consent, 'which has become a ritualistic research mantra to many in the social sciences' (Calvey 2017, 48). To do so would have required me to produce a form for my informants to sign prior to each interview. This would probably have dissuaded them from speaking to me at all, and would certainly have limited the information that they were willing to provide. This illustrates the censorial function of 'absolute informed consent' in situations in which the research participant is disclosing sensitive information, and 'the researcher is trying to capture... the unofficial view of an organization' (Calvey 2008, 908).

In addition to these interviews, I received testimonies in the form of unsolicited emails and hand-written notes from other employees of the MVP, who had heard that I was in Ruhiiira, but who did not dare to speak to me for fear of being reported to the administrations and losing their jobs. After leaving Uganda, I received further written testimonies from two MVP health workers. I also came into possession of a dossier of complaints compiled by a group of former administrative staff of the Project, which they had sent to Millennium Promise in New York. The dossier included contact information for these and other ex-employees, on the basis of which I conducted telephone interviews with four former administrators who had worked in the Project Office in Mbarara, and received a detailed written statement from a fifth.

My research demonstrated that the MVP was not ending extreme poverty in Ruhiiira, but was functioning to deepen pre-existing inequalities, with the great majority of project inputs benefitting local elites. These findings are reported in Chapter Five of my book on Jeffrey Sachs. Allegations of corruption within the project, and the circumstances of my own detention and subsequent persecution, were included in the original version of Chapter Six. This chapter was removed from the book, apart from a few less 'controversial' sections, which were incorporated into an expanded version of Chapter Five. What follows is the full, uncensored version of Chapter Six.²

² The only alterations to the final proofs of the original manuscript are those required to comply with the style guidelines of the *Journal of Extreme Anthropology*.

Chapter Six: Sabotage of Development

The Ruhiiira MVP has been described as a ‘petri dish in the laboratory of Jeffrey Sachs’ (Munk 2007). But this is a strange kind of science. The MVP was established as a ‘proof of concept’ for Sachs’s global solution to extreme poverty (Konecky and Palm 2008, 1). In the natural sciences, ‘proof of concept’ means ‘test of concept’. But Sachs would appear to have taken the expression literally. The objective is to *prove* that his strategy works, rather than to test whether it does or not. From the outset, Sachs has claimed that every village in Africa ‘could be rescued, and could achieve the Millennium Development Goals... with *known, proven, reliable and appropriate* technologies and interventions’ (Sachs 2005, 232). Now his reputation depends on being able to demonstrate that the MDGs have indeed been achieved in the Millennium Villages through the application of these ‘known’ and ‘proven’ interventions by the end of 2015. As we have seen, the reputations of several billionaires and numerous multinational corporations are also invested in the success of the MVP. There is therefore immense pressure for positive results across the Project as a whole, and particularly in Ruhiiira, as the ‘flagship’ Millennium Village.

This pressure may help to explain the atmosphere of tension under which the implementers of the MVP are forced to operate. One person who worked closely with the MVP in Ruhiiira told me that its employees ‘are motivated by stress and fear ... There is a lot of arrogance from the top officials. You are a slave. You do what you are told. Otherwise you are fired.’³ Several people told me about MVP employees being dismissed for spurious reasons, and government employees working in the area being transferred when they angered the MVP. In the words of one clinician who had been transferred for this reason, ‘They expect you to do this, do that, according to their tune. If you don’t do that you are not good for them.’⁴

Health workers employed by the MVP and the government also told me that they felt the administration had privileged the lives of people living inside the Project boundaries over those of people living just outside its borders, since only the former would show up as statistics concerning the fulfilment of the MDGs. One told me: ‘If you are just one household outside the Millennium borders, they are leaving you out. Are these people not human? Do they not deserve help?’⁵ Another recounted his experience of the Project as follows:

What I heard when I was entering into the Millennium Project area is that [people living outside the area] are not much considered. I mean, when that person dies – that one who is not in the Project area, they don’t mind so much as when someone is from the Project area ... That’s how I found it here. You hear even the bosses talking about it like that. Seriously. You hear that if someone in the Project area is to die it is something serious ... Because when that person dies, that means you are ‘sabotaging the MDGs’. That’s what they say. And

³ Engineer working for a local council in Ruhiiira. Author interview, Kabuyanda, Uganda, 11 February 2013.

⁴ Clinical Officer working in Ruhiiira. Author interview, Mbarara, Uganda, 19 February 2013.

⁵ Health inspector working for a local council in Ruhiiira. Author interview, Kabuyanda, 11 February 2013.

when someone dies outside the Project area, they say ‘OK he has died’, you know, ‘OK, it has happened. That one – ignore it.’⁶

The same health worker went on to criticize what he saw as the lavish salaries that the administration was paying itself, compared to the low wages paid to implementers. The MVP does not make details of its wage structure publicly available, and did not respond to my request to provide these details. But according to this worker, the highest-ranking administrators were earning as much as 11,000,000 Ugandan shillings (US\$4,230) a month, while he was only being paid 700,000 shillings (US\$270) a month – figures that were broadly consistent with those provided by other employees. He told me: ‘The administrators are benefiting a lot when you compare them to the implementers, and of course the implementers – they are the people who matter ... The relationship [between administrators and implementers] is not good at all. We are good enemies!’⁷ This was a sentiment shared by many of the implementers I spoke to, as well as those who corresponded with me via notes, emails, and written statements.

Allegations of Mismanagement and Corruption

The depth of the problems that I discovered in Ruhiira might help to explain the restrictions that the MVP has sought to place on independent research. Nevertheless, I was initially surprised by the climate of fear that the administration appeared to have instilled among its employees in order to discourage them from providing information to anyone not officially sanctioned by the MVP. Teachers, medical staff and agricultural extension officers were all wary of speaking to me, although several of them deliberately sought me out to tell me their stories. All insisted on speaking anonymously, and all were afraid of losing their jobs as a result. One told me that he and other employees had been instructed not to speak to anyone about the MVP without permission from the administration. Another was too afraid to speak to me at all, and insisted on meeting me at night outside my hotel, where she silently passed me a slip of paper that listed her complaints. One even told me that he feared for his life. Such fears may appear extreme, but their reasons for contacting me, and my own subsequent experiences, suggest that they were not unfounded.

Many of these implementers sought me out to denounce what they saw as a culture of corruption and nepotism within the MVP Office in Mbarara. Their claims were reinforced by telephone interviews that I later conducted with ex-members of the MVP administration. There were stories of highly qualified and committed staff being forced out of the Project and replaced by the relatives and cronies of specific administrators. Project inputs, such as cement for schools, and motorcycles for Community Health Workers, were said to have gone missing, without any attempt being made to account for their disappearance. Several implementers and beneficiaries of the Project claimed that certain members of the administration were colluding with local council chairmen in falsifying the delivery and receipt of fertilizer, and selling it elsewhere. One lab technician summarised the situation by explaining that she had recently left the MVP because ‘I did not wish to see the project... collapsing due to poor skills, full of

⁶ Millennium Villages Project Medical Sector worker. Author interview, Kabuyanda, 12 February 2013.

⁷ Ibid.

corruption, mismanagement of funds and embezzlement of funded things like fertilizers.⁸

One of the more persistent allegations concerned the theft of profits obtained through the bulk sale of produce on behalf of local farmers' co-operatives. Many sources referred to a particular instance in 2010, in which beans produced by the Ruhiira Twijukye Women's Association were sold in bulk to the World Food Programme (WFP). The organisation began purchasing beans from this cooperative in 2009, and completed three contracts. The third of these was settled in August 2010, just days after Jeffrey Sachs and the Executive Director of the WFP had appeared in Ruhiira to announce a doubling of the quantity of beans that the WFP would purchase in the future (World Food Programme 2010). The event was widely publicised, and was celebrated with great fanfare on the MVP website (Handa-Williams 2010). The contract, however, was never fulfilled. Records provided to me by the WFP show that the payment for the third contract was for US\$26,928.⁹ The WFP could not identify the recipient of this payment, but according to one administrator who had worked closely with the women's cooperative, the money had subsequently disappeared, with two different members of the administration each claiming that the other had been in charge of it. When I asked whether the members of the cooperative had complained about the disappearance of their money, the administrator told me 'You see, the farmers – we were dealing with women. They could not complain... But the money disappeared.'¹⁰ Rather than complain, however, it seems that the cooperative simply stopped producing for the WFP. This administrator left the MVP shortly after this incident, but other sources told me that supplies to the WFP had collapsed at this point, resulting in the WFP cancelling its contract with Ruhiira in 2011.

The MVP did not respond to my request for information on this issue, but it is notable that there has been no further mention of the World Food Programme on the MVP website since Sachs's triumphant announcement of the expansion of their contact in 2010. Despite the collapse of this contract, the announcement remains on the website at the time of writing, and elsewhere the Project continues to imply that it is still selling produce to the WFP in Ruhiira. In a video on the Tommy Hilfiger Promise Collection website, which was set up in April 2012, Sachs informs us that 'We've helped farmers to be much more productive – more food, school meals, better nutrition'. To illustrate this apparent success, a member of the Ruhiira MVP administration then claims that these farmers 'are bulking and selling to World Food Programme. World Food Programme is coming to this Millennium Village to buy excess food to take to other countries like Somalia, like Darfur [*sic*]. Just imagine this village which was food insecure is now having food surplus and is selling to World Food Programme! That's what we are

⁸ Laboratory Technician employed by the Millennium Villages Project from 2006-2013. Written statement provided on 9 September 2013.

⁹ Communications and Advocacy Officer of the World Food Programme, 'Re: WFP contract with MVP'. Email to author, 11 October 2013.

¹⁰ Member of the administrative staff of the Millennium Villages Project 2009-2011. Telephone interview, 18 September 2013.

doing.’¹¹ Of course, by the time this video was released, the WFP had not made a payment to the Ruhiira Twijukye Women’s Association for almost two years, and it has not purchased any other produce from Ruhiira. Yet as this book goes to press in October 2013, the video is still on the Hilfiger website.

Another persistent allegation of corruption concerned irregularities in the payment of ‘top-ups’ to government health workers operating in the Project area. These top-ups are intended to incentivize staff and to compensate them for the additional tasks that they perform for the Project. The MVP did not respond to my request for details on the payment of top-ups to medical staff. But according to the reports I received, a senior clinical officer who earned \$350 a month would be promised a top-up of about \$115, while a junior health worker earning \$150 a month would be due a top-up of around \$90 – a significant increase in both cases. Several health workers, however, claimed that the top-up payments were being made irregularly, and that workers were being intimidated into signing documents confirming that they had received the payments even when they had not. If they tried to complain to senior figures in the administration, they were met with silence or threats. I interviewed two workers who had refused to sign the documents. One had been transferred from the Project area. The other had had his payments completely frozen for several months, and was being placed under great pressure to sign the forms. When he complained to the administration, he claims he was told: ‘You will never get that money, even if you go to Washington.’¹² He told me that he was afraid he might be killed if he continued to resist the demands of the administration, and if they found out that he had spoken to me – fears that are not unreasonable for a poor and powerless man in an isolated corner of a country like Uganda. There were rumours of members of the administration constructing extravagant houses in other parts of the country, and speculation that this was being partly funded through the embezzlement of the top-up funds. One worker explained his perception of the situation as follows:

Some people are not receiving [the top-up] regularly. It comes one month, but the next month it is not coming. The reason? Not known ... My conscience tells me that there must be something behind it. Because we asked ourselves, ‘Why does it happen like that? Some months the top-up is coming, then two months it is off, no reason? And later, it comes?’ There must be foul play somewhere, and it must be coming from the administration.¹³

The extent of this alleged corruption, and its implications for the success of the MVP, was conveyed in an unsolicited email sent to me by a ‘concerned community member’, entitled ‘The Real Picture of MVP in Ruhiira’:

¹¹ This video can be seen on the Promise Collection website under ‘Food’, <http://eu.tommy.com/hilfiger/millennium-promise/default.pg.html> (accessed 17 October 2013).

¹² Government health officer working in Millennium Village Project territory. Author interview, Kabuyanda, 13 March 2013.

¹³ Clinical officer working in Ruhiira. Author interview, Mbarara, 19 February 2013.

It is very important that when donors release their funds for a particular cause in society, it should be meant for what it should be for. The MVP has tried ... to improve the standard of living to some extent. However, along the way I feel some key individuals who are running the operations of the entire project have lost the vision of achieving the millennium development goals by 2015 ... The problem now has come in the fact that individuals have decided to personalize [the Project] as their family businesses. Administrators are spending lots of money on themselves while leaving the majority of implementers such as field workers to survive on meagre resources. The end result being loss of motivation among workers thus consequently affecting work at grass roots ... This is evidenced by irregular payment of allowances to workers and sometimes they are not even paid ... There is no transparency in the entire system ... It is my request that the culprits of gross financial mismanagement are followed down to the dot ... Thank you and all the best in your research.¹⁴

These allegations were reinforced by a dossier of information that I received in September 2013, several months after I had left Uganda. The thirty-five-page dossier was prepared by several ex-administrators of the MVP, who had worked at the Project Office in Mbarara before leaving earlier that year. Entitled *Ruhiira Millennium Villages Project at the brink of collapse*, the dossier opens with the claim that 'Peasants face hunger, disease and poverty again as the project strays in office battles' (Anonymous 2013: 1). It includes extensive allegations of corruption within the MVP administration. The dossier claims that the management of the MVP has degenerated since July 2011, when the Country Co-ordinator left the Project, and oversight of procurement and recruitment passed from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) to the United Nations Office for Project Services (UNOPS), the role of which has been 'silently reduced to... issuing contracts to employees and paying their salaries' (Anonymous 2013: 1). In a telephone interview in September 2013, one of the authors of the dossier told me that previously all contracts over US\$500 had to be approved by the UNDP but that the Mbarara Office was now in control of contracts for as much as US\$15,000.¹⁵ Another ex-administrator explained that from 2011 onwards, money was sent directly from Millennium Promise in New York to the Mbarara Office, with no questions asked. Oversight of recruitment and procurement was supposed to be provided by the MDG Centre for East and South Africa – the regional centre of Sachs's Earth Institute – but the Centre was failing in this duty. It was at this point, according to this administrator, that 'things started going down and down.'¹⁶

¹⁴ Ruhira community member, 'The Real Picture of MVP in Ruhira, Isingiro Uganda.' Email message to author, 11 February 2013.

¹⁵ One of the authors of *Ruhiira Millennium Villages Project at the brink of collapse*. Telephone interview 11 September 2013.

¹⁶ Member of the administrative staff of the Millennium Villages Project 2006-2013. Telephone interview 19 September 2013.

The dossier claims that ‘On average, the project has handled cash equivalent to \$6m (15bn shillings) annually’ (Anonymous 2013: 1), much of which has been embezzled through a variety of scams. Many of the allegations included in the dossier corroborate those made by the implementers I spoke to, which are described above. But the dossier goes far beyond what I am able to include here, in terms of naming specific individuals and specific instances of corruption, nepotism, and unfair dismissal. It contains a detailed account of the alleged theft of profits from the sale of produce to the World Food Programme discussed above. It also includes a similarly detailed description of the theft and sale of a large quantity of fertilizer in 2011, and the subsequent cover-up of this alleged crime, in which the local police and the MDG Centre in Nairobi are said to have been complicit. The dossier reports numerous cases of corruption and nepotism in procurement and recruitment; extensive abuse of expense accounts; and the loss of any vision of ‘shared goals towards which the team should be working and the timeframe for achieving them’ (Anonymous 2013: 9). Despite having produced the report anonymously, the author I spoke to in September 2013 claimed to be facing a campaign of intimidation from the members of the administration implicated in the allegations. They also told me that the dossier had been sent to Millennium Promise in New York in August, and that two representatives of the organization had arrived in Uganda a few days prior to our conversation to investigate the matter.¹⁷ When I called back a week later, I was told that these representatives had met with the authors of the dossier, and had promised to take action on the basis of their investigations, while also warning them not to circulate the dossier to anyone else.¹⁸ This meeting was confirmed by an email exchange between the authors and Millennium Promise, which was forwarded to me. The emails show that the finance director and the associate counsel of Millennium Promise met with three of the dossier authors in Mbarara on 12 September.¹⁹ The email exchange continues after this meeting, and shows the assistant counsel becoming increasingly dismissive of the authors’ requests for news concerning the progress of their investigations, and for meaningful action ‘to save the project before it collapses’.²⁰ The final terse message of the exchange was sent by the assistant counsel on 6 October. It reads: ‘I appreciate your concern, but the investigation is being handled internally... If we need anything further from you we’ll be in touch’.²¹ As this book goes to press in October 2013, it remains to be seen what – if any – action will in fact be taken by Sachs’s philanthropic foundation. But in a written statement, one of the authors of the dossier told me that the lawyers ‘were more worried about the document going out of

¹⁷ One of the authors of *Ruhiira Millennium Villages Project at the brink of collapse*. Telephone interview, 11 September 2013.

¹⁸ One of the authors of *Ruhiira Millennium Villages Project at the brink of collapse*. Second telephone interview, 19 September 2013.

¹⁹ Associate Counsel of Millennium Promise, ‘Re: Complaint regarding Ruhiira MVP’. Email sent to an ex-administrator of the Ruhiira MVP, 12 September 2013.

²⁰ Ex-administrator of the Ruhiira MVP, ‘Re: Complaint regarding Ruhiira MVP’. Email sent to the associate counsel of Millennium Promise, 1 October 2013.

²¹ Associate Counsel of Millennium Promise, ‘Re: Complaint regarding Ruhiira MVP’. Email sent to an ex-administrator of the Ruhiira MVP, 4 October 2013.

the project to Ministries and Donors than looking at the cause of this'.²² In an email, the same author noted that 'Millennium Promise has not been helpful ever since they visited and discussed with some staff... We don't think their investigations will help us.'²³

When You Find Ruhiira Shining

In September 2013 I wrote to the director of communications at the Earth Institute, requesting an interview with Jeffrey Sachs or another representative of the MVP concerning the situation in Ruhiira. When she failed to respond, I sent her a set of written questions regarding the allegations of mismanagement and corruption detailed in the previous section. She did not respond to these questions either. Instead, the General Counsel of Millennium Promise copied me into an email sent to one of my superiors at the university at which I work. The email complained that I had been 'undertaking research activities in the Millennium Village in Uganda without any prior notification or approval by the project', and falsely accused me of representing myself 'as being part of the MVP team'. It went on to stress that 'the MVP has strict protocols in place for approval of any research projects, and certain procedures and agreements to follow when conducting such research'. It concluded by demanding that I 'refrain from contacting... anyone... associated with the MVP for any information unless we have seen evidence of the approvals necessary to conduct his research... His behaviour to date of course concerns me as the general counsel of the project.'²⁴

It is worth emphasising that this attempt to intimidate me into abandoning my research was made while the legal team at Millennium Promise was supposed to be conducting its own investigations into the allegations of corruption and mismanagement contained in the dossier. Unfortunately, I have been unable to further pursue any of the allegations that I have reported here myself, for reasons that will soon become clear. I am therefore reporting them only as allegations, and not as statements of fact. At the very least, they demonstrate considerable discontent within the MVP in Uganda. Jeffrey Sachs may seek to dismiss them in these terms – as the malicious lies of disgruntled workers. But it seems unlikely to me that poor, powerless people would take what they perceived as serious risks with their jobs, and in some cases with their safety, in order to make knowingly false allegations for no personal gain. My perception is that these were people committed to their work, who were brave enough to communicate what they had experienced in the hope that this would make a positive difference to the lives of the people they were trying to help. These are the same lives, let us not forget, that Sachs claims to be 'saving'.

In the context of these allegations, it becomes increasingly difficult to comprehend the basis on which Sachs is making his extravagant claims of success in Ruhiira. Several people who worked with the Project in Ruhiira had seen these claims on the Millennium Villages website, and were incredulous. One health inspector told me: 'When I see such

²² Written statement from an ex-administrator of the Ruhiira MVP to the author, received 11 October 2013.

²³ Ex-administrator of the Ruhiira MVP, 'Re: Follow-up questions.' Email to the author, received 11 October 2013.

²⁴ General Counsel of Millennium Promise, 'Research on the Millennium Villages Project.' Email message copied to author, 10 October 2013.

things, it baffles me, because it's not what is happening.²⁵ A government health worker remarked: 'On paperwork it is doing well, but down [on the ground] it is not doing what is written on that paper.'²⁶ And an employee of the Project made the following assessment of its achievements: 'Some little change has come. But that's really what I can say. *Little* ... So really, what they always put on the internet, that "We have achieved this and this and this" – it is not exactly what they are doing. But we have to take what comes ... We are lacking another option. But the situation is not good.'²⁷

The illusions of the Project on the internet are matched by the illusions that it stages in Ruhiira itself. This explains the rave reviews that Ruhiira has received from journalists, politicians, businessmen, academics, development students and corporate employees. When comparing these reviews, it becomes clear that everyone who visits Ruhiira through the official channels receives the same carefully orchestrated tour of the 'village'. They all visit the same clinic, the same school, the same water project, the same IT centre. Most of them even visit the same farmer, whose name appears repeatedly in articles, reports and blogs about Ruhiira. In stark contrast to the impoverished farmers I visited, the MVP has provided this farmer with two cows, several goats, and a variety of grafted fruit trees. It has even given him a state-of-the-art biogas cooking system, which is made to appear as if it is standard issue for every household in Ruhiira, although none of the people I spoke to had received one, or knew of anyone who had.²⁸ In the words of one MVP health worker, 'No community involvement: They just use certain homes as demos.'²⁹ Another health worker described the preparations that are made before official visits to Ruhiira:

When we get visits from donor countries – now that is when you find Ruhiira shining! When the visitors are coming. But let them come another time. It is just like that. [When the visitors are coming] of course they have to do some cleaning. They renovate where the situation was going bad ... So it is all about pleasing those visitors. Then [the visitors] go back, and they revert to their normal situation. Those farmers they take [the visitors to meet] – before they have of course talked to them and told them that on such and such a day we will be having visitors, so be ready to show them this and this. Meaning that you have to make sure that you have shown them something good, eh? Not to ashame us. That is what happens ... In my department, in the time I have been there I just saw them once ... We were not allowed to talk to them, because [the administration] don't want you to reveal the challenges ... They were just donors,

²⁵ Health inspector employed by a local council in Ruhiira. Author interview, Mbarara, 9 March 2013.

²⁶ Clinical Officer working in Ruhiira. Author interview, Mbarara, 19 February 2013.

²⁷ Millennium Villages Project medical sector worker. Author interview, Kabuyanda, 12 February 2013.

²⁸ See for example the 'Postcards from Ruhiira' on the Tommy Hilfiger Corporate Foundation website (<http://108.166.76.198/2012/06/>), and the press pack for the Promise Collection. (<http://eu.tommy.com/hilfiger/millennium-promise/default.pg.html>) (accessed 18 October 2013).

²⁹ Millennium Villages Project health worker. Hand-written note provided 11 March 2013.

whose names I am not sure of. But that's what the office told us, that 'These are the donors, from the US, New York'. That's what they told us,³⁰

Visitors to Ruhiira are completely taken in by this simulation. The following report by a delegation from the University of Notre Dame is similar to many blog-posts and newspaper reports on Ruhiira, and demonstrates the care with which the Ruhiira experience is organized by the administration:

Over twenty Millennium Development Village staff ... greeted us and presented an overview of their goals and efforts to date ... Following the presentation and a brief lunch, our group joined the entire Ruhiira Millennium team for a one-hour drive ... to the sites of the project office, school, health centre, and a local farmer's home ... It quickly became apparent that this project had not been imposed on community members without respect for their wisdom and talents ... In fact, the work was led and supported by members of the community ... Before our departure, a group of women ... bid us farewell with song and dance ... I have learned a great deal about this country and the Millennium Village project and most importantly, about how the project works collaboratively with community members to seek lasting change ... The Ruhiira village is a wonderful model (Shavers 2007).

There Is Nothing on the Ground, and the Project Has Eaten All the Money

Like a Potemkin Village, the perceived success of Ruhiira depends on the maintenance of a carefully managed façade. Given that this is the case, the discovery of someone researching it independently was unlikely to be well received. Several weeks after my arrival in Ruhiira, a member of the administration saw me arranging an interview in one of the main villages. He did not approach me directly, but took my interviewee to one side and spoke to her out of earshot. After that, the woman appeared frightened, and no longer wanted to speak with me. The next morning, the local police detained me in my hotel, and took me to the police station to question me on the nature and objectives of my research. They openly admitted that they had detained me on the request of the Millennium Villages Project, and they were in constant contact via mobile phone with people they identified by name as members of the MVP administration.

Two hours after my detention, a man arrived in the police station, dressed in a crisp black suit that contrasted with the mud walls of the station and the humble clothes of the local policemen. He introduced himself as a member of the MVP administration, and told me his name. This same individual is named in the dossier discussed in the previous section, which claims that 'his work is to spy on other staff and to feed wrong information and rumours to [another member of the MVP administration]' (Anonymous 2013, 9). Sitting alongside the local chief of police, he questioned me aggressively about my activities in Ruhiira, insisting that I had no right to

³⁰ Millennium Villages Project medical sector worker. Author interview, Kabuyanda, 12 February 2013.

be there without having sought permission from the MVP in advance. I was then informed that the same individual who this man allegedly spies for would arrive at the police station the following day to interrogate me further. This person was repeatedly identified in the dossier and by my various informants as the one responsible for orchestrating the corruption and nepotism in the Ruhiira MVP.

While awaiting the arrival of this member of the MVP administration, the police instructed me to remain in my hotel, and retained my passport and other documents. They were apologetic about this, and suggested that the MVP ‘must have something to hide’. But as poor local policemen, it was clear that they felt obliged to do the bidding of this wealthy and powerful organisation. Even though I was under effective house arrest at this point, MVP workers continued to contact me, and to tell me about their allegations of corruption and mismanagement. They were prepared to do so, even though they knew I had been detained, and were well aware of the risks that they were taking in communicating with me. The woman who passed her note to me in the darkness and the man who told me that he feared for his life were among those who contacted me at this time.

No one from the MVP arrived the next day, or contacted the police to explain their absence. Under Ugandan law, a detainee can be held for a maximum of forty-eight hours without charge (Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative 2006, 7). The following morning, I was released, as the forty-eight hours had elapsed. Soon after my documents had been returned to me, one of the policemen handling my case received a call on their mobile phone. He identified the caller as the member of the MVP administration who had missed our appointment at the police station the previous day. He then put the caller on speakerphone. I heard this individual angrily demanding my detention, and offering to send the police a cash transfer to ‘facilitate’ my transport to Mbarara – the nearby city where the administration is based. Interestingly, the dossier discussed above alleges that the same individual used the same expression when offering to provide money and fuel ‘as “facilitation” to police’ when they were investigating the disappearance of large quantities of fertilizer that had been supplied to the Ruhiira MVP in 2011 (Anonymous 2013, 3).

To their credit, the police turned down this offer of ‘facilitation’ and refused to detain me again. My research assistant and I then left Ruhiira and travelled to another part of the country. Two days after my release, we were contacted by someone in Ruhiira who warned us that I was now being pursued by the Internal Security Organisation on suspicion of ‘sabotage of development’. The Internal Security Organisation is the Ugandan counter-intelligence agency, and is notorious for its torture and execution of political prisoners, which it conducts in secret locations in collaboration with paramilitary groups that operate outside the law (Human Rights Watch 2004, 20; Tripp 2010, 137). At this point, my research assistant and I began to fear for our safety. I sent an email to one of Jeffrey Sachs’s closest associates at the Earth Institute in New York, informing them of the situation, and demanding that they intervene to prevent it escalating further. They did not respond.

The following day, my contacts in Uganda helped me to arrange a confidential meeting with a trusted senior member of the Ugandan intelligence services. He looked into my

case, and informed me that I was indeed being pursued on suspicion of ‘sabotage of development’. The position of the Internal Security Organisation was that the MVP was doing ‘good things for the people of Uganda’, but that there was an ‘international conspiracy’ intent on undermining its good work. I had been identified as an agent of this unspecified conspiracy. My objective, allegedly, was to ‘tell the world that there is nothing on the ground, and the Project has eaten all the money’ – in other words, that the Project is not being properly implemented, and is riddled with corruption. It is surely no coincidence that I had indeed discovered that the MVP was failing in its implementation, and I had indeed received numerous allegations of corruption within it.

That evening, I left Uganda by a minor land border, returning to my home in the UK a few days later. I never received a response to my email from the Earth Institute. Instead, four days after having sent the email, I received an email from the General Counsel of Millennium Promise. The email stated categorically that ‘neither [the person at the centre of the allegations of corruption and mismanagement in Ruhira], nor anyone on the Millennium Village Project team, had any involvement in the proceedings against you by Ugandan authorities’. It also warned me that ‘We will consider any further comments you make about [this individual] with respect to your troubles with the Ugandan authorities to be defamatory.’³¹ One wonders what reasonable basis a lawyer in New York could have for making such definitive statements about obscure events in an isolated corner of rural Uganda, or what interest Millennium Promise could have in issuing a legal threat of this kind to an independent researcher under such circumstances. Significantly, the dossier discussed above claims that the same individual that Millennium Promise was protecting in this instance ‘normally brags about how [they are] protected by the MDG Centre in Nairobi and Prof. Jeffery Sachs [*sic*] (the founder of the Millennium Promise) we wonder what sort of Technical support this is’ (Anonymous 2013, 8).

The Last King of Uganda

As we have seen, Jeffrey Sachs has a close relationship with the Ugandan president, whose regime has a long tradition of using the security services to repress what it perceives as subversive political activity. Sachs likes to emphasize the role of such relationships in guaranteeing the success of the MVP. In his words, ‘I think the main effect of the high-level buy-in is ... there’s political – I would say, I hope – political protection of the project. It’s not so much the direct interventions, you know, having those nice meetings. It’s more the fact that the project can go forward’ (Sachs 2006, 21). In the case of Ruhira, ‘those nice meetings’ with Museveni would seem to have paid off, and Sachs would certainly appear to have all the ‘political protection’ that he could hope for. This is not, of course, to suggest that Sachs had any knowledge of my presence in Ruhira, or of the actions taken against me by the Ugandan authorities. Perhaps the general counsel of his organization does not inform him of such matters. In fact, it would appear that Sachs has very little knowledge of what is happening in Ruhira at all. As of August 2013, to my knowledge, Sachs has made only three fleeting visits to Ruhira, spending a few hours there in January 2007, in July 2010 and in July 2011. This

³¹ General Counsel of Millennium Promise, ‘Response to March 15th Email’. Email message to author, 19 March 2013.

is not surprising for such a busy man. The problem, however, is with the nature of these visits. If Ruhiiira is a Potemkin village for its Western visitors, then Sachs is Catherine the Great, and the most spectacular fireworks displays are reserved for his arrival. This is well illustrated by Sachs's visit to Ruhiiira to celebrate the ill-fated expansion of the contract with the World Food Programme in 2010. An American academic working with the Project in Ruhiiira posted a blog describing the occasion:

Everyone at the MVP office was immersed last week in preparations for the visit on Saturday of Jeff Sachs, the Director of the Earth Institute and Josette Sheeran, the head of the World Food Programme. In addition to these two, there were governmental officials, large staffs, armed police, and press people – maybe 50–80 people in a long line of UN white landrovers ... The tour of Ruhiiira for the visitors was similar to the one I did last week. However, this time, there were children or community people at every stop lining the entrances, singing and clapping hands (Powers 2010).

An official video of the event shows Sachs being escorted through throngs of cheering villagers, from a pristine school to an overflowing warehouse and a gleaming water project, in a deluxe version of the standard Ruhiiira tour.³² On this evidence, Sachs's visits to Ruhiiira are carefully engineered occasions, in which every element of his experience is managed to provide him with an image of a flourishing development utopia, which bears very little resemblance to people's everyday reality on the ground. This is not to say that the people who sing and clap are not genuinely grateful to Sachs for the little they have received from the Project. But, in this regard, Sachs is just reproducing the paternalistic relationships characteristic of Uganda's highly personalized power structures. As one Ugandan commentator has explained, 'People from rural areas treat the provision of services as a favour from the government ... Even if shoddy work is done they remain thankful because they never expected it in the first place' (Nganda 2009). Even so, among the households I spoke to, almost no one had any idea who Sachs was, or had been present at any of his appearances. The only exceptions were three women who were part of a singing group called the 'Millennium Band'. The group was provided with uniforms by the MVP administration and invited to perform on occasions like this, singing songs with lyrics such as: 'Jeffrey Sachs/You have done a lot/God should bless you'.³³

Given the nature of Sachs's experience of Ruhiiira – and no doubt of the other Millennium Villages – it is unsurprising that he views the MVP as an unqualified success. Like Jim Carrey in *The Truman Show*, Sachs wanders around his Millennium Villages in a state of narcissistic bliss, unaware that his surroundings are being entirely staged for his benefit. Shielded from the troubling realities that lurk all around him, Sachs is given unlimited licence to revel in his imagined identity as Mr Aid. His performance is described in rapturous language on the MVP website:

³² The video can be viewed at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AbTfV-cEBI>, accessed October 18, 2013.

³³ Member of the 'Millennium Band'. Author interview, Ruhiiira, Uganda, 10 March 2013.

‘Welcome visitors, welcome today. We’ve all been waiting so long!’ Coming over the crest of the hill into the Millennium Village of Ruhiira, Uganda, children’s singing voices gradually become louder, intermingled with bursts of clapping and laughter. The long-awaited visitor, Jeffrey Sachs, is due to arrive at any moment, and the anticipation is palpable ... For the people of Ruhiira, the visit ... was a celebration of the fact that today, their story is different. Today, the community was living proof to the world that despite all the scepticism, great stories and dreams can be made a reality as a result of effective synergy between well-targeted aid and community empowerment. ‘We haven’t done it, you have’, proclaimed Sachs, to tumultuous applause and ululation from the crowd of hundreds; babies and grandmothers who had walked from far and wide to catch a glimpse of their hero ... Pledging support to the community until 2015, [Sachs] promised that when that day comes, Ruhiira will be ‘a shining example to the entire world ... having shown how this community achieved all the Millennium Development Goals’ (Handa-Williams 2010).

Jeffrey Sachs is prone to rejecting criticism of his development strategies by invoking his supposedly unparalleled knowledge of the gritty realities of development, and insisting that ‘issues of life and death carry a moral burden to know what you’re talking about’ (Sachs 2011). Yet his absorption in this messianic spectacle suggests that Sachs himself has no idea what he is talking about in the case of Ruhiira, and may have very little grasp of the reality of the Millennium Villages in general. This ignorance, however, does not prevent him making the strongest claims for the success of the Project, or attacking anyone who attempts to challenge him on the content of these claims. While some may be tempted to pity Sachs for being duped into believing his own hype, his ignorance in this respect can only be described as wilful. If I can go to Ruhiira and discover as many problems as I did in the space of a couple of weeks, then there is no justifiable excuse for Sachs to be unaware of the failures and controversies of his own Project. In his moralizing promotion of his development agenda, Sachs has insisted that the extent of global poverty is ‘unimaginable to anyone that knows or cares to look. The only way we could come to this is if you take the decision never to look, and I’m afraid that’s the world we’re living in right now’ (quoted in Washington National Cathedral 2005). Could it be that Sachs has taken the decision not to look at the exclusion of the extremely poor from his own development project, and not to hear the accusations of corruption within it? Could it be that the vast resources of the MVP are primarily devoted not to ensuring its effective implementation on the ground, but to projecting an image of its success on the international stage? At this point, it is worth recalling the assessment of the expert I spoke to before visiting Ruhiira: ‘At the top [of the Project] they have to prove that the model works. They don’t really care what happens in the villages to the people. What they care about is that their model survives. If they can prove that they can achieve the MDGs ... then for them the job is done.’³⁴

³⁴ Rural development practitioner. Author interview, London, UK, 24 November 2011.

My own experience of the MVP supports this damning verdict. In Ruhiira, the Project is failing to end extreme poverty, or to generate a sustainable and participatory model of rural development. Indeed, by contributing to the legitimization of Museveni's corrupt and authoritarian breed of peripheral dependent capitalism, the MVP helps to keep the donor funds flowing, sustaining the regime in power, and absolving it of any material incentive to become more responsive to the needs of its impoverished population (Jones 2009). In this sense, Sachs is not only failing to end poverty, but is also helping to ensure its continued reproduction. This demonstrates the serious contradictions of his development strategy, and calls into question his assumed identity as Mr Aid. Under these circumstances, it is easy to understand why the MVP might be determined to maintain the appearance of success, regardless of realities on the ground. It is even possible to imagine that the preservation of this appearance might extend to the criminalization of independent research as 'sabotage of development'.

Yet given Sachs's apparent lack of knowledge of the realities of the Project, it would be wrong to draw any such conclusions in his case. Instead, Sachs's determined ignorance of the reality of Ruhiira, and his evident enjoyment of the fantasy that is staged there, suggest that he is not only concerned with legitimizing his strategy to the international community, but is also anxious to conceal something from himself. I have interpreted the MVP as an elaborate attempt to realize Sachs's harmonious vision of capitalist development, which has been cleansed of all traces of the Real that confronted him in Russia. If this is the case, then his obsession with 'proving that the model works' may be driven less by professional ambition or personal commitment than by a dread of something hidden, and a desire to remain lost in a dream.

This dream was scheduled to end in 2015, with the conclusion of the MVP. But in July 2013 the Ugandan government announced that the Project would be extended beyond 2015, and scaled up to five more districts around Ruhiira, supported by an interest-free loan of US\$9.75 million from the Islamic Development Bank. In a press release to mark the occasion, the MVP stated that 'the announcement follows the success of Ruhiira ... which since 2006 has served as a proof of concept of the benefits of an integrated, holistic approach to rural development pioneered by the MVP' (Millennium Villages Project 2013a). A month later, the Islamic Development Bank announced that its loan to Uganda was only a small part of US\$104 million of financing that it is now providing for the scaling up of the Millennium Villages in Uganda, Mali and Senegal, and the launch of a new project – the Sustainable Villages Project – in Chad, Mozambique and Sudan, in partnership with the Earth Institute and Millennium Promise. In the words of Jeffrey Sachs, the Sustainable Villages Project will apply 'cutting-edge methods to the fight against poverty, hunger and disease' (quoted in Millennium Villages Project 2013b). As this book goes to press, further projects based on the Millennium Villages model are being rolled out in Benin, Cameroon, Congo, Guinea, Liberia, Niger, Madagascar, Togo and Zambia. Meanwhile, in Ruhiira the 'extremely poor' remain trapped in their poverty. In Mbarara, the authors of the dossier await news from Millennium Promise. And in New York, Millennium Promise concentrates on securing cash flows, singing its own praises, and silencing independent research. For Jeffrey Sachs, it seems, reality is only valued as a support for fantasy. Beyond that, it is a threat to be repressed. Only one thing really matters: The dream must go on.

Postscript

The deadline for the completion of the Millennium Development Goals passed at the end of 2015. By this time, all the Goals were supposed to have been met in Ruhiira, and in Millennium Villages across sub-Saharan Africa. Yet in contrast to his earlier promises of success in this regard, Sachs has since remained silent on the matter, and the scale-up of the MVP in Uganda never took place. The 2014 Annual Report on the MVP announced that ‘a final evaluation will be conducted in 2015 and results will be made available in 2016’ (Millennium Promise 2015, 1). But at the time of writing this postscript in January 2018, the promised evaluation has still not appeared, and the MVP website has been inactive for over two years. Meanwhile, Sachs and his wealthy friends have moved on to other messianic endeavours, and the world has forgotten about the Millennium Villages.

The MVP has a lot to tell us about billionaire philanthropy and the global development industry. I have considered these questions elsewhere (see for example Wilson 2014b, 2017a). Here I will conclude instead, in the spirit of ‘extreme anthropology’, with some brief methodological reflections on conducting research under challenging circumstances of the kind that I confronted in Uganda. Certain details of my detention that were not mentioned in the chapter are relevant in this regard. For example, when the police allowed me to return to my hotel while we awaited the arrival of the MVP administrator, I locked myself in my room and frantically edited my transcripts to remove all incriminating content pertaining to corruption, project failure, and so on. I then downloaded the original files onto a memory stick, which I stashed in the room. When the authorities revised my computer, they only discovered the edited and innocuous version of the transcripts. This helped to counteract the administrator’s depiction of me as a malicious trouble-maker. Nevertheless, it was quickly established that I lacked a research permit, at which point the administrator insisted on my immediate transfer to the regional police headquarters in Mbarara, in preparation for my deportation on grounds of ‘abuse of migration facility’. To buy myself some time at this crucial point in the proceedings, I told the administrator that I had the personal permission of Jeffrey Sachs to conduct my research. This was stretching the truth – Sachs had only vaguely indicated his approval of the general theme of my research during an informal conversation at a conference in 2011. But it was enough to convince the administrator to have me placed under house arrest while the MVP contacted New York to corroborate my story. The police eventually released me, but only after I had bribed them to do so. The MVP’s demand for my re-arrest came after they had received a belated statement from New York, asserting that I did not have clearance from Sachs. Given that the MVP was offering to transfer money to the police to ‘facilitate’ my re-arrest, I had little choice but to pay a further bribe to facilitate my escape.

In 2014, I returned to sub-Saharan Africa to investigate a second Millennium Village, this time in Ghana. Having received a notice of Cease and Desist from the lawyers of Millennium Promise, I concluded that all official channels to the MVP were now firmly closed, and that I had no alternative but to repeat the approach that I had taken in Uganda. Once again, I sought no permission from anyone. I discovered that the Millennium Village in Ghana had been overrun by wildcat goldminers from around the world, and the MVP had been totally eclipsed by the ecological destruction and social

dislocations of the illegal gold industry. Sachs had dealt with this by suppressing internal reports, falsifying data, and firing uncooperative staff (Wilson 2016). This time I was able to complete my research undisturbed. I dressed like a foreign gold prospector, and the MVP administrators rolled past me in their 4x4s without a second glance.

I then moved to Ecuador, where I joined a research institute financed by the Ecuadorian government. Our intention was to contribute to the post-neoliberal ‘Citizens’ Revolution’ that was underway in the country. However, it soon became apparent that ‘twenty-first century socialism’ was a facade, which was functioning to legitimate the reproduction of rentier capitalism. We then used our position within the state apparatus to investigate and reveal the farcical failings of its utopian development projects. This led to my dismissal and the closure of the institute, after which I was blocked from jobs and conferences and eventually obliged to leave the country (Wilson 2017b).

In the summer of 2017 I returned to Ecuador on a tourist visa, and got caught up in a spontaneous uprising against a foreign oil company in a remote corner of the Amazonian region of the country (Wilson and Jarrin 2017). I spent nine days immersed in the struggle, dispatching press releases to contacts in the capital city of Quito who posted them online. As in Uganda, I was detained by the police in my hotel. On this occasion, however, I was rescued by militant members of an indigenous community, who arrived at the hotel armed with spears, and forced the police to release me.

It would be stating the obvious to note that these improvised research projects are woefully lacking in anything that could plausibly be described as a methodology. But they retrospectively reveal the minimal regularities of a kind of ad hoc anti-method, which involves leaping before looking, riding your luck down blind alleys, and trusting complete strangers in the midst of dangerous situations that you do not fully understand. This approach takes inspiration from investigative journalism and the subterranean academic tradition of ‘covert research’ (Calvey 2017, 2008, Spicker 2011), and abandons any attempt to comply with the risk assessments and research protocols of the capital-state-academia nexus. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, that which betrays a set of principles is defined as ‘renegade’. To the extent that this anti-method is based on the betrayal of the ethical principles of neoliberal academia, it can therefore be defined as ‘renegade research’. As such, it has a few principles of its own:

1. Do not seek ethical approval from your university.
2. Do not apply for a research visa from the host government.
3. Do not ask for clearance from the institution being studied.
4. Do not request informed consent from research participants.
5. Tell lies whenever convenient.
6. Pay bribes whenever necessary.
7. Steal information whenever possible.

These principles are deliberately provocative, open to numerous criticisms, and utterly unworkable in most cases. They may even be regarded as ethically abhorrent. But ethical conduct in the field depends, ‘not on the automatic application of programmatic rules, but on examining the ethical implications of process and outcomes in the context in which the research is done’ (Spicker 2011, 127-128). The seven principles of renegade

research only hold to the extent that the research in question is directed against the ideological state apparatus and deployed in pursuit of concealed truth – understood in the naively empiricist sense of ‘things that power doesn’t want you to know’. As such, they reflect what is often required of research committed to uncovering the hidden realities of a system that seems to have everything sewn up in advance, including the rules of research itself. These rules serve to stop us long before the real lines are crossed. Taking risks reveals that things can be pushed a lot further than we think. And in the distance between the imaginary lines of research ethics and the real lines of state repression there is a lot of truth to be told.

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Japhy Wilson teaches at the University of Manchester. His research explores the entanglement of space, power and ideology in the transformation of social reality under conditions of global capitalism. He is the author of *Jeffrey Sachs: The Strange Case of Dr Shock and Mr Aid* (Verso), and co-editor of *The Post-Political and Its Discontents: Spaces of Depoliticization, Spectres of Radical Politics* (Edinburgh University Press). Contact: japhy.wilson@manchester.ac.uk