THREE MEN IN A BOAT: EMBEDDED ACADEMICS IN THE STATE REFORM

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ABSTRACT:
Our investigations target different processes of government reshaping in France (agencification, democratisation, PPPs) in which we are involved within three policy venues (regional health agency, regional council, EU think tank).

Participant observation ensures researchers depart from conventional wisdom and ready-made concepts (Becker 1998). More, ethnographers access unattainable data which is particularly relevant for policy analysis. Beyond textual analysis of policy outcomes, researchers can follow the ongoing development of policy-taking (grey literature, backstage discussions/interactions, power struggles). Ethnography - observing what makes sense for natives - leads to unexpected research directions.

However, we contend that a detached objectivist stance fails to grasp informative elements that the social actors do not want to express for various reasons. A degree of indigenisation helps to be trusted in the social milieu we work ON and IN. Compared to quantitative analyses or expert-to-expert interviews, the added value of ethnography rests on the embodied experience of the investigator. Being simultaneously observers AND actors (trainee in a PR unit, associated researcher in an operational department, expert in a think tank), we address the shift from participant observation to observant participation. Analysing this bilateral transfer requires to study the heuristic disturbance we create (Devereux 1967) and the transformation of our Self gone native (Wacquant 2004)
Policy analysis, in France at least, progressively shifted away from a normative and managerial stance which was its initial raison d’être (Payre, Pollet, 2005). However, this tension between two typical opposite roles – the sociologist and the Prince’s adviser – remains vivid. Undoubtedly, the contemporary transformations of research policies and of the research profession (public and private commissioning; targeted subsidies; applied research; public-private partnerships) rekindle this antagonism. To a large extent problematic, this tension can nonetheless prove fruitful for an ethnography of the State that takes the researcher’s multipositionality seriously. It is precisely the perspective we want to develop here by mutualising our contrasted research inquiries on three processes of government reshaping in France (agencification, democratisation, PPPs). Taking the shape of an observant participation (Soulé, 2007) in three policy venues (regional health agency, regional council, EU think tank) which seems estranged to the canonical rules of sociological methodology and is often regarded as unprofessional by the academic establishment, we argue that our reflexive engagements in the State reform is of great heuristic value as it provides access to rare and unpredictable materials. Therefore, if our communication further develops the reflections on the renewal of inquiry methods in line with the contemporary transformations of research policies, it starts with the recognition that knowledge transfer from higher institutions to the governmental and private sectors goes both ways. We contend it is an exchange rather than a one-sided process.

Having said that, the “return” of the sociologist as a Prince’s adviser is inevitably challenging the belief in the “neutral axiology” required by Max Weber, the conception of the academic as a scientific “machine” (Devereux, 1967) or as a passionless observer (Naudier, Simonet, 2011). Clearly, the acceptance that research is bounded in practice by the different involvements of the scientist, his/her relationship to the world and to his/her object is not new (Devereux, 1967; Favret-Saada, 1980; Elias, 1987; Bourdieu, 2001). And this assertion appears even more sensible since anthropology has progressively become the darling of both the humanities and the social sciences (Tedlock, 1991: 79). Indeed, the ethnographic approach is fully structured by the researcher’s involvement as it precisely rests on “the direct implication, in the first person, of the investigator”, therefore, “the core medium of the investigation is the embodied experience” of the latter (Céfaï, 2010: 7).

By involvement, we mean the researcher’s getting fully absorbed – albeit intermittently – in the daily practices of the individuals he observes. However, one has to differentiate between the researcher engaged in and the researcher engaged by the field site. Any researcher resorting to ethnography is indeed involved in his field site: he is investigating, getting informed, interviewing, taking part in meetings, meals, in a nutshell in the most trivial daily practices of his field site. Consequently, the ethnographer has to analyse the social processes at stake as being simultaneously related to the milieu under examination and to the ethnographic encounter (Barley, 1983; Bourgois, 1995; Beaud & Weber, 1997; Bizeul, 1999). Barbara Tedlock labels this change in ethnographic epistemology occurring since the early 1970s as “narrative

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1 We want to thank Sara Belleil, Vincent Dubois, Jérôme Godard, Michèle Leclerc-Olive for their remarks on previous versions of this text.
ethnography” where the human experience of fieldwork is never separated from the ethnographic monograph. However, the situation is significantly different when the researcher is engaged by his field site; that is to say when his wage depends on the institution (or milieu) under examination. This situation creates expectations: as part of a “gift exchange”, the researcher has to produce expertise for the institution. Beyond a financial and hierarchical dependency and beyond the legal contract that directly tie us to our field sites and compel us to produce work for the institution, we also have to adopt appropriate behaviours that ensure our continued acceptance. Overall, we have to handle a set of constraints which, on the one hand, impose us certain roles that we will detail below and, on the other hand, condemn us to endorse them so as not to be marginalised or outcasted. In this figuration, the researcher is not only a marginal constraint or a marginal issue for the social world under examination. It would be comfortable to postulate the investigator can be an invisible observer (Becker, 1970: 46-47), but one would fail to grasp the analytical benefits related to the cautious examination of the disturbances implied by the very presence of the researcher. These disturbances should not be naturalised as nuisances exterior to us but are rather central to the coproduction of ethnography. As reminded by George Devereux, a crucial step is

“the acceptance and exploitation of the observer’s subjectivity, and of the fact that his presence influences the course of the observed event as radically as ‘inspection’ influences (‘disturbs’) the behavior of an electron. The behavioral scientist must learn to admit that he never observes the behavioral event which ‘would have taken place’ in his absence, nor hears an account identical with that which the same narrator would give to another person. Fortunately, the so-called ‘disturbances’ created by the observer’s existence and activities when properly exploited, are the cornerstones of a scientific behavioral science, and not – as is currently believed – deplorable contremeps, best disposed of by hurriedly sweeping them under the rug”. (Devereux, 1967: 6-7)

Just like the characters embarked on the boat trip over the Thames river depicted in Jerome K. Jerome’s *Three Men in a Boat*, we are embedded in our own journey in the State reform and will give account of our personal fieldwork experiences in a text – not a novel! – sprinkled with engaging first-person narrative vignettes. In other words, the article wants to detail the potential heuristics of our respective engagement in sectoral State reforms which are by and large underpinned by expert discourses under the aegis of “governance” (Georgakakis, de Lassalle, 2007) or “new public management” (Merrien, 1999), these hybrid – exert and lay – categories which are exploited simultaneously as concepts and slogans. Incidentally, our getting access to the field sites was most likely made easier by the core importance acquired by

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2 “The world, in a narrative ethnography, is re-presented as perceived by a situated narrator, who is also present as a character in the story that reveals his own personality”. (…) “In contrast to memoirs, narrative ethnographies focus not on the ethnographer herself, but rather on the character and process of the ethnographic dialogue and encounter” (Tedlock, 1991: 77-78)

3 We are indebted to Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan (1995: 75) for clarifications.
expertise. Hence, the paper questions the manner in which the “embedded researcher” interacts with his field site as well as to what extent these interdependencies can reveal a great deal about our own research objects. Promoting a revolutionary method with higher potentials than the traditional ones is beyond the point we want to make. In line with the panel’s theme, the issue at stake is to discover \textit{ex post} the unexpected benefits associated with a labour relation imposed by economic necessity. Consequently, we will address the virtues of ethnopraxis which is based on an indigenisation process (I), then turn to the disturbances generated by a researcher who is decidedly not an ordinary native (II).

I Making a virtue of necessity: exploiting indigenisation

The ethnographic study – at least to limit the resistances of those surveyed – implies a certain level of engagement from the researcher (Favret-Saada, 1980). The ethnographer inescapably tends to adopt the vernacular language and knowledge as well as the native practices such as professional savoir-faire, dress codes or indigenous rhythms (1.1). Nonetheless, this – never-completed – indigenisation is an iterative process which generates a wide array of gaffes and blunders whose analysis is relevant (1.2).

1.1 Ethnopraxis of clerical work

As our social inquiries are relying on observant participation, going native is all the more necessary that we are accepted in the field site as employee or trainee: it serves as a tribute to the tribe. Having said that, the obvious proximity between the academic production and the expert production – around clerical work – makes the conversion of our educational capital possible. Conversely, this narrow social distance is also quite disturbing for the researcher who has to conform to a new social and work world which is surely close but nonetheless governed by partially contradictory rules.

\footnote{This notion – which implicitly refers to the “embedded journalists” in Iraq – was used during our field research by some of our colleagues who meant we were hired in order to provide them with our “outsider’s look” and expert prescriptions.}
Three contrasted expert engagements

Our respective inquiry experiences concern three reformative processes: agencification, PPP development, democratisation. As such, the creation of the ARS (Health Regional Agencies) – studied by Marion Gurruchaga – is clearly part of the General Review of Public Policies as it is focusing on “readability”, “economy”, “efficacy” and “efficiency”. Voted in June 2009, this reform is meant to rebuild the health “territorial governance” by merging various bureaucracies whose history, routines and actors have been developing separately. In a similar vein, the multiplication of PPPs to reverse the obesity epidemics – investigated by Thomas Alam – embodies a similar will to “do better with less” thanks to so-called “win-win partnerships” where the State is only one actor among others. Paradoxically, it is the food and drink industries that invest part of their Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) budget in such health promotion programmes. As such, PPPs are celebrating the participation of “civil society” in public policies; what has been widely labelled as *stakeholder democracy*. This “deliberative imperative” (Blondiaux, Sintomer, 2002) – through the institutionalisation of participatory democracy (PD) within a Regional Council – is also studied by Julien O’Miel. As in the two reforms above mentioned, the PD’s implementation is very largely supported by scholarly writings which are here characterised by a normative tropism: a critical approach pinpointing the inefficiency of devices manipulated by elected representatives alternates with an enchanted perspective where participation is a means to subvert the political and social order. Overall, these three reforms contribute to renew the legitimacy of public action as they are closely linked to the universal prescriptions of the managerial modernity backed up by numerous scholarly writings. It is precisely the porosity of politico-administrative and academic borders that have made our engagement possible on the ground.

As for our relationship to the field of study, it is significantly differing since Julien and Thomas are to a certain extent salaried on the site as experts whereas Marion holds a PhD scholarship. Facing practical difficulties to grasp such a reformative turmoil, Marion managed to enter her field site by becoming a trainee within an ARS, only two months after the official creation of these agencies. Julien’s entry in a Regional Council happened through his hiring as a CIFRE doctoral researcher5. Finally, Thomas was recruited in 2008 as a post-doctoral researcher within a European think and do tank, the *Epode European Network* (EEN), which is funded both by the European Commission and the food industry.

The entry on the field clearly takes the shape of an observant participation as we make live the institution that we are studying. As such, Julien and Thomas are engaged in applied research and subject to managerial and normative objectives: identification of *best practices*, *benchmarking*, *monitoring* and production of *guidelines*. Lastly, as part of her six months work experience in an ARS, Marion was accomplishing tasks that are traditionally the remit of a communications officer (writing work, communication planning) and of a cabinet member (drafting of policy notes and speeches).

5 The CIFRE convention is a State framework whereby the student jointly works for the structure that employs him and for his PhD dissertation.
This process of adjustment to the milieu is as much a constraint (contractual relationship) as an intent (methodological bias) but is also highly structured by the researcher’s representations and expectations of the social milieu under examination (and vice versa), as illustrated by the following vignettes. As far as Julien is concerned, his role as researcher was neither understood nor put to the forefront at the beginning of his contract. He was then clearly perceived by the participatory democracy (PD) project manager as a direct competitor. In order to fit in, he had to adopt behaviours that did not alter the way those surveyed perceived him. As such, he fully endorsed his role of “super trainee” as he was tagged by his colleagues. In a similar vein, Marion adopted the cabinet timetable (9am-8pm) after several calls to order from her boss (“you are leaving now?”). Conversely, the change in Marion’s clothing habit – her jeans being switched out for a formal paintsuit – happened very early on when she negotiated access to the field because of her preconceived representation of a cabinet member. She therefore renewed her wardrobe by mimetism although no one ever hinted at it.

The heteropraxy, implied by not respecting institutional rites, is indeed mocked by those surveyed either through jokes or irony. For instance, Julien repeatedly suffered from it since he was blamed for not having organised the traditional welcome party in order to celebrate his integration. It was also the case for Thomas who, during a PowerPoint presentation, kept on looking back at the widescreen instead of checking his laptop in front of him, which his PR colleagues, found very amusing. Funny as they are, these mockeries operate as thinly veiled calls for order. They are even more efficient that they are expressed implicitly through the language of hint, innuendo and ambiguities, and therefore can be denied: “it need not be faced up to” (Goffman, 1982a: 30).

These events – which we could multiply ad nauseam – reveal a lot about what those surveyed hold as being the orthopraxy of their professional universe. As for the “embedded researcher”, the need to mimic the native behaviours is the result of some sort of direct and indirect orders related to work activities but also to the simplest rituals of conviviality. In our three inquiries, the paid work within the institution is a vehicle for indigenisation. Through bureaucratic or expert work, the researcher can handle and capture the categories of thought, codes, routines and unwritten rules of those surveyed. The demanded duties (recommendations) or their shape (the unavoidable PowerPoint for instance) familiarise the researcher with the ways of doing and the ways of thinking of those inquired. And yet these instituted practices and representations are

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6 “Julien, you are not meant to be a second project manager on PD” was the project manager’s explicit reaction to Julien’s request to attend a work meeting.

7 “Tact in regard to face-work often relies for its operation on a tacit agreement to do business through the language of hint – the language of innuendo, ambiguities, well-placed pauses, carefully worked jokes, and so on. The rule regarding this unofficial kind of communication is that the sender ought not to act as if he had officially conveyed the message he has hinted at, while the recipients have the right and the obligation to act as if they have not officially received the message contained in the hint. Hinted communication, then, is deniable communication; it need not be faced up to. It provides a means by which the person can be warned that his current line or the current situation is leading to loss of face, without this warning itself becoming an incident” (Goffman, 1982a:30).
generally out of reach for outside observers. To put it differently, the researcher has to adopt the ways of those surveyed – “se mettre à l’école des enquêtés” (Céfaï, 2010: 8): he/she performs the demanded duties (drafting of work meeting minutes, of summary memos on various projects, or recommendations), attends department meetings but also lunches with colleagues and *auberges espagnoles* organised for birthdays, retirements, the Epiphany, and so on.

Carnal sociology (Wacquant, 2005) – through ethnopraxis, an experimental form of ethnography – is therefore progressively transforming the researcher. The native rites, the rhythms and flows of the civil servant’s profession, are slowly imprinted into the researcher’s body. Quite insensibly, relatively unaware of these transformations, the researcher starts to complain about the slowness of the administrative machine or to criticise the elected representatives or the PR consultants whose directions are not clear enough. He learns to waste part of his time in endless meetings. He experiences the little sufferings and the little joys of those inquired. One can transfer to our field experiences – almost word-for-word – Loïc Wacquant’s analysis of boxing apprenticeship which he describes as “the almost imperceptible process whereby one becomes involved and invested in the game (more so than one would sometimes wish)”, that takes us from initial scientific curiosity to “the irrepressible desire to get it on” (Wacquant, 2004: 70) during meetings.

Overall, this process appears compulsory if one wants to capture the studied professional cosmos, its codes, practices and tensions. It also confirms the relevance of ethnopraxis as a technique for social enquiry. Having said that, indigenisation is never completed, which is neither possible nor desirable from a practical perspective. On the one hand, the researcher has to keep a minimal distance from the field – so close and yet so different – so as to guarantee his critical distance and his analytical capabilities. He therefore has to develop a dodging pragmatics which unfolds in various tricks in order not to be overwhelmed by indigenous tasks. The simplest strategy is to remind those inquired of our researcher status, but it is equally effective to multiply exits from the field (teaching, follow up of master students’ dissertation, academic reading, scientific production, holidays…) and to learn how to perform these indigenous missions speedily in order to save time for the ground research. On the other hand, as this indigenisation is never completed, the researcher inevitably adopts inappropriate behaviours. Rather than being artefacts, as a positivist vision of science would regard them, we hold these *faux pas* as fertile disturbances.

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8 The embedded researcher is faced with a schizophrenic tension as he has to choose between ethnographic bulimia – there is always something to observe – and physical distancing from the field.
1.2 Avoiding gaffes or knowing how to interpret them

If indigenisation offers some sort of heuristic profits, it is nonetheless operating in a diffuse, insensitive and partially unthought-of manner. Following Ernest Gellner, one has to admit that “for much of their life, men are not maximising anything or striving for some concretely end, but are simply eager to be included in, or to remain within, a continuing play. The role is its own reward, not a means towards some further end-state” (Gellner, 1985: 73). It is precisely what the gaffes reveal; those moments that remind us that “whatever social role the individual plays during a conversational encounter, he will in addition have to fill the role of interactant”. (Goffman, 1982b: 116). To put it differently, a form of social control operates within certain encounters, notably in collective meetings where, whatever role (academic or expert) we endorse, we cannot break the rule of etiquette or systematically argue and contradict our colleagues. Maintaining good relations with the co-workers we study is not only a methodological precaution, it is above all related to face-work (Goffman, 1982a: 30).

As such, the researcher is adapting to interactions and is partaking in the daily life of the institution he studies. However, as he is not entirely adjusted to this social cosmos which is sometimes very far away from what his socialisation has prepared him for, he makes wrong moves at time and disturbs his field site. Following Devereux (1967, Chapter XXI: 266-274), we argue that these distortions, rather than being artefacts, are revealing a great deal about the institution’s dynamics and the power struggles within it.

Whether it comes from a blunder, a contretemps, a faux pas or an incident, the palpable discomfiture in such situations says a lot about the internal economy of the milieu under study. To give a revealing example, in the first chapter of his book on selling crack in El Barrio (East Harlem), Philippe Bourgois (1995: 21-23) narrates how his clumsiness once put at risk his physical security. Surely, the humiliation caused by the unwanted revelation of a ruthless Puerto Rican gang leader’s illiteracy was hard to deal with as the anthropologist was condemned to make himself scarce around the crackhouses where he could only make camouflaged visits. However, this event indicates how much “upward mobility in the underground economy of the streetdealing world requires a systematic and effective use of violence against one’s colleagues, one’s neighbors, and, to a certain extent oneself” which has to be comprehended “in the logic of the underground economy as judicious public relations and long-term investment in one’s ‘human capital development’” (Bourgois, 1995: 24). Obviously, we never enrolled our partners and children in our respective ghettos, nor have we been confronted to such physical risks, but we all have experienced embarrassing situations or symbolic violence after unavoidable blunders (for the rookies we were) whose analysis can prove fruitful. As Jack Katz puts it (2002: 83), through these “poignant descriptions”, “the ethnographer grounds theory in the details of subjects’ lives and creates for the reader an especially memorable, distinctive picture of a social world”.

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As such, these “poignant” data are made even more accessible by the practice of observant participation which precisely requires an engagement in an iterative process of indigenisation. If these events leave a mark on the reader, they also leave a mark on the researcher as well as on the natives. And if these gaffes matter for us as much as they do for them, they prove to what extent we are engaged in the social milieu we work on and in.

“We are not the State”. Excerpts from Marion’s field notes, June 2010.

A few days after my arrival as communications officer, I am attending my first staff meeting and the agency brochure is on the agenda. As I had worked in a territorial State department for a previous research, I am surprised that the Marianne is not appearing on it since it is the case in all State documents. The atmosphere gets tense. The head of the department, originating from the Health Insurance, is called and shouted at several times by a civil servant – who also holds trade union positions – on the civil service status. At the end of the meeting, as most participants are leaving the room, I confess my astonishment to my boss. The reactions are diverse from the sardonic laughs of civil servants (“Come on Marion, we are the ARS now!”) to the staunch reaction of the head of the department who reminds me “the agency is not the State but an autonomous public body”.

This blunder allowed me to question one of the research hypotheses I made on the statisation of the health administration. Contrary to the French agency auditing hospitals’ performance studied by Nicolas Belorgey (2010) which backs its organisational prescriptions by the French Republic logo, the ARS dropped the Marianne from its institutional self-presentation. This embodies a distinction strategy vis-à-vis territorial State administrations and the préfecture, in particular. This event underlines the latent conflict between civil servants and Health Insurance employees as well as the ambiguous relationship between the ARS and its local institutional environment.

As such, blunders – which should not be multiplied to keep the researcher on track – reveal a great deal about the bureaucratic order, about our interactants, about their interpretation of reforms, as well as about us and the role conflicts with which we must come to terms. Broadly speaking, the sole presence of the “embedded researcher” creates distortions, which are not only faux pas and which find their source in his multipositionality. Being simultaneously a researcher, an “embedded expert”, a trainee and a colleague, he does his best to play with these identities in order to adapt himself to interactions. However, these different identities cannot be manipulated freely because of the partners’ expectations, needs and representations which the researcher also has to handle (Lefebvre, 2010: 230 et s.). These imposed roles or identities inevitably lead him to disturb his field site as claiming to be a dumb – non-interfering – researcher is simply not tenable. Our experiences highlight that our arguments, our stances and our remarks are likely to create chain reactions which have to be taken seriously in order to grasp the ambivalent relationship to expertise of the studied milieu as well as our own relationship to the object.

To give a meaningful example, Thomas’ self presentation as an independent researcher was challenged right from the start of the interviews with NGO representatives or health civil servants who were critical of the citizen engagement of food giants. “Qui vous télécommande ?” or “what does Nestlé want to know” were often the first questions asked to the EEN inquirer.
2. “Colleague” or “expert”? About different scenes of perturbation

Every situation of observation, be it participant or not, implies a permanent disturbance which is not captured easily. Hence, in the next paragraph, we suggest to categorise the disturbance we induce on the course of public action because of our observant participation according to the scenes and moments. We would like here to suggest a first exploratory distinction which should be further enriched. We think it is relevant to differentiate between high publicity disturbance (in arenas where a presentation of our expertise is expected) (2.1) and informal disturbance (in daily interactions where the expert status is less central) (2.2).

2.1 Expert participation to public policies and distortion

As an employee of the institution, the researcher partakes in the expert production of public policies. The disturbances we cause have to do with our colleagues’ reactions to the work we perform which is sometimes maladjusted to their expectations but they also have to do with our participation to public action, to the implementation of a reform which we are meant to study.

Learning to harden a soft category. Excerpts from Marion’s fieldnotes, November and June 2010.

In November 2010, I am asked to prepare the general director’s intervention to a conference organised by the Conseil d’État. Because of my academic training, I write a first draft with a problematised introduction and a plan which I propose to the head of cabinet. Burst of laughter from the latter who reminds me that in the agency: “I am not at Uni. There is no need for problematisation. We only need strong arguments, a little bit of sociological speak and that will do the trick”. One can clearly grasp here the researcher’s maladjustment which reveals the real expectations of the sponsor.

When I arrive in the agency, in June, the communications department is working on the agency’s brochure. It appears necessary to define the territorialisation of public action which is embodied by the agency according to its executive staff and to the discourse justifying the reform. The trouble is no one in the department has a clue what territorialisation means. Therefore I am asked to write this paragraph down since my boss views me as competent because of my PhD student status. The discussions with the general director and with the head of the cabinet have clearly oriented the draft towards a consensual definition based on proximity, on the efficacy of a response “closer to the territories”. Clearly, this new born institution had to find its place in a sedimented institutional environment. The definition of this soft category allowed me as well to shed light on an institutional struggle which I did not manage to objectivate earlier. From the onset indeed, territorialisation has been opposed to regionalisation. The semantic battle therefore revealed other struggles.

Overall, I partook in the definition and reification of a category of public action. This event is rich in terms of data as I accessed a set of working documents as well as informal discussions. Furthermore, the executive staff made explicit to me some of the constraints faced by the institution.
The engaged political scientist very clearly disturbs his field site as she hardens a soft category of public policy (Godard, 2007) and strengthens the native belief in its scientific relevance. This type of perturbation is thus particularly useful to understand how this internal bricolage operates around fuzzy concepts which are often taken for granted by the champions of cognitive analysis of public policies (Desage, Godard, 2005). But it also underlines the strategic dimension such a category represents in a bid to establish a brand new institution. Finally, it is more the social scientist’s label that sustains the belief in the scientific relevance of the category rather than the respect of a proven scientific methodology, as confirms, *a contrario*, the painful vignette below:

**PPP, Socio-history and ideology: a scepticism seen as heretic. Excerpts from Thomas’ fieldnotes, 5-7 May 2009.**

Less than four months after my arrival in the think tank, I had to present my first recommendations to the EEN Board in Amsterdam. Relatively unaware of the expectations of the sponsors, I presented a first slide about the epistemological dilemma for an expert-sociologist: “How to deal with normative issues in a sociological research?” I then presented the theoretical foundations of PPPs which are said to be based from the onset on trust and are seen as technical, politically neutral and “win win” operations. As such, I emphasised that PPPs were not an innovation of the managerial modernity but had a long history intimately linked to the socio-genesis of the State. Regarding the fashion of PPPs, I nonetheless underlined that we were witnessing a “commodification” of ethics which had become an “offer” from the corporate sector (Salmon, 2004). First recalling the need to think beyond the theory of “hostile worlds”, I then listed the benefits expected by corporate sponsors (“a discrete lobbying”, “a subtle PR strategy”, “material benefits” such as tax refunds) as I believed it was important to identify what could be the rewards before regulating PPPs. Finally, I wondered what kind of recommendations I was meant to produce: what is the priority in terms of “risk analysis”? Would the drafting of strict partnership rules jeopardise the (financial) participation of corporate partners?

The more board members casted reproachful looks at me as the communication went on, the more isolated and disadjusted I felt. But I could not imagine to what extent this methodological scepticism would isolate me after a very tough discussion. The head of the EEN urged me to drop what she saw as an ideological stance and to focus instead on local partnerships (which are probably less sulphurous). Among various reactions, the general director of the EU Commission’s Health and Consumer Protection DG advocated a change of vocabulary was needed. He suggested favouring “voluntary cooperation” over PPP as it is less symbolically loaded and advised me to define concrete parameters: “Talk about evaluation and accountability. Set explicit public good goals from the beginning, then develop monitoring and evaluation”. This interaction is enough to depict how sociological work is regarded with contempt and to what extent academism is seen as irrelevant compared to managerial evaluation. As a strong reminder, the head of the EEN confessed her concern two days later in a violent email “about the progress of my work but also about my focus and my positioning which do not match our reciprocal engagements and expectations”. She added that “the general framework of the grant agreement is non negotiable” and that “our objective is not to question the relevance of PPPs (…) but to find innovative solutions in order to regulate in an efficient and flexible manner the relations between the different stakeholders”. She explicitly concluded that “if EPODE’s philosophy was not in line with [me] (…), the terms and conditions of our collaboration can be reconsidered”.

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These multiple faux pas – certainly partly avoidable – have durably affected the way the sponsors of the inquiry perceived Thomas. As was later confirmed by consultants of Vitamin, the communication agency in charge of the EEN coordination, the company lobbyists judged Thomas’ intervention as hostile. To put it grossly, he was understood as thinking through a binary analytical category – “corporation = evil” – whose control is however the basis of social inquiry. Afterwards, as if he had become an undercover agent in a criminal network, he could not attend any meetings between the EEN coordinating team and the private sponsors. Although it is quite problematic for social inquiry, this disturbing event nonetheless elicits what is expected in applied research. It is highly unlikely that this event can only be summed up as the naïve discovery of the capitalist big bad wolf by the ingenuous sociologist. It is more a confirmation that expertise rests on a radically distinct epistemology from the sociology’s one, and condemns the fresh expert-sociologist to “the express learning of the expertise rules of the game so as not to lose face” and not to fall into professional schizophrenia: “In this case, one has to exchange Weber’s epistemology of social sciences, characterised by a comprehensive stance, for an ‘expert’ epistemology that is rationalist, scientist and radically action-oriented. In a world he knows to be uncertain, conflictual and non-popperian, he has to arbitrate, decide what the norm is (in terms of ethics or public interest), manufacture the “universal” and the “indisputable” truth, and ‘negotiate with the tension between scientific reservation and expressive will, neutrality and value, specialty and generality, description and prescription, facts and laws’ (Memmi, 1996: 75), that is to say to wear the too-big-for-him clothes of the moralist” (Alam, 2011: 245).

These two ethnographic vignettes highlight to what extent our participation in policy-making can prove heuristic. According to the reactions of the people we work on and with, it informs about the value and the political utility they attach to social sciences, about what it is expected from the expert role and, more broadly, about the functioning of the institution. These disturbances come here within the scope of a specific framework where the “embedded researcher” responds to the imperatives associated with the indigenous tasks he has been ascribed (expertise making in particular).

Other forms of disturbance have more to do with the institution’s daily life. To put it simply, when he is partaking in meetings, meals, or corridor discussions, the researcher is then acting as an ordinary colleague. Yet, this role demands that he reacts more or less enthusiastically to the imponderables of the institutional life to which he has to partake in and in which he cannot claim to be a “dumb” researcher who, on behalf of neutrality, would always refuse to take a stand. It is this argument we now want to address by questioning the way our apparently minor stand-takings can cause snowball effects.
2.2 Informal stand-takings: the politicisation of decisions

The engagement in the field enables to think about the concrete use of expertise in situ. Very clearly, what Julien, Marion and Thomas are asked is not “to question the relevance” of PD, agencification or PPPs, but to provide recommendations in order to improve the devices at stake. From this point of view, some elements of our expertise can also participate in the politicisation of certain stance-takings in universes which however do their best to display a technical, managerial and pragmatic stance on the relevant issues.

A good indication can be found in the way Thomas strived to illustrate the ideology underlying the PPP; an ideology which the activities of the think tank – as a typical neutral locus (“lieu neutre” – Bourdieu, Boltanski, 1976: 62) – precisely contribute to conceal. As paradoxical as it may be for PR professionals and food industry lobbyists, Thomas has also contributed to introduce incrementally bits of economical thinking in an entrepreneurial world which did not display such a pecuniary dimension. For example, one of the communication consultants insisted he should delete a slide devoted to the “corporate ethical offer” (Salmon, 2004) which was questioning the relevance of CSR from the commodification of ethics’ perspective. Similarly, any mentions related to the sponsors’ subsidies had to be deleted from the deliverables. Not only this information would have revealed differences in the level of generosity of corporate sponsors but it would also have highlighted – for an informed reader – the discrepancy between the allocated amounts and the marketing budget of food giants. Having said that, Epode’s presentation as a disinterested programme is not only a strategy to promote a favourable image of the food industry, it is also a mean to conceal the intermediary role of the communication agency. Indeed, the agency has not only acted as a service provider, it has clearly captured the programme, registered the brand and the associated concepts (which enables the agency to claim royalties), and has charged the Epode association disproportionate invoices for their services. As such, one of the value of the research Thomas conducted was to “open the eyes” of the president of the association (to quote her words) whose interest for budgetary issues dramatically increased. This collaboration was also followed by the designing and adoption of new internal governing rules which is a clear sign that expertise in political science – at least by the questions it asks – is prone to politicise public action.

Similarly, Julien, who was compelled to give his views in a working group, reintroduced the political dimension of the PD technical devices.

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As such, the implementation of a website was charged over 100,000 Euros and additional fees were charged for maintenance work. These elements were obviously deleted from official publications of the think tank.
The politicisation of a public policy.  
Excerpts from Julien’s fieldnotes. 27 January 2011.

The Regional Council decided its participatory democracy (PD) policy should be the result of a “co-construction” through the setting up of seven participative workshops evenly spread on the territory. The first step of the process was to organise a call for proposals so as to define the content of these workshops. During a preparatory meeting, external consultants associated to the project presented different possible scenarios for each workshop. Only the last workshop generated a real debate around four options:

- A. A workshop for participatory evaluation that would questioned what has been done so far;
- B. A workshop designed as an “open space technology” (sic.) with no central issue to debate on;
- C. A workshop that would answer the question “what would be a more sustainable and participatory Region?”;
- D. A workshop on the drafting of a PD charter that would define its framework and procedures after consultation with the present stakeholders.

The first person to give her opinion was the vice-president who stated her preference for option B, i. e. the experimentation of a technological dispositive. In other words, she made a technical choice rather than a political one. Sitting on the vice-president’s right hand side, I was the second person to be given the floor. In line with option C, my view was that considering that all the issues dealt with in the different workshops are technical ones, it would be relevant to give a more political or ideological flavour to the last workshop. Even if the vice-president reminded that this thinking had already been made within the Territorial Planning and Development Strategy, the researcher’s stand gave birth to a chain reaction. It is not possible here to cover the richness of the dialogues but every present actor had to express its own relationship to politics. Eventually, option C – the one I defended – was retained but its underlying political justification had progressively been eroded. The winning argument that finally helped to reach a consensus was that option C would “boost” (sic.) the development of proactive work. In other words, the outcome of the deliberation is that the pragmatic justification prevails over the political one. As such, this data created – in spite of himself – by the embedded researcher became a research hypothesis that has never been invalidated so far: the representative in charge of PD strives to neutralise the political content of this public policy.

This discovery is even more interesting that the politicisation of the DP is a more and more defended stand within the institution itself. The critique about the lack of politicisation of these issues, expressed in the meeting, is as much Julien’s personal critique as a stand defended by many regional civil servants and by external experts and consultants. It goes without saying that the significance of these “little informal discussions” after meetings should be deeper studied, as they can be viewed as micro-disturbances. Nevertheless, the latter, nourished by academic readings, could only reinforce the project manager’s conviction; in other words turning PD into an instrument for the socialisation of the lower socio-economic groups. Surely, more thinking should be done on the way in which the “embedded researcher” can contribute to rationalise actors’ ideas. But what we want to assert here is to what extent the stands he defended have contributed to sustain the existence of and actualised a relationship to politics among civil servants, which is therefore not only the privilege of top-ranking civil servants (Eymeri, 2003). Administrative agents regularly blame the elected representatives for being only managers. In turn, they do their best to make sure
politicians politicise internal decision-making further, notably by intertwining technology to worldviews.

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We hope this qualitative contribution, sprinkled with ethnographic vignettes and reflexive fieldwork experiences, raises new questions as far as universities and knowledge transfer are concerned. The point we want to make is that knowledge transfer is neither a straightforward nor a one-sided process. As such, we have mostly insisted on informal, unexpected and unthought-of transfers. Clearly, we were neither in a position nor in a will to radically alter public policies. Nevertheless, we may have informally contributed to transforming our partner’s ways of thinking which may have longer-lasting effects than rapidly outdated technological innovations.

In turn, our involvement in policy-making is also fruitful for a critical policy analysis. However, we neither promote nor impose a revolutionary method. Our involvement on the field is very largely a constraint and our approach is mostly driven by the will to make a virtue out of necessity. If our ethnographic involvement creates a whole set of practical, methodological and even psychological constraints (with the role conflicts related to our multipositionality), it nonetheless guarantees an access to the administrative machinery and to the reform in the making. Participant observation ensures researchers depart from conventional wisdom and ready-made concepts (Becker, 1998). More, ethnographers access unattainable data which is particularly relevant for policy analysis (grey literature, emails, database, backstage discussions/interactions, power struggles). Last, ethnography – observing what makes sense for natives – leads to unexpected research directions (Evans-Pritchard, 1973: 2). Facilitating repeated interactions, it also provides access to the individual practices and social properties of actors (Dubois, 2009); in a nutshell to a whole set of materials that are so taken for granted by the actors under examination that they do not elicit them in (often expeditious) interviews.

Being simultaneously observers AND actors, we also address the shift from participant observation to observant participation with a particular focus on our Self going native (Wacquant, 2004). As such, ethnography and observant participation enable the objectivation of subtle changes in the daily routine of civil servants who are usually unaware of them. In addition, this privileged access to the backstage immunises against textual and scholastic approaches of public policies which apprehend public action from an excessively rational, pacified and ordered angle and too often explain policy change only by the power of ideas (Desage, Godard, 2005). There is a high risk to comfort institutional discourses or the coherence of the reformatory programmes when policy analysis intervenes “after the battle” (Corcuff, Sanier, 2000), from outside, and resorts to semi-structured, expert-to-expert, interviews as a priority (Bongrand, Laborier, 2005).
Overall, thanks to ethnographic observation and ethnopraxis, our approach is particularly heuristic to design a sociology of work in the milieu we are involved in. More, if we take seriously the idea that the embodied experience of the ethnographer is the core medium of enquiry (Céfaï, 2010: 7), we touch upon an underlying — yet under investigated — notion of ethnographic work: the disturbance. Neither an act of contrition nor an uncalled for narcissism, reflexive thinking about distortion is becoming a prerequisite for the growing number of researchers who are getting involved in policy-making whether they like it or not. Actually, one can even wonder whether behind this argument there is not a “generational unit” whose “common destiny” is fully structured by the contemporaneous transformations of the scientific field.

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