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Compte rendu de 'Chercheur.es critiques en terrains critiques'

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Simon Le Roulley and Mathieu Uhel (eds), *Chercheur.es critiques en terrains critiques* [Critical Researchers in Critical Fields] Paris: Le Bord de l'Eau, 2020, 194 pp., ISBN: 978 2 35687 719 2.

Sociologists endeavour to unpack the intricate social processes that underpin the structure and evolution of power relations that frame individuals' positioning and behaviour in a given socio-political field. Yet, in conducting ethnographic research, sociologists often find themselves unsettled as they realise that their attempts to adopt an overhanging academic posture – deemed a precondition to the maximisation of scientific objectivity – are battered by their inevitable embeddedness in the very social structures they aim to investigate. Because scholars are *situated* in social, political and institutional structures, their posture in the field shapes the research object, and *vice versa*.

Edited by Simon Le Roulley, sociologist, and Mathieu Uhel, social geographer, *Chercheur.es critiques en terrains critiques* [Critical Researchers in Critical Fields] sheds lights on the epistemo-methodological challenges that sociologists face when undertaking ethnographical fieldwork. In sum, not only are the actors situated, but so is the researcher. Here, while *researchers* are critical as they recognise being situated, their *fieldworks* also challenge researchers in their depiction of situations of social, economic or political struggle; and so are the *actors* interwoven into the field's power relations, as they develop specific representations of the researchers and their work while challenging their posture and methodological and theoretical instruments.

Beyond an opposition to 'crude rationalism' (p. 172), the book's contributions lay out an interactionist framework to account, via constructivist lenses, for the dialectical process by which researchers, reflexive upon their own *socialisation*, take heed of their *position* in the field and adjust their methodological approach. This effort requires continual adaptation as researchers enter or re-enter the field and as the field's underlying power relations transform over time. Thus, this 'reflexive imperative aims to make visible the social effects of researchers in the field and the effects of the field on them, as well as to reinscribe the entire research mechanism in their institutional and social trajectory' (p. 7). The book assumes that conducting ethnography must not imply that researchers veil their social positioning, notably when studying social movements – the book's focus. Rather, while 'the practices of activists and researchers can feed off each other', 'taking part or positioning oneself vis-à-vis the social processes researched' is encouraged (p. 6). Awareness of one's social position hence becomes an epistemological tool.

In the opening chapter, Renaud Lariagon reflects on the conduct of his research on university students' mobilisation movements in France and

Mexico, exploring how collective action is underpinned by 'spatialised' power relations. Drawing on his synchronous socialisation as student activist and young researcher, Lariagon looks into the movements' challenges while accommodating this dual status. He not only argues that one must acknowledge one's political position (*subjectivation*) to minimise the distortion of one's interpretations of social facts (*objectivisation*) (pp. 17, 27), but also that active participation constitutes a pivotal methodological tool, allowing him to grasp the formation and evolution of heterogeneous *subjectivities* framing power relations within student movements *from within* (pp. 26–27). Lariagon makes a central epistemo-methodological argument: critical of phenomenology and of the 'myth' of 'universal rationality' (p. 11), he shows how researchers' ethnographic *experience*, shaped by their *subjectivity*, frames knowledge *production*.

In the second chapter, Leïla Frouillou and Julie Le Mazier explore how they engaged with the introduction of a new university admissions platform (*Parcoursup*) in 2018 – a programme viewed as hardening student selection – while both being teachers involved in teachers' unions and Ph.D. candidates working on the segregated access to Parisian universities and student movements, respectively. They show how militant and academic interests are not antagonistic. Rather, researchers may use their role as 'experts' in support for political struggles, with the union becoming a platform to diffuse knowledge (pp. 30–31). Being *part of* the research object thus constitutes a resource for the social scientist while requiring differentiation between activism and research analysis (p. 38). They ask: 'When a researcher avoids taking position in social struggles, are they protecting the conditions for the exercise of a critical gaze, or simply a prestigious, overhanging intellectual status that is far removed from the routine and costs of labour struggles?' (p. 46).

In the third chapter, Irène Pereira reflects upon an ethnographic research carried on a self-managed social centre and bar in Orléans, bringing together socially isolated individuals divided into two distinct groups in conflict over their uses of a space: a *cultural purpose* involving events and a *social purpose* involving alcohol consumption. Pereira intends to overcome researchers' enhanced difficulty to ensure lengthy and continuous access to the field and to balance research and professional activities through a pragmatic methodological approach she names 'auto-ethnobiography', whereby sociologists' self-reflection on social experiences in which they take part, observe, and relate to via participant observation provides analytical lenses.

In the fourth chapter, Romain Geffrouais describes the differentiated ethnographic approach he adopted while studying the gentrifying effects of an urban project on the structuring of two collective mobilisation groups in Ivry-sur-Seine in southeastern Paris. While one group was comprised of

landlords facing eviction that held weak activist tradition, the other, staffed with more radical activists based around a self-managed social centre, articulated its opposition to the project to a broader social struggle. Geffrouais describes how he embraced an *in situ* observation attitude, thereby restraining his active participation in the former, while actively participating in the collective actions and debates of the latter (p. 69). Besides noting that temporal overlaps that prevented a proportionate engagement with both groups, he shows that methodological choices stemmed from his social trajectory. He posits that his ease to engage with the more radical group hinged upon his 'inclination to collective action', which implied shared cultural codes, knowledge 'know-hows' ('savoir-faire') and 'know-how-to-be' ('savoir-être') (pp. 72–74) that proved invaluable to his understanding of the actors and social processes at stake.

In the fifth chapter, Florian Opillard looks back on a comparative research led on popular mobilisations that formed in response to urban policies in two foreign and contrasted fields: San Francisco and Valparaíso. In a processual analysis, Opillard emphasises how comparative ethnographic research requires sociologists' constant reassertion of their legitimacy and that of their research – a legitimisation enterprise thus operating on two scales, mirroring their dual status as both researcher and involved actor in the field. First, researchers should continually adjust their focus to empirical realities while sustaining the comparison's 'external coherence'. Simultaneously, they undergo a constant 'reflective unlearning' to 'gain' legitimacy (p. 93) via the 'deconstruct[ion of] the representations produce[d] among activists', which involves committing to the social causes studied (p. 89). This legitimisation process is particularly emphasised as Opillard alternates between two fields where distinct norms and challenges prevail and where distance implies sociologists' reintegration into the field.

In the sixth chapter, Marcos Burgos and Nicolas Bautès provide insights into how different methodological postures are underpinned by distinct embeddedness in the field, as each author investigates how urban policies designed to pacify and assert municipal control on two favelas in Rio de Janeiro have redesigned the social fabric. The authors first emphasise that modes of knowledge production are contingent upon a spatial component of the researcher-field relation. While Burgos lived in the favela (raising suspicion), Bautès lived outside to foster an analytical and emotional distance, which enhanced his ability to grasp longitudinal transformations via his object's *desingularisation* in contrast with the 'outside'. Again, researchers' legitimisation effort is constant and requires strategies such as relying on local proxies and accommodating local actors like drug traffickers, accepting interviews as they provide platforms to

claim specific rights. Yet, as exogenous shocks (i.e. police intervention and disarmament of drug networks) disrupt power relations between actors making up the social fabric (i.e. citizens, traffickers, NGOs, local representatives), researchers must 'renegotiate' their position and adapt to shifting equilibria. Paradoxically, 'pacified' environments may prove harder to navigate, as the disruption of power relations and tacit norms enhance 'mistrust' and 'invisibilised' local conflicts, pushing sociologists to use methodological cunning (pp. 124–125).

In the seventh chapter, Mathieu Uhel dissects his doctoral research's methodological posture, which examines the micro-processes underpinning the social 'revolutions' led by Evo Morales and Hugo Chavez in Bolivia and Venezuela, grasping their modes of action *from below*. While the two cases showcase distinct modes of collective organisations (in Bolivia, the movement was rather horizontal/inclusive; in Venezuela, it bypassed unions and parties, hence more vertical), both contexts were polarised and conflictual, challenging national and international political elites and calling for social change. Aware of the need to deconstruct his symbolic image as a Western middle-class graduate and to mitigate a legitimacy deficit, Uhel relied on 'guarantors' or 'fixers' (pp. 133–134) – professors and activists – and presented his work's social utility (p. 136). He underlines that sociologists' insertion into local networks is crucial to grasp movements' transformations but can become detrimental if transforming power relations (e.g., in Venezuela, the radicalisation of the revolutionary project) puts the researcher at odds with his positioning in the field. Uhel concludes by showing how the theorisation effort of research, combined with 'transnationalisation', have nurtured his own politicisation.

In the final chapter, Kevin Camberville, Thomas Guyonnet, Pauline Picot and Anaïs Ousseni pull together ethnographic research conducted on four distinct objects (i.e., imprisonment, dubbing actors, feminist activism, and 'de-colonial' anti-racist activism) in which they explored how 'race', although a flawed biological category, has performative effects on social practices. Critical of a hegemonic use of the term that would prevent grasping its multi-dimensionality as a social phenomenon intersecting with other categories (gender, class), the authors plead for a focus on 'racialisation' as a historically- and socially-constructed *process* generating transversal systemic effects (pp. 154–156). They show how the monolithic category of a 'racialised minority' has effects on the representations of the sociologist by the actors (e.g. when entering the field) and *vice versa* (e.g. during observations) and would 're-conduce or re-invent essentialised mechanisms' (p. 160). To grasp actors' socialisations and their effects, they label the categories as *processual*, *relational* and *interactionist* social phenomena. Still, the authors acknowledge how respondents'

self-identification should be examined *per se*, as indicators of how they interpret experiences to analyse social systems and derive political action. Hence, experiences must be valued because discourses have a limited performative effect on domination patterns ('saying is not necessarily doing' [pp. 160–161]).

The book's contributions show how sociologists' reflexivity upon their socialisation (Bourdieu's 'participant objectivation'¹) and the material constraints on the conduct of fieldwork (scarce resources, temporal and spatial discontinuity, and cultural discrepancies) condition the researchers' methodological stand and foster the creation of an *intersubjective* space as epistemological bedrock. In contrast to certain social scientists who wish to 'see without being seen' (*depoliticisation*) (p. 104), involvement in the field has positive outcomes on knowledge production and on field's actors in their pursuit of socioeconomic goals. The authors also convincingly show how sociologists' involvement allows them to grasp the spatial dynamics in which collective action and identity formation processes are anchored. The authors equally advocate for longitudinal fieldworks, which, despite implying researchers' constant 're-learning' (p. 93) to reach a 'negotiated and stabilised position in local power relations' (p. 138), is pivotal to study power relations reconfigurations and spatialisation, particularly as local actors' behaviour draw on 'inherited experiences' (p. 22).

The book's contributions also emphasise the effects of sociologists' involvement and legitimation efforts on their relations within the field. As researchers are taken into identification dynamics, they may gain further access to the field, which can go alongside their symbolic capital's instrumentalisation by local actors seeking legitimation (pp. 141–142). Yet, as benefits of involvement depend upon the temporal continuity of the field's coherence, legitimation strategies may ultimately restrict access to the field as its inner dynamics are disrupted. Furthermore, researchers must consider their inconsistent presence's implications for the field and its actors.

The book finds one of its limitations in the difficult generalisation of the positive input of personal involvement and close *habitus* to the field, particularly as the book is largely confined to the study of collective mobilisations based on socioeconomic claims. While a close *habitus* enables researchers to enter easily into the field and manoeuvre in it, the risk is to limit themselves to the perspective of peculiar actors (De Sardan's '*enclichage*', i.e., getting caught up in a clique²). This indeed restrains access to the rest of field, notably as it is

1 Bourdieu, 'L'objectivation participante'.

2 de Sardan, 'La politique de terrain'.

reconfigured – as Geffrouais touches upon (pp. 78–79). In critical fields where claims are based on religious or communitarian grammars, where violence may play a major role and challenge sociologists' integration, projecting one's distant rather than close *habitus* may prove a favourable posture to explore the crude representations projected in response to the perceived *naïveté*. While well insisting upon self-objectivation, the book also could have elaborated on strategies deployed by social scientists to prevent the unintended effects of the 'outsider' trying to 'blend in' the field.³ Moreover, the reader may, in some instances, regret the lack of consistency between theoretical concepts brought in and their articulation with the empirical narrative, as seen in Pereira's chapter.

In sum, this edited volume is a must-read for young sociologists, anthropologists, geographers and political scientists who wish to conduct fieldwork on collective mobilisations and movements, particularly when pertaining to socio-economic claims. It is especially valuable in reaffirming the importance of fieldwork given academia's neo-liberal bureaucratisation – intensified by the pandemic –, whereby institutional regulatory bodies encourage *uncoupling* data collection and analysis (via *subcontracting*) and research *securitisation*, lessening researchers' ability to critically understand the social world in its context.⁴

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3 Bourgois. 'In Search of Respect: Selling Crack in El Barrio'; Goffman, *On the Run: Fugitive Life in an American City*.

4 Baczko and Dorransoro. 'The Ethical, Epistemological, and Conceptual Need to Resume Fieldwork'.

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