

## Methodological, Epistemological and Political Aspects of Engagement of Social Scientists

Introduction

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# **Methodological, Epistemological and Political Aspects of Engagement of Social Scientists**

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## Introduction

*Emmanuelle Piccoli and Jacinthe Mazzocchetti*

Based on the notion of an impossible neutrality in social science research (Caratini, 2004; Fassin and Bensa, 2008; Hagberg and Ouattara, 2012; etc.), this issue of *Anthropologie & développement* will consider the challenges and potentials of explicitly engaged research projects in anthropology and qualitative sociology. If ethical and quality fieldwork research requires involvement and reflexivity (Ghasarian, 2002; Hermesse *et al.*, 2011; Piccoli, 2013), and if an empirical anchorage does not mean a theoretical blindness or the absence of a tool for assessing social reality (Burawoy, 2009), the involvement we want to analyze pushes the debate a step further by simultaneously claiming the possibility of a committed public stance and rigorous scientific research.

Beyond a simple argument, this issue aims to give researchers a voice regarding their practices of engagement and the challenges they encounter. What are the potential problems in justifying the stances taken? How, if at all, do researchers manage to juggle their multiple identities (as researchers, actors, activists, spokespersons and mediators...)? How can one combine scientific production, activism, political positioning and public pronouncement?

In this issue, we will consider how this positionality is played out in the choice of research themes and places of investigation as well as in the positions taken by researchers in their fields. Indeed, engagement is not always evident and is the result of unpredictable

interactions with multiple actors on the ground, including both public and private dimensions. Fieldwork might also provide researchers with an opportunity to develop understanding and empathy towards people and situations *a priori* antagonistic to their own convictions, such as political ones (Bizeul, 2007). In other situations, a sincere commitment can be inappropriate. In that case, the researcher may end up being caught up in the logic of mistrust and rejection he was trying to avoid. As a craftsman (Olivier de Sardan, 1995), the researcher cannot be satisfied with adopting a single posture throughout the length of his fieldwork. The researcher must be able to adapt to various events and situations and to grasp what is at play in the real – and therefore continuously evolving – situation, in order to avoid the risk of “losing” his field.

Moreover, engagement is not limited to the choice of research fields or the position taken during the fieldwork; it is also reflected in the theoretical choices and positions assumed in writings and in the methods chosen for constructing and sharing knowledge (Mazzocchetti, 2007 and 2015). Likewise, dialogues with non-academic actors are another form of engagement, whereas the academy is increasingly self-referential, caught up in the logics of publication credits and ranking (Bierschenk *et al.*, 2007; Mazzocchetti and Jamouille, 2007; Svampa, 2008; Mujica Bermudez and Piccoli, 2014). The recognition of an engagement helps prevent certain forms of insidious cynicism that may justify the lack of scientific courage to fully describe unequal or unjust realities. It could also be a way of fighting against forms of analytical and ethical resignations (Benson and Kirsch, 2010).

Finally, engagement has to be embedded in a deontological framework based on the absolute necessity to “do no harm” people in the field, which is notably the first principle of the ethics charter of the American Anthropological Association (2012). The injunction is wide: it touches on the physical integrity, dignity, direct and indirect damage to individuals and communities, their identities, their tangible and intangible environments. Several authors in this issue remind us of its

importance, and the fact that it is not just about ensuring individuals' anonymity, but can, more fundamentally, guide the writing process in order to protect sources, their way of life and the stratagems they use to survive.

The articles in this issue will therefore highlight how engaged positions shape field research practices, the construction of knowledge and theoretical orientations, as well as the subsequent of writing and public speaking that result (Sanford and Asale, 2006; Low and Sally, 2010; Beck and Maida, 2013). This will reveal a variety of approaches which, moving beyond naïve, preconceived engagement, enables researchers to develop practices that connect various fields (academic, practical, political, development-related...) and therefore produce innovative analyses.

More precisely, this issue covers three aspects of engagement. First of all, it considers the social science researchers' public engagement (Piccoli and Yopez del Castillo; Mazzocchetti). Next, it looks into the implications of researchers' political and personal choices in their fields and the importance of reflexivity in the production of knowledge (Bellè; Martín de Almagro Iniesta). Finally, it analyzes the impact of engaged positions in development projects, more specifically, the stakes of action research (Pannier and Culas; Daré and Venot).

At first, let's turn our attention to ethical dilemmas in the context of conflicts and glaring inequalities. In such situations, understanding the actors' logics may potentially represent a weapon against them. Several articles show that the claim to neutrality is impossible to maintain, particularly when intelligence services are working on the same field as social scientists (Piccoli and Yopez del Castillo; Mazzocchetti). In this kind of context, the production of knowledge is deeply ambiguous. Gathering data as well as writing are thus bound to become political acts.

Emmanuelle Piccoli and Isabel Yopez del Castillo analyze the evolution of the situation of the social sciences in Peru, as mining industry-related conflicts increase. Taking one of these conflicts as

an example, they show how so-called “neutral” data production may contribute to reinforcing inequality and the imposition of mining projects. In this context, according to the authors, it is essential to rethink “engaged” research and to distance oneself from a façade of neutrality. They consider three possible approaches: fostering a middle ground between the academic world and social activism; challenging discursive constructions and the general context debates take place in; and, finally, attracting attention towards what is emerging as alternatives.

Jacinthe Mazzocchetti pursues the same reflection. Her field lies in the Maltese islands, at the heart of the “war against migrants”. As she describes its issues and contours, it leads her to set limits to her ethnographic writings. Indeed, knowledge for its own sake is impossible in such a context, as it can be hijacked at any moment and used against those who entrusted their words to the researcher. Ethical vigilance must be constant and commitment to one side or, by default, to the other, is unavoidable. Moreover, at a time when both media and political discourses are constructing the image of migrants as a threat, as enemies, thus dehumanizing them, alongside works which attempt to give these migrants a story and a face: it is more urgent that researcher analyze those discourses and public policies, than describe survival practices in detail.

The following two articles consider the epistemological potential of engagement and reflexivity. While Elisa Bellè and María Martín de Almagro Iniesta share the same preliminary position, in particular, defining themselves as feminists, they choose very different fields. Yet, in both cases, they find themselves in situations of discomfort. The reflexivity about the differences between their personal positions and those of their interlocutors allowed them to progress in their research. Those articles show the importance of reflexivity and plead for the definitive disappearance of any pretense of neutrality of the researcher.

While most studies focus on progressive organizations, Elisa Bellè decided to analyze a reality in complete opposition with her

values as a socialist and feminist militant: the Northern League, a far right-wing party in Italy. She thus found herself in an awkward position. Although she was not doing a covert ethnography and she was open about her role as researcher, part of her identity remains silent: her political opinion. She considers the stakes and potential of this discrepancy on three levels: interpersonal, epistemological and political. The difficulties generated by a hostile terrain thus become a major interpretative resource.

In her research, María Martín de Almagro Iniesta revisits a domain that is, in principle, close to her convictions: transnational campaigns about women, peace and security. However, as her study progresses, she discovers the gaps between transnational discourses and those of local actors, as well as the diversity of positions, leading to feelings of tensions and discomfort. Yet far from contradicting the study or putting it in jeopardy, as it does for Elisa Bellè, reflexivity provides her with good tools for analyzing and understanding the stakes and struggles involved, as it is also the case for Elisa Bellè. Reflexivity is once more brought to the heart of research, not to justify a position, but as a methodological device for engaged research.

The last two articles discuss research carried out within development projects. In line with the work of APAD, these articles highlight the potential of collaboration between anthropologists and development actors. They focus on the importance of preliminary ethical discernment before the researcher makes an engagement combining two realities: scientific production and development projects. In both cases, researchers explain that they have chosen the position of facilitator/mediator in order to bring their knowledge and expertise at the service of the expression of the needs they saw in their fields.

In their article, Emmanuel Pannier and Christian Culas present their route of research and action in the field of anthropology of development in Vietnam. Analyzing the functioning of development organizations, the authors have identified a series of principles on

which they define the conditions of their possible interventions. Their first research results confirm their conviction that what is needed in the field is not new projects, but indeed mediators to channel the negative effects of existing projects. They thus embrace that role. Their article provides an example of how ethical principles can be used as markers in deciding whether or not to undertake action in cooperation with governments or enterprises.

Finally, William's Daré and Jean-Philippe Venot's article revisits the difficult balance between research and action. In the water management project they helped set up in Burkina Faso, they alternate between several stances in order to maintain the dual position of researchers and facilitators of local participation.

This 44<sup>rd</sup> issue of *Anthropologie & développement* on "Challenges and Potentials of Engaged Fieldwork Research in Social Sciences" is therefore designed to gradually zoom in, starting with discussion of engagement as a public posture, continuing with a debate on involvement as epistemology, and ending with reflections on action. We hope this issue provides further food for thought about our practice and engagements, at once inevitable and desirable.

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