

M. De La Madelle*
M. Selim*

Communication and Social Relations in the Ethnological Survey on Contemporary France

The personal integration of the ethnologist in the French urban zones leads to reconsider the conditions of his/her introduction into these social spheres. What position is then granted to him/her? What relations and what type of communication does he/she establish with actors belonging to his/her own society and acting in various fields? How does the creation of concrete interactions specific to the survey influence the anthropological knowledge under these specified conditions?

* ORSTOM, Paris, France
EHESS

The questions concerning the structure of the object as well as the personal relations established by the ethnologist in his/her field and considered as the methodological knowledge of the social and cultural facts produced by him/her crop up nowadays in a number of researches. This epistemological interrogation has been repeated and has been stimulated mainly by the development of an ethnological experience in urban zones over the last years. Social anthropology in its exotic tradition in its monographical or structural forms—did not seem to raise these questions originally in so far as the cultural distance tended in a certain way to make them marginal by placing in a dependent position the relations between the ethnologist and the actors. The objects of ethnology, either prefabricated or existing “in themselves” depended in a way on an exercise of knowledge: one had to avoid false “information” and to select correctly one’s informants.

In the 1970’s, the ethnologist “ethnologized” couple appeared with a particular profile under the influence of the prevailing contending ideologies which raise, among others, the problem of anthropology and colonialism. The ethnologist who is moved by deontologic reasons and gathers scattered elements in a new synthesis had to disappear as such in order not to tackle as “an object” the population studied “to the service” of which he/she had ideally to enter. Then he/she became the mouthpiece of groups-victims, and he/she gave evidence in his/her own field. The ethnologist who is involved in a “genuine” relation and conveys a “realistic” speech for it is based on intimacy, sharing and confidence longed more or less to be identified with the Other. As a corollary to the emphasis laid on subjectivity, his/her profession, nevertheless, depended more or less on the descriptive objectivity. From this point of view, the ethnological project conceals a basic ambiguity ranging from the reduction of the existential distance as part of the personal relations characterized by the cultural distance to a maximum distanciation inherent in the theory.

Finally, the interaction between the ethnologist and the subjects of the survey is viewed—with Gerard Althabe—as an heuristic instrument only in the early 1980’s. The ethnologist

who is involved in peculiar social relations and social organization seems then to be a main element of methodology and therefore of the production of knowledge. The analyses made in this way show that one cannot limit to the two choices of a foreign ethnologist in terms of culture and /or social difference within his/her own society or in a so-called exotic context.

Ethnology which is divided between the production of a distance and of a basic alterity and a will to "communicate" is from the outside seen as the discipline-in the field of social sciences-which constructs a knowledge very closely to the actors: "the integration" of the ethnologist into the group studied is, according to the anthropological practice, required to determine the way of life and of thought of the subjects. Materials are collected by observing directly the daily facts and movements and derive from a given speech as part of a personal and concrete relationship. What is seen as the formation of a privileged immediacy appears in the survey as a very complex reality sprinkled with multiple mediations. The latter depend both on the conceptualization specific to the data interpretation and on the social implications of communication within the survey which will be more particularly studied.

A. Beteille lived in a Brahman house when he conducted a field study in Tanjore in 61-62. This non-Brahman Indian anthropologist lays stress, beyond the exceptional "privilege" granted to him, on the effects of identification with the Brahman caste resulting from this settlement in the Brahman district. He explains how this assimilation makes him "suspicious" to the non-Brahmans and the adi-dravidas who considered him as a northern Brahman.¹ Therefore, his access to these groups is limited and he considers that his materials are of poor quality. But he points out that if he had settled in the non-Brahman district or still in the adi-dravida district, he would have been excluded from other places.

M. N. Srinivas who is a Brahman also tells how he is assimilated to the Brahman status during his survey on the multi-caste village of Rampura, although he belongs to a non orthodox

Brahman family which owns lands in the surroundings.² Therefore, he gives among various other examples that of the behaviours towards him during marriage or funeral ceremonies. Despite his reluctance to the gifts which are ritually offered to him by the poorest villagers, he is forced to accept them due to the prevailing social rules from which his interlocutors cannot depart in order to preserve their own status.

What lessons must be drawn from these observations? While they are made by ethnologists who study their own society but a society where social stratification is intensified, they show paroxysmically the strong relations between the ethnologist's position, the social structure he intends to understand and their mutual influences on the knowledge. A highly statutory social relation is evidenced in this particular situation: the ethnologist is limited to a status whose principles of formation are consistent with the structure of the society and are in a way rather independent of the survey. Therefore, the micro-social relation which is established between the ethnologist and his partners refers to the general social relations: there is no question of modifying here its configuration.

Let us move to another continent and introduce other elements in the ethnological confrontation. M. Duval³ in a village of Burkina Faso says that "he had refused . . . to be considered as a dominating person, to have held the position granted to us . . .". He thinks that he had been "placed in a marginal position" and had to face particularly difficult conditions for his survey because he had not accepted to be "the supreme ethnologist" as a "white" under neocolonial conditions. The French ethnologist considers like the already mentioned Indian anthropologists who gave in a way different answers that the information given by him about the society studied under these conditions are partial for they are drawn from a specific social position.

These remarks refer to clear situations in so far as the ethnologist is granted a status which—beyond the fact that it integrates him or not—seems to be decisive in the process of internal understanding of the group. What is the situation in

France? Although the question about the ethnologist's position is considered currently as essential in the analyses made by him, it depends on a situation where social identity is made from a series of different fields and does not seem to be able to be limited only to the status. The interrelations existing in the survey and associated with the characteristics of the microsocieties studied involve a range of negotiations and lead to multiple variations. Four fields will allow to outline these implications which are in the heart of the ethnological survey. Two of them have focused on the social structure within districts situated in Paris and Amiens.

Sevrin which is a former industrial and working zone at Amiens includes nowadays about 1500 people who are living outside the working conditions and the prevailing ways of life of the inferior classes. A brief account of the settlement zones and of the progress of the survey will allow to understand the type of relations which have been established between the outside actor, namely the ethnologist and the inhabitants. These relations where ethnologist holds a well defined and specific position reveal from another point of view the social behaviours of the population.

Prosaically, the survey required first that the ethnologist settled in the district. A small mud house whose frontage was weakly strengthened by an heterogeneous coating was let without too much difficulty. It was discovered thanks to a conversation engaged in a bar. An old inhabitant moved into a council house at Amiens to which he never got accustomed, as was revealed by his daily visits to the district. Once he had moved out, he makes daily long rides on bicycle despite his age in order to tell his former neighbours to what extent he is alone in his new flat. This man was granted a small amount of money in return for the improvements he had brought to his house, such as the fitting of a sink which was his sole comfort. At the request of a neighbour with whom one knew afterwards that he established exchanges of services, an individual came to clean the place summarily. The moving in was inevitably public.

He was welcomed by neighbours who offered him various types of help. He paid successive visits to several inhabitants who were more remote and very inquisitive in the following weeks. He supplied each of them with detailed observations about the reasons for this settlement and the objectives. They did not comply with any precise request and were welcomed with some lack of interest. On the contrary, they asked for something to drink and they preferred to talk about topics concerning the district and sometimes involving the host. The moving into Sevrin seemed to cancel partly in the people's mind the idea of a survey about it. This reluctance to determine that the settlement depended on other purposes and the will to interpret it as the first one seem a posteriori to depend on the coherent social structure. Nevertheless, this situation led to an intrinsic ambiguity which, in order to be entirely removed, would have suggested in a way to act contrary to the endogenous conceptions. Therefore, this ambiguity had to be tackled according to deontology. Therefore, the research conducted was constantly presented to the people. The Parisian place of residence and the journeys there and back between Amiens and Paris were explained. These explanations had little influence on the meanings assumed by the settlement in Sevrin. The general symbolization of the settlement is linked to the imaginary significance of the territory in the internal organization of the relations: the territorial organization is the central factor of the group's answer to its social and economic illegitimacy. Therefore, this territorial integration has been a decisive factor for the survey of which it represents, however, only a favourable possibility.

A few weeks later, the unexpected meeting with the secretary of the communist cell during the annual feast of the quarter led to a particularly valuable introduction within the population. At that period, the cell held lively meeting which were attended by inhabitants inclined to have relations with people from the outside. It was one of the forestages where was established a relation with the outside society. Luck had it that this cell secretary who was a local officer had a personal knowledge of ethnology.

Without any reciprocal arrangement and without any particular information on the progress of the works, he suggested to make easy the survey. The fact of having been accepted in cell meetings, of having given notice of the study and of having been invited more or less tacitly to contribute to the survey were significant recommendations. Under these conditions, the introduction into the small group of members and militants was a first step. The absence of political vision in the strict sense of the word—which is observed in the population led to the fact that this precise participation in a scene characterized from the outside as political does not lend itself to any final interpretation. The followers of this scene like those who were not interested in it hardly established any relation between the participation in merry meetings where one joked, drank and danced and any commitment. This view could be applied to themselves and to the ethnologist.

The whole relations were established with the inhabitants within a general set of relations which depend on the social status of the group of which it is in a way an extension: it involves a difference which is mainly social but not only between the ethnologist and his interlocutors. The modalities of this difference are specific in Sevrin like elsewhere.

Some surveys seem to be focused on the social distance which is observed between the ethnologist and the subjects. Then the imaginary assertion of this distance is in the heart of the relations and entertains personal relations. A survey concerning the inhabitants of a council house with 10,000 tenants in the northern suburbs of Paris who were minor wage earners, not very skilled among which there was a high percentage of immigrant families — allowed to observe such a situation. The natives tended to show their social conformity to the ethnologist. The latter was supposed a priori to be invested with a general legitimacy for which they longed. But their living conditions seemed to them to be significantly contrary to their conceptions. The social promotion which governed the views of their existence was in their opinion destroyed by their residential integration.

which is made negative by the "foreign" presence. The ethnologist who wanted to understand the inter-personal relations in the settlement was directly integrated into this internal contradiction. One made every effort before him to separate individually from a membership considered as ignominious. He was considered as a place of establishment with an illusory social distinction. One took him to witness a personal drama whose characteristics were on one hand, the symbolic interruption of a social rise—through the cohabitation with the foreigner—and on the other hand, the hopeless pursuit of the rise and of its dignity. Therefore, the confrontation between the ethnologist and the inhabitants was entirely governed by a social mobility which was suddenly interrupted. The mythical category to which the ethnologist was supposed to belong became a reference all the more obsessing as it seemed to be increasingly remote. In this situation summed up in a very simplified way, the behaviours showing a destroyed respectability multiplied. The adequate presentation of oneself gave life to the relations established in the survey. The proximity of the ethnologist was looked for as an evidence given to all of an ambition which had been broken. Therefore, the survey was based on a paradox: the general belief and the hope for a possible reduction of the social distance resulted in the creation of an irrecusable distance which outlined the relations which were, moreover, hearty. Quite another paradox governs the survey conducted at Sevrin whose motives are revealed a contrario by this development.

The social distance in its various and evolutive forms is in the centre of the group's theory which lays down as an interdict the individual social rise. From a certain point of view, the inhabitants get a clear view of the world to which the ethnologist belongs: it is the outside, prevailing and hierarchical society which is constantly faced by the population in an unspeakable position of inferiority. The outside actor who intends to participate into the social life of the district which is highly blamed from the outside gives rise to a totally unusual situation which is almost reversed as compared with the rooted practices:

rapid inroads of people from the outside who exert a disgraceful social control. In this peculiar situation created by the ethnologist, his capacity to resist to behaviours which are not his are first of all tested. One bids higher for infamous behaviours. One displays with some pleasure mixed with feelings of distress an ignominy of which one tries to make the most shocking exhibition. One waits for the ethnologist's opinion and the manifestation of his repulsion. One waits that he shows his personal distance as a symptom of a social distance affected by his presence. This behaviour which is always ready to reappear to the smallest indication of disapproval is led to diminish and disappear systematically with the familiarity created by the duration.

Then, relations have been established on other bases quite as significant. One tried to draw the ethnologist more and more deeply into the social environment of Sevrin and one evaluated simultaneously his capacities to separate from his own field. This relation seems to derive from the constant necessity of strengthening the internal cohesion and more precisely from the basic social relations represented by the decay. This relation gives rise to an imaginary obliteration of the social distance in the personal relations established in the survey. It involves a pseudo-integration of the ethnologist into the social structure. This integration originates from the global vision of an insuperable social distance which is strengthened at other levels.

This situation allowed that the survey is conducted without any real obstacle in very diversified directions. The materials collected derive first of all from the ethnologist's presence in situations either commonplace or not. The characteristics of the group and of the social relation in which the survey was conducted contributed to the fact that this presence could cover large spheres of the daily life.

It is obvious from the previous examples that the question of the position cannot be reduced to a mere abstract class relation. It can be tackled only by correlating the social structure under consideration with the problematics selected, the type of the materials collected and the modalities of the survey.

Let us leave the poor districts in order to deal with a very commonplace site known by everybody : the itinerant market, that of Carpentras and its unknown production market. The wholesale market confronts often well-to-do producers and consigners with the officer, a local employee. The economic implications are considerable. The social organization is based here on the exchange of goods between producers and consigners who buy to the former. Generally, consigners are prevailing.

From a physical point of view, due to the material organization of the market, the ethnologist takes the side of the producers who are fixed elements as compared to the moving consigners. The duration of his presence and the relations established outside the market, at their home or at the bar led to distinguish him gradually from the reporters, being the only "foreigners" they were used to see in the market. The ethnologist gradually was seen as an access to the outside world in a period of crisis linked to the slump and it is a relationship with someone likely to give evidence of the situation. The obvious relationship with the producers led consigners to try to justify themselves to the ethnologist who was identified from the outside.

The ethnologist's position is determined here by the type of the social relation between producers and consigners. It is linked to the view given for the work specific to each group. In so far as the ethnologist's presence was considered as a work due to his regular and very early hours, he built his position and processes of relationship have been established : thanks to the work achieved by themselves as well as by the ethnologist who thus had the right to settle, the legitimacy of their claims on one hand and of their role of intermediary on the other hand could assert themselves in front of a foreigner who had become perfectly legitimate.

On the contrary, the itinerant market is much more complex. The population is highly diversified in customers as well as in tradespeople. Generally, the market is seen as an area where sociability gets more scope than in the places of residence or

of work. Hierarchies tend to be apparently dissolved and this situation is meaningful only as compared to other situations of social and individual integration.

The traditional peddlars have been interested in the discussions. They often get a good situation and are satisfied with their activity so that they established with the ethnologist some relations which were not hierarchical: what is the structure of the social environment, namely seduction, familiarity and the staging of a collective display in which buyers as well as sellers participate prevailed in the survey.

On the contrary, the ethnologist has been confronted with the considerable marginal population in the markets of the area which refused to submit to the survey. It is composed mainly of former intellectuals who have broken bounds and they felt to be in a position of inferiority towards the ethnologist who practises "the profession which could have been theirs if they had not made other choices". Therefore, the survey seemed to be an attempt to level the positions from the actors' point of view. The ethnologist became a friend to whom one made presents, received and as an ethnologist, namely by placing themselves in a position of exteriority, they told about the market to someone who became finally their colleague.

The other side of the market is composed of the highly heterogeneous crowd of customers. For them, the implications are cultural. The market is a local patrimony and as such it is of interest to the ethnologist who is readily likened to an historian. One is very glad to show him what one knows, his customs and those of the others are mentioned all the more easily as one is secure from the social preoccupations.

These exchanges could be observed outside the strict limits of the market and the actors' life could be considered in the long run or because relations had been established outside the survey. Then the ethnologist's position was specific to each situation since he was not faced with an established group.

These examples show that ethnologist gets a position and a role in the survey which vary with the social relations specific

to each zone and therefore require to be analysed in a particular way. This point of view differs—among others from that put forward by P. Bourdieu concerning the researcher's position as compared to his study area. This position is then linked to his general involvement in the social stratification. P. Bourdieu aims at focusing on what "the vision of the object owes to the point of view, namely to the position held in the society and in the scientific field".⁴ This "sociology of the sociology necessary condition for a scientific sociology"—is necessary to the objectivation of knowledge but this methodological control remains from a certain point of view outside the development of the survey and its logic. Although this social clearing up of the general relation between the ethnologist and its objects seems to be essential, attention was—in the spirit of Gerard Althabe's works—drawn here in a complementary way to the specific processes inherent in the ethnological survey. The interactions between the ethnologist and the actors—who are an integral part of the social processes studied—are linked dialectically with its processes. They are an indication of these relations which are considered in a particular way because they depend closely on the microstructure of the endogenous relations and they can be understood only through the latter. Therefore, in order to understand these interactions, it is necessary to know the microstructure studied by the ethnologist.

Moreover, in this social relation which produces knowledge are involved the identities on both sides, the individual and collective ones of the ethnologist's interlocutors, but also the ethnologist's one. Although the ethnologist is considered as an actor of the society studied in the words of Gerard Althabe, which was revealed in the logic specific to this society—he is neither passive nor a mere "black box" into which the population could insert the status which would meet systematically the intrinsic requirements of its relations. In the survey, the ethnologist produces and rearranges constantly his role and his identity. As such, he actually exists and therefore he plays with his personal profile in which some people would find an always

unparalleled accumulation and crystallization of social and psychological features, his age, his sex, his "look", his habits. . . In return, all these characteristics, in a word his "personality" give rise to views from the population whose own coherence is meaningful in its systems of thought: therefore, the personal relation is also a component of the social relation.

Simone de Beauvoir always recalled that the status did not belong to women but they inherited it from their father and husband. This reflection must not be taken for granted. Starting from our reasoning and our experience, we can, however, wonder whether women would not profit by a small privilege as far as ethnology is concerned: could not the social flexibility representative of their status allow them to make more opaque in the views given by the actors the hierarchical relations which are instilled into the survey? Therefore, would not it be possible to conjure up moderate positions which would neutralize in the imaginary the existing domination relations? Would not these positions which are more open to the various situations be valuable to collect materials and observe the cultural facts?

Notes

1. A. Beteille, *Caste, class and power*. University of California Press, 1971.
2. M. N. Srinivas, *The remembered village*, Oxford University Press, 1976.
3. M. Duval, *Un totalitarisme sans etat*, L'Harmattan, 1985.
4. P. Bourdieu, *Questions de sociologie*, Editions de Minuit, 1980.

M. Selim
pas de page 64

page 4
page 19

F1

THE JOURNAL OF SOCIAL STUDIES

22 MAI 1995

ORSTOM Fonds Documentaire
N° : 40194 ex 1
Cote : B

43

**THE JOURNAL OF
SOCIAL STUDIES**



Journal of the Centre
for Social Studies
No. 43, January
1989

ORSTOM Fonds Documentaire
N° 110194 ex 1
Cote B