

Readings in Methodology

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Readings in Methodology

African Perspectives

Edited by
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CODESRIA

Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa
DAKAR

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Introduction: Questions of Method

Jean-Bernard Ouédraogo & Carlos Cardoso

All truth is simple: isn't this a double lie?

Bringing something unknown to something known lightens and reassures, and, moreover, provides a feeling of power. First principle: any explanation is preferable to a lack of explanation. Given that it is only a matter of ridding oneself of anguishing representations, we do not look too closely to find the means to get there: the first representation by which the unknown is declared known makes us feel so good that we hold it to be true.

Nietzsche

From the beginning, the principal reason for the organization of a series of methodological workshops for young researchers was the fact that no body of knowledge can be established if the procedures on which its knowledge is founded are not clearly established and mastered. And given that CODESRIA, as a pan-African institution, has as its main mission the promotion of a social science on Africa produced by Africans, such an objective is based on the certainty that progress in Africa can only be achieved by a rigorous intelligence of social realities on which it will thrive. This volume is, therefore, an assemblage of some texts produced out of those methodological workshops organized by CODESRIA since 2003. Naturally, the primary threat capable of compromising this mission could come from the approximate or erroneous exercises of collection procedures, theoretical treatment and presentation of social practices. Yet methodology is, unfortunately, often perceived as a tool box used in a fetishistic, mechanical and standardized way for which the researcher is thought to maintain a distant and deceptively instrumental relationship in the guise of intimacy. Moreover, this weak mastery of method – a dominant tendency today – seems to reduce the processes of scientific discovery to simple standardized procedures. Starting from such a limited methodological perspective, society becomes an extremely simplified reality, informed by effective prejudices imposed by a social order without which the

action so sanctified by the prevailing pragmatism would have no real political and ethical foundation. We understand that such a fusion of the quest for knowledge and transformative action considerably compromises the success of the two related moments; it is clear that the suppression of the distance, indispensable to scientific objectivization, renders problematic any research which is instructed by reason of the secret truth of the social world. With respect to action, its effectiveness is limited by the urgency which commands its implementation. This confusion probably comes from an approximate knowledge of the founding principles and conditions of implementation of the two terms that are improperly and simultaneously confused: research and action. The imperative of this direct action becomes the *credo* of all thought on social life, subjected by interventionists to an immediate and required correction. The break with such a tendency proves indispensable to the theoretical and practical construction of a scientific rigor which should always be at the root of the progressive unmasking of hidden aspects of the social world. We should immediately note that this encouragement towards reflection on methods does not mean, in our view, an acceptance of methodologism and theoreticism which is associated with it; these two existing tendencies in social research insidiously dominate and rigidify the approach of the researcher by giving methodological systems a status which keeps them distanced from specific problems that the construction of the subject poses. A technical sovereignty of method develops as a simple sophisticated manipulation of indices and empirical observations. It is also indispensable to keep one's distance from "anarchistic," poorly monitored methods in order to adopt a measured methodology, which considers both the theoretical construction of the subject and of the necessary adaptation of research techniques.

However, the question of methodology would remain poorly posed if it was considered only with respect to its technical aspects, because this technicity itself cannot be understood except if it is within a definition that is given for science. The understanding of this exposition of science, such as it has been historically constituted, puts into perspective the role of the stages of the conquest of a certain knowledge of the social world and allows us access to legitimized knowledge as central social issues. Indeed, the preliminary of all use of methodologies is a clear delimitation of epistemological acts which have the goal of discovery, an objective which is always socially defined. But we should also remember that the execution of epistemological acts obeys a logic of organization, the omission of which leads to a lack of control of the research process and seriously compromises its effectiveness. In all logic, observation depends on the theoretical construction of the subject, which happens only after a series of breakaway operations. Seen from this perspective, the question of methodology becomes more complex and its resolution requires a reflexive return towards

unresolved problems, perhaps not yet raised as such in the young African social sciences, but its persistence limits the performance of acts of knowledge.

Regardless the perspective from which we consider methodology, a first series of questions is essential: what is science? In what conditions should its exercise be considered legitimate and effective? This double interrogation leads us directly to the heart of the “science” system and sheds some light on the tendencies which govern it. Faced with these formidable questions, the weight of history, of the thought of the Ancients, imposed by the insistent shadow of progress, has deeply marked modern science by the power of its ambitions, and the requirements of progress lead to debates in attempting to order a limited vision of this unusual human practice. We can, nevertheless, assert that modern science is constructed on positivism which has, in fact, become apparent as the expression of the triumph of reason over metaphysics. But then, if the power of the science of nature as an essential factor in the modern world facilitates the everyday nature of men, thanks to techniques that it provides them, there is no reason not to accord the same degree of scientific nature to the social sciences. And, since the era of Quételet and Durkheim, the ambition of this science of societies was precisely to impose its rationality as an equivalent to the recognized causality of the natural sciences. This fundamental question of the logical practice of sciences, clearly posed by Pierre Bouda, retraces the universal scientific adventures that the critique of Wittgenstein revisits; this exercise allows us to situate the origin of his epistemological meditations and his disillusionment, faced with the systematic use of the hypothetical-deductive method in the human sciences. On the one hand, Wittgenstein recognizes the heuristic beneficial effects of this method and, on the other, he lamented that the triumph of this method led us to say nothing of the spiritual sources that he considers as procedures just as fecund as knowledge. According to him, philosophy should buckle down to working more energetically on this task of rehabilitation of these cognitive sources. Thus, he considers that the Ancients, who were well aware of the limits of knowledge of the world, were wiser than the contemporaries who believe in a causal explanation of all social phenomena. This epistemological differentiation may be explained by an evolution in the relationship to the world and not to science. This inclusion of science in the general system of human relationships is certainly not new, but it presents the advantage of clearly showing the influence of human contingencies in the objectivist rationality of science, and at the same time emphasizing the social issues that inform it. He observes that Freudian confusion between causes and reasons, i.e. between the elements in accusation and individual motivations, in psychoanalytical experiments led him to consider his discipline as a positive discipline. However, Wittgenstein thinks that to describe a human fact is to understand it, not the subjective understanding of Dilthey, but an objective understanding, i.e. an ability to participate in a form of life.

The contestation of this scientific hijacking of the social sciences revolves around the scientific status of procedures that they adopt in their discovery approach. The polemic on the scientific nature of the social sciences crystallized with Karl Popper in the establishment of an identity between “refutability” and the scientific nature – a correspondence which condemns the social sciences to a true contradiction: to accept the disqualification of “interpretation” in social sciences or only recognize it on behalf of phenomenology and intuition of essences. Protesting against such a domination of Popper’s criteria of the scientific nature on the practice of social sciences, Jean-Claude Passeron stresses the dangers of experimental illusion (Thom 1985) and the nomological dream.

Let’s dare to give an extended metaphor to say without superfluous precautions of language: we definitely wanted to encourage epistemological thought to not shut itself in the idyllic sheepfold of quasi-experimentalism where too many *Popperoid* sheep are grazing, without ever daring to lift their eyes to the fence of their cozy park. But this is surely not to invite the emancipated sociologist to go howl with the wolves of hermeneutic usage, always ready to chomp with much relish on all scientific nature that is a little bit fragile, especially if it is rather young.

Behind this radical criticism of the perspective proposed by Karl Popper hides a measured interrogation on the conditions of production of scientific discourse and especially on its appropriateness with the uniqueness of social phenomena.

Jean-Claude Passeron reminds us again, following in the steps of Max Weber, that this debate leads us to immediately add a critique to the sociological response which establishes a relation of causality between the “appropriate meaning” which allows for interpretation of social processes through a “causal appropriateness,” and which avoids being only hermeneutic. We are less surprised then when Jean-Claude Passeron asserts the unity in the practice of the social sciences of conceptual interpretation and empirical reference and reaches the conclusion of the existence of a scientific nature particular to types of knowledge coming from “empirical sciences of interpretation.” He accepts, nevertheless, that

in an empirical science, we can qualify as interpretative all reformulation of the meaning of a relationship between descriptive concepts which, in order to transform this meaning (enrich it, displace it or simplify it), should bring in the comparison of this relationship with empirical descriptions which do not exactly suppose the very ‘universe of discourse’ as the relationship thus interpreted (Passeron 1991:401).

The relationship between the order of logic – that of concepts, and the system of facts, of empiricism – appears as a central element. If the conceptual fragility of the social sciences is in their inability to produce a “protoscholarized” language

with the virtues of a sustainable paradigm, this lack of stability is probably another no less legitimate way to induct the perceptible world. Prigogine and Stengers (1986:14) note, "Henceforth, it is based on themes of stability and instability that our descriptions of the world are organized, and not on the opposition between chance and necessity." At the end of the day, the tandem interpretation/empiricism only maintains its coherence insofar as both the status of the two instances and the function of each in the statement of the relationship itself are clearly defined. Henceforth, the relational process is at the core of the theory and practice of the social sciences. We should note that this dialogue between the concept and the real is necessarily unequal, because, as Karl Popper has observed (Popper 1959:107) himself, "theory dominates experimental work from the initial conception up until the last laboratory manipulations." Such an epistemological reconfiguration gives a particular status to the theory which inserts empiricism completely in the discovery process subjected to its control. Perhaps it would be good to note at that juncture that, against a superficial theoretical academism, science, as an "incessant polemical act of reason", is developed by following the three axioms defined by Canguilhem (Canguilhem 1957:3-12) who, borrowing the epistemological positions of Gaston Bachelard, affirms: 1) "There is no obvious first truth. There are only obvious first mistakes." 2) A speculative depreciation of intuition: "In all circumstances, the immediate should give way to the constructed"; 3) The position of the subject as a perspective of ideas: "Our thought goes towards the real; it does not depart from it."

The preconception of the series of seminars proposed over these years was to consider that the practice of social sciences in Africa was profoundly and permanently modified by consultancy which, by inscribing research in a register of voluntarist transformation, thereby transformed the rules of objectivization, observation and comparison, all of which are at the basis of the production of scientific discourse. And there is more. The cycle of urgency in which research and analysis on the social sciences is embarked reformulates fairly radically these objectives on the individual and collective levels. Thus, both processes are standardized: the conduct of the researcher and the forms of writing which normally should reproduce the complexity of the social world and the indispensable precautions which accompany the process of discovery and the tools used on this occasion. By accompanying the critic who attempts to breathe a new dynamic into the science represented by the "hard" sciences, the current metamorphosis should win over the social sciences and organize in them an original relationship with the African social world, wrongly considered as too simple and, therefore, naturally accessible by rudimentary tools. It is probably leaning on this simplistic vision that practitioners of development – the principal backers of social research – have succeeded in imposing a certain vulgar empiricism in the research method, not at all fruitful, even sterile, and analyses of an obtuse and

just as ineffective utilitarianism. This ascent of an everyday pragmatism, according to the term used by Nkolo Foé, comes from a general transformation in social relationships imposed by the logic of the capitalist dynamic. Pragmatism, according to Nkolo Foé, as a theory of knowledge dominating the field of social research is, in fact, inspired by acquired knowledge of the capitalist industrial revolution of 18th-century Europe; it claims to understand the real from empiricism or immediate experiences of objects without effort of distance. This new post-modern epistemological form, which established itself as an alternative to the Enlightenment with its universal ambitions, appears much more as a technique of social engineering searching for solutions favorable to the interests of dominant groups in crisis. Jean-Bernard Ouédraogo and Pierre Bouda's text also emphasizes this broad tendency of utilitarianism in the practice of social sciences in an Africa under the influence of developmentalists. These two authors examine the dominant current of *social engineering* and the influence that it exercises on methodology and the aim of research in social science; they compare the ideal of the researcher as a "hunter of myths" to the current figure of the practitioner of sponsored research based on a methodological fixism in the service of an overused vision of tendencies of the African social dynamic.

This form of knowledge has had more and more success in the field of the human sciences, where it inspired one Paul Feyerabend, proclaiming that "Anything goes" (Feyerabend 1979), and a certain anthropological trend claiming to conduct research without hypotheses, the law of the "field" being their only guide. This methodological process which the author qualifies as the "laboratory spirit" has basically practical and utilitarian objectives in resorting to experimental action as paths of access to knowledge and to the preparation of economic revenues. After a reconsideration of the skepticism¹ of Wittgenstein, rejecting explanation and proposals in favor of clarification, and the nominalism of Berkeley, asserting the uniqueness of things and the names that men attribute to them in classifications of appearances, the author finally finds a solution to the epistemological aporiae which characterize current philosophical debates in the philosophical dialectic of Engels, Marx and Lenin. It is true that the inscription of philosophical reason in history, to borrow the words of Hegel, allows us to reduce tensions between the individual and society and between the past, present and future. This proposal appears relevant except that this long voyage can prove to be perilous and uncertain, the relationships of man to things and knowledge having greatly evolved and perhaps been resistant to the epistemological form which Nkolo Foé proposes.

The use of theory in such a context becomes totally illegitimate and outdated. "They will only see," remarks Bachelard in a similar case, "a museum of thoughts which have become inactive, or at least thoughts that can no longer be of any worth other than as a pretext for instructional reform" (Bachelard 1971:197). A

negation of the topicality of theoretical bases which attempts to posit the social sciences as “sciences without ancestors” (Bachelard) would also like to renounce all logical filiation which binds concepts and techniques in a same history of search for the hidden meanings of the human world which is, we should recall, the classical definition of science. As Gaston Bachelard has pointed out, the attachment to scientific progress is a pedagogical element indispensable to the formation of scientific culture and serves as a framework of expression of epistemological obstacles and epistemological acts, understood, he says as “jolts of the scientific genius.” We should not see in this obvious will to renew the heuristic function of theory, a disguised way of bringing about a nostalgic return to the past and of refusing all evolution of the ways and rules of the practice of science; this recognition of theoretical filiation, according to Bachelard, “is done instead to help us become aware of the force of certain roadblocks that the past of scientific thought has formed against irrationalism” (Bachelard 1971:200). Indeed, the rejection of a certain terrorism exercised by theoreticians and sterile pedantry should not lead us to renounce concepts, categories which are fundamentally attached to scientific practice. The revitalization of theory does not at all mean a greater detachment from the empirical; the facts, as they say, are the facts. They are captured from the perceptible world and recomposed in a body of theoretical hypotheses based on conceptual fixations of practices from the past. The methodological consciousness currently underway in the social sciences stresses the indispensable liberation of the researcher from “fumbling empiricism” to accede to “the age of rigor” (Schwartz 1993); indeed, the benefit of the critique of empiricism is that it leads us to recognize that what we believed to discover in the tyrannical regime of facts is only that of which we are, ourselves, the architects. Jean-Ferdinand Mbah discusses at length the process of construction of the subject to aptly indicate the central role of concepts in this measured reconstruction of the real. As a reminder of the tidy formula which has since become a platitude of epistemological thought which affirms that the real never has the initiative since it can only respond if we interrogate it, a number of classics of social sciences would fall in line with Max Weber to stress that “these are not real relationships between ‘things’ which make up the principle of the delimitation of various scientific fields, but the conceptual relationships between problems. It is only where we apply a new method to new problems and where we then discover new perspectives that a ‘new’ science is born” (Weber 1992:146). Conceptual investment serves the sole objective of better sketching out the most secret boundaries of the social world which reveals itself at the end of a series of operations of construction, of observation and a comparative litmus test of facts. “The work of science,” writes G.G. Granger:

is thus both to formulate these configurations, to construct them, and to *think* them, i.e. to situate them, put them in perspective in a broader experience,

because science thinks. What is this talent science has for thinking? We will start our train of thought by this question, because to think means here, basically, although in various ways, *to compare knowledge to the real* (2001:9-10).

Noting the necessary break with the clear, the immediate and the real life of common sense, Jean-Ferdinand Mbah invites the researcher to go beyond the immediate subject. Emile Durkheim, very early on, confronted this methodological problem of the conceptual recomposition of social relationships and faced the reluctance that this perspective of objectivization of facts created in certain scholarly milieus; he explains the intentions in his famous preface to the second edition of *Rules of Sociological Method*.

The thing is, he stresses,

any object of knowledge which is not naturally penetrable by intelligence, all that we cannot make an appropriate concept by a simple process of mental analysis, all that the mind can only understand provided that it goes outside of itself, by means of observations and experimentation, by passing progressively from the most external characters and the most immediately accessible to the least visible and deepest. To treat facts of a certain order as things, is not then to classify them in such or such category of the real; it is to observe a certain mental attitude with respect to them. It is in addressing the study by establishing the principle that we are absolutely unaware of what they are, and that their characteristic properties, like the unknown causes on which they depend, cannot be discovered by even the most attentive introspection (Durkheim 2004:xii-xiii).

And by this recognition of the duality of the social, the researcher undertakes a conquest of the hidden meaning of social relationships which never immediately give themselves up to the knowledge of the observer. He emphasizes the major stages and the precautions to take to monitor the approach which leads to the construction of the subject in contrast with the social uses that it is used for in the common world. In a sense, the social use of the concept of tribalism in Africa is a good example to reveal the social issues, spontaneous and scholarly pre-constructions, against which the researcher should battle to conquer his subject reformulated by the articulation of hypotheses.

To consider that science is based on the combination of logical reasoning and facts is justifiable. Yet, although it is very often evoked, logic, the science of reasoning, remains suspect of evading social reality because it applies specious and abstruse reasoning to it. Whereas logic is closely related to physics and mathematics, it remains little used in the social sciences. The text that Gbocho Akissi proposes shows the methodological potentialities of various fields of logic. By examining successively the “operations of the mind” contained in language

and logical reasoning, Gbocho Akissi clearly indicates that the concepts of “reasoning,” “argument” and “demonstration” are useful to the spirit of discovery. The various stages of the construction of scientific knowledge can, therefore, be supported by the rules of logic which are not reducible to the syllogism.² The author determines clearly, with the help of concrete examples, what practicing logic means and provides the necessary tools to get around the sophist traps which normally blur the argumentation of the researcher using natural language. The links that Gbocho Akissi establishes throughout the text between logic, argument and demonstration allow him to show the utility of this “science of the combination of clauses by reasoning” in the process of discovery and in the various stages of exhibition of scientific results. Entrance into the universe of logic leads us to the recognition of foundations of the production of science, expression of the curious human mind, and thus underlines that it consists above all in representing experience in symbols. These representations and perceptible experience which these symbols refer to are then subjected to rigorous operations of demonstrative reasoning. The introduction to this exercise of logic is also an invitation to the practice of an intellectual asceticism to give priority to a clear and rigorous presentation of scientific thought. Social science research has often undergone the negative influence of certain literary tendencies which favor good expression and style to the detriment of good thought; given how much esthetic concern confines to an exclusively ethical demarcation, we would be entitled to apply to this “literary” current the somewhat severe judgment, we admit, that Jacques Bouveresse puts forward on writings on ethics: “they are reduced,” he explains, “in a certain way to conjuring the absence of the subject by the indefinite proliferation of discourse; but at no time are they able to provide the assurance that a real question was posed and that something was really said” (Bouveresse 1973:9-10).

The universe of these pre-constructions also includes science itself by imposing prescriptions on it; it is illusory to proclaim the neutrality of science when we know that it is constantly streaked with social issues among which are those which appear on a daily basis in the relationships between communities, groups, nations and races. As a result, the question of where sociological knowledge is produced, otherwise the environment in which its technical and theoretical instruments of investigation are used, becomes crucial in Africa, given that the force of the social dynamic imposes a constant and decisive renewal of the hierarchy of social values. Inherent to the case of social science's sustainability on the national level, the usual issues related to the role of social competition, which is fairly well organized, become more pronounced as it happened under traditional colonial control which established new lines of otherness corresponding to a social division between subjects and masters, and between observers and observees. Political subjects immediately become the objects of a scholarly investigation often sponsored by

the colonial power as a means of management of colonial society. This type of knowledge produced under the colonial administration and designed for its policy can rightly be considered as a science of government; one of the essential characteristics of the original approach of anthropology, as a political science, is its being a science for command and in this role to conceive of knowledge as an operation of capture and manipulation. The political meaning and the epistemological consequences of such an observation require us not to question the observer and his heuristic instruments, but rather to assess the points of prehension that he leaves on his subject of study and in so doing to locate the forgotten dimensions of this subject to commit ourselves towards its recognition. The question not only arises after the social awakening of the native who becomes a sociologist, but also follows the observation of the limits of assumptions of “objectivization,” which are only transcended by a break from the dominant and normative heteronymous model permanently marked by colonial history and the encounter of two social forms. The question of the existence of this line of otherness remains well after the arrival of independence. The status of the Other is blurred, in the Moroccan case studied by A. El-Maliki, in this profound colonial history which creates an aggregate of problems and makes the construction of a new epistemology in accordance with the current social dynamic which is acutely felt. The question of the weight of colonial history in the development of social sciences in Africa comes only after the social awakening of the emancipated native; it is also the result of “objectivization” which will only be overtaken by a break with the dominant and normative heteronymous. Perhaps this subversion, by the epistemological deployment of the subject, until that point, the unspecified and passive “thing” of manipulation will help to better understand this complex world feeding our curiosity.

Even if the presence of theories were legitimate in the research process, it is not always clear to immediately agree on the conceptual types to use and the modalities of their link with methodology. Because conceptualization is not a sufficient guarantee to protect the researcher from a series of abuses linked to inaccuracy, cheating, and ideological exploitation. A critique of the idea of concept and of its roles in the apprehension of reality proves to be salutary. If theory participates in the construction of the subject by an embellished re-translation of the “problems,” the very definition of social space and the sociological contradictions that it contains is never a neutral operation, sheltered from influences coming from struggles on various social issues. It is for this reason that it is indispensable to the initiation of the research process that the appropriateness of used terms and concepts be clearly assessed, and that the principal of their adjustment be posited throughout the itinerary of discovery. These theoretical constructions do not really play a heuristic role of discovery in scientific practice, as they are firmly extended towards the realization of a “strong objectivity”

towards the research of a harmony of the theory with reality. To this end, we should know how to convert abstract architectures into absolutely scientific concrete questions.

Having posited this, in order to move forward, we should recognize that the perception, though theoretical and abstract, is the result of a social struggle for the definition of the organization of things. As everyone knows now, the viewpoint creates the subject. Masked by a false neutrality of techniques and theories, involvement in the knowledge of the social world is weighed down by a series of first concepts, of “preconcepts” that Emile Durkheim checked off from the first steps of the sociological science, and which will later lead Gaston Bachelard to stress the importance of the concept of epistemological rupture which begins with the first intentions of investigation under the critical procedure of the “preliminary extrication from all involvement.” The development of this epistemological vigilance, which should be constant, is one of the most essential conditions for training in social science research.

Bringing us back to the African context, Roseline Achieng' poses the question of the local production of categories of knowledge and the relationships that this type of knowledge entertains with the academic universe, here represented by the figure of the Western scholar, and of the dilemma which appears when researchers observe the society in which they were socialized. Roseline Achieng's concern is to examine the problem of the illusion of epistemological break in researchers in social sciences studying their own societies. This question arises sharply because the information which is provided by natives is done so by the distorting filter of the “*socialization proces*” of actors. Researchers should then be aware of this danger of the illusion of transparency in order to “*externalizé*” these conceptual tools, and therefore contextualize the analysis of the social reality in which they are also, necessarily actors.

Roseline Achieng' proposes three paths to escape from the corruption of the “mirror effect,”: 1) the trans-historical method which consists in revisiting local history to reveal the changes in the social morphology as well as the causes of these structural mutations; 2) the comparative method which includes three phases: “contextual comparison,” of social, economic political conditions of changes over time, “triangulation of methods ” which enables natives to “make their realities foreign to better understand them,” or to externalize them in order for them to be intelligible, and finally the social particularism which indicates a variation of perceptions by region, generation, race, ethnicity, gender, etc.; 3) interdisciplinarity, i.e. the enrichment of perspective of approaches between disciplines like sociology, medicine, chemistry, etc. It is also true, she says, that this collaboration includes risks in its generalization, but at least it has the advantage of allowing for a diversification of perspective of research and a refinement of the axes of questioning. We should, nevertheless, point out that the mirror effects, as

obstacles to the objectivization of research in societies with an oral tradition, do not only pertain to “native” researchers, and the history of the social sciences is made up of “scholastic distortions” in their relationships with the subject. Indeed, Pierre Bourdieu stresses, “when he refrains from analyzing the ‘theoretical’ position which he adopts with respect to his subject, social conditions which make it possible, and the gap between these conditions and those which are, in principle, the practices which he analyses. Or more simply, when he forgets that, as Bachelard reminds us, ‘the world in which we think is not the world in which we live’.” The ethnologist – shut inside his scholastic ethnocentricity – can perceive a difference between the two “mentalities,” two natures, two essences, like Levy-Bruhl – and others more unobtrusively after him, when he is, in fact, dealing with a difference between two socially constructed modes of construction and understanding of the world: the first which is scholastic, and which he constitutes tacitly as the norm; the second which is practical, and which he has in common with men or women who appear to be very distant from him in time and social space, and in which he is not able to recognize the mode of practical knowledge (often magical, syncretic, in short, prelogical) which is also in his most ordinary acts and experiences (jealousy, for example) of social existence.

Scholastic ethnocentricity leads to cancelling the specificity of practical logic, either by assimilating it with scholastic logic, but in a fictive and purely theoretical way (i.e. on paper and without practical consequences), or by referring it to radical Otherness, in non-existence and the non-value of the “barbaric” or the “vulgar,” which as the Kantian concept of “barbaric taste” reminds us, is nothing other than the barbaric of the interior” (Bourdieu 2003:77-78). The danger of opaqueness that this type of relationships to the subject infers leads the researcher towards the comfortable regions of “scholastic epistemocentrism” in forgetting to “return to the world of daily existence, but armed with a fairly conscious scholarly thought of himself and his limits to be able to think the practice without destroying his subject” (Bourdieu 2003:76). We need to recognize that epistemological radicalism often hides a weak knowledge of the foundations of the research process or, even more seriously, an intention of simplification and thus of exploitation of the phenomenon studied; in these two cases, methodology is reduced to being only a fetishistic idea without any heuristic objective being assigned to it. Roseline Achieng thus attempts to warn against the harmful consequences of the propensity which African researchers have to too intense an identification with the population studied – empathy which often blinds more than it enlightens the researcher, by substituting emotion for reason, feeling for moderation, and slogans for analysis. The social reality thus becomes the hostage of the feeling of ethnic or national membership. Although it is not desirable, nor even possible, to completely reduce affectivity in the scientific relationship to the subject, Norbert Elias (Elias 1993:12) made this a criterion of distinction; he notes, “What distinguishes the scientific attitude from

prescientific attitudes, thus less distant, concerns the relative proportions of the tendencies to distancing and commitment and as well as the modalities of their fusion.”

Referring to the exception, J.-L. Moreno, Roger Cornu remarks that sociology manuals generally separate training on concepts and on techniques and methods without ever stressing their interrelations. Roger Cornu emphasizes, however, that “if we look more closely, we can observe that the slightest of methods requires a whole series of theoretical questions both for the way in which it was produced and for its mediating between theory and the subject studied, or even in the way in which it is used” (Cornu 2005:394) ; and on the other side of research, he observes that “the sociological imagination exists only insofar as we consider that the question of tools is not a simple technical problem but that it implies theoretical issues”(Cornu 2005:395). Although we cannot always show the difference between theory and technique, it is always wise to construct a distinction between these two terms of the heuristic process and to clearly portray the foundations and theories which articulate their relationships. This is probably the moment to stress the importance of theory in research and to, therefore, break with the representations, as false as they are common, of theory seen as a sort of pointless speculation completely devoted to the realization of a uniquely abstract design. Yet, there is no need to come back to the modalities of the abstract (re)construction of the perceptible world with the goal of better discovering its most secret articulations. Is there a reason to suspect that theoretical formulation is incompatible with understanding social reality, because it is too far removed from it? On the contrary, is it justifiable to only stick to the practical function of techniques meant to immediately bring us closer to “reality”? Entire works on methodology in the social sciences refer recurrently to this false opposition and invariably provide a series of conventional responses to it.

Life stories, understood as a technique of investigation and discovery, correspond very well with the interrogation on the neutrality of techniques used in the social sciences. This reveals particularly the epistemological bearing of this seemingly banal operation of life itinerary collection. This technique places the problematic relationships between individual and society at the core of the debate; and this approach, by the apparent facility of its exercise, nevertheless hides a mass of obstacles which, if they are not overcome, might limit the performance of the approach. We should recall the acerbic critique (Bourdieu 1986) stirred up by the arrival of this approach to life stories which consisted in making the “subject” sacred and accepting a certain philosophy of life unfolding, following a chronology in which the subject would only be the corporal manifestation. It would then be sufficient to collect indices of this linearity by carefully following the sequential logic of the order of things and forgetting that this organization is a sort of “artifact,” an “artificial creation of the senses.” The main argument of this criti-

que consists in putting to the test the coherence of the narrative, which intends to impose a “significant sequence” and refuse an identification that presupposed the life story as the trajectory of a finished substance. And it is clear that recognition, even conventional, of the individual supposes that the influence, however decisive, of a whole social system be minimized, without which the singular element can neither exist nor assert itself as a particular subject. This is why we can understand and accept the argument of Pierre Bourdieu who attests that: “trying to understand a life as a unique, self-sufficient series of successive events without any other link than the association to a ‘subject’ whose consistency is probably only that of a proper noun, is almost as absurd as trying to make sense of a metro trip without considering the structure of the network, i.e. the matrix of objective relations between the various stations” (Bourdieu 1986:72). Following this critique of the false evidence of the unity and individual singularity, the question still remains as to the legitimacy of this approach and especially as to the way in which it could promote a better understanding of social processes which are seen in the interaction of life in society. Mokhtar El Harras, in reconstructing his Moroccan experience, stresses the complexity of the life story, the obstacles and ways to minimize them. He wonders how to overcome the fictional aspects of the life story and in what way anthropology can benefit from this particular approach.

Whereas films and photographs produced in Africa seem to confirm a certain exoticism, a sort of naïve distance for an aesthetic consumption of clichés, analysts have forgotten to question the use of the image as a means of investigation and discovery of social relationships. In her text, Clara Carvalho discusses the importance of audio-visual instruments (film, photography) in anthropological research. Referring to discussions which took place at the beginning of the 1970s, she leads us back to the origins of what will later be visual anthropology, born out of a tension between those who advocate the “anthropology of urgency” (Margaret Mead) and use film and photography as auxiliary means of research, and those partisans of an anthropology which assumes the form of a knowledge in which the relationship between the subject and the observer constitutes the foundation of a “dense” textual “description” (Kirsten Hastrup). The scientific potentialities of this new means of expression of human personal experiences have long been neglected within this discipline. The use of film and photography has long been considered a secondary epistemological act, despite the fact that it still has a number of enthusiastic defenders. Among the pioneers who begin to use film as an efficient research tool we can cite Marcel Griaule with his film “Au pays des Dogons [“Dogon Country”]” produced in 1935. Anne Attané presents concrete cases of the use of photography in the practice of social sciences and succeeds in showing that photography is perhaps not a means of construction and investigation throughout the research process, but it can be used, in still rare cases, effectively in the research results presentation phase as an autonomous

modality of the exposition of a final argument, without being pigeon-holed into the thankless and passive role of the “illustrative vignette.” In stressing the limits of the use of iconography in research, Anne Attané observes that the use of photography requires a good mastery of photographic language and recognizes that this new tool does not replace the classic means of research, but calls for combination and collaboration, thus an improvement in our practices by a reciprocal improvement in tools used.

In the early days of sociological science, the founding fathers discussed the possibility of using a comparison, of establishing causal relationships between various forms of “human development.” Émile Durkheim (2004) found in the “comparative method” the basis of the administration of proof in sociology. More recently, Marcel Étienne (2000) searched for the implementation of a “constructive comparatism,” thanks to an alliance between the historian and the anthropologist. The development in the African context of a demand for applied research coming from supranational organizations has abundantly solicited hence leading the comparatist approach astray – used with no rigor, reduced to being only a simple listing of disparate and associated facts without adequate theoretical foundations. The approach has had great success in various fields of the social sciences without any confrontation of the disciplinary specializations and the parallel development of methods being used to compare different orders. In this way, the African reader will find in this text a well-crafted presentation of the procedures and hypotheses in play from the comparatist perspective. Cécile Vigour, after having probably provided the most informed and most complete work on comparison, proposes a clear and precise synthesis of the conditions of exercise of comparison, the success of which very often expresses a great ignorance of epistemological, technical and political conditions. Comparison is not the simple proximity of facts. It refers strictly to principles and issues of the comparative approach and finds strategies to explain evident social facts in at least two entities. Cécile Vigour suggests that epistemological and methodological thought should be conducted prior to any comparatist approach. This leads necessarily to a general interrogation on the production process in the social sciences. In this way, comparison leads us to revisit the foundations of the social sciences.

Paradoxically, writing appears as a dismissal of research work. Often considered a prerequisite, an ordinary given of all intellectual work, it seems to be taken for granted, and its more or less brilliant mastery adds to the dexterity of academic competence. We forget, however, that for certain literary figures like Flaubert (De Biasi 1995), “to think well is to write well” is a good definition of literary work. This subordination of writing to thought is based on the heuristic function of language and as a result, is, according to Popper, consubstantial with the formation of the critical method which is the foundation of scientific progress. Indeed, he notes that, “The critical method even presupposes writing as much as

possible” (Popper 1997:21). Bidet and Lemeur’s text invites us to be vigilant of the false neutrality of writing and the abusive use of the effect of “pathos” in the exercise of research work; they then revisit the process of knowledge production through stressing the active function of discovery of writing and reading in each sentence. The two closely linked activities feed on each other as the researcher writes texts that he rereads and gives others to read just as he gains in knowledge by reading others. The two authors show the pressing need of being wary with respect to “artificial paradises of formalism” in writing, effects of styles which often make us forget that in all research work, as Bolzano suggests, it is necessary “to say clearly what we are talking about, in what way we are using such or such word, and then to indicate for what reasons we are asserting such or such a thing, etc.” (cited in Bouveresse 1999). After reading this text, it seems clear that it is not in the extreme stylization of scientific language that the social sciences will impose “their epistemological status by tearing them away from the sins of natural language” (Passeron 1991:154). Bidet and Lemeur’s text stresses the fact that writing in scientific practices is not only a modality of expression, a style, but is also a mode of knowledge and of discovery.

The texts included in this volume have the sole objective of enabling readers to consider with critical distance scientific commitment which suffers from a sterile utilitarianism often corrupting the creativity of researchers in the African context. It would seem that we should now suggest a break with the dominant *doxa* which, supported in this undertaking by developmentalists, refused to allow African researchers free rein in abstraction and requires them to occupy the thankless place of data purveyors in a global division of intellectual work where the spot favorable to the accumulation of symbolic benefits of recognition is forbidden to them. How can we construct a science, monitor its practices and formulate theories on which it should thrive without mastering the epistemological prerequisites and thereby daring to offer a measured contextualization of its results? This volume is an incentive for a critical look back on social science as it is practiced in contemporary Africa. The intention of the authors of this volume will have been diverted if after the reading of these texts it does not clearly appear that “methodology is not the private tutor or guardian of the scholar, but always his student.”

Notes

1. We will agree on the skepticism of Wittgenstein and his great distrust with respect to psychoanalysis and the anthropology of Frazer and accept along with Jacques Bouveresse that, “the phenomenon which seems to have most attracted Wittgenstein’s attention at a certain time is that of the transmutation of an interesting hypothesis into an *a priori* truth from the clarifying point of view into a mode of obsessive representation, from a revolutionary formula into a consecrated formula, from a theory into a myth.” in *Wittgenstein: La rime et la raison. Science, éthique et esthétique [Rhyme and Reason. Science, Ethics and Esthetics]*, Minuit, 1973, p. 27.
2. The obligatory and incontestable profession of this type of reasoning which deals with objects as an entity without “quality,” constructed from an extreme creates mistrust and suspicion.

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