STUDIOWORK AND FIELDWORK

2011: After the so-called "Arab spring", a summer of unrest and rioting in China and the UK ensues. Demonstrators on Tahrir Square, protesters in Guangdong, looters in Hackney – crowds on the streets, brought live to our screens. Film footage of revolt, interspliced with talking heads who provide us with real time analyses of causes and triggers of the protests. "We knew this was coming, it was merely a matter of time." Now, where does this analytical audacity stem from? What is it that enables the social analyst – sitting in a television studio, at a comfortable distance to Arab springs and London riots – to speak on behalf of thousands of protesting individuals?

WHAT DO YOU SEE: ARCHETYPES OR DETAILS?

Analysis-at-a-distance is an activity that owes a lot to sociology – the science that dares to speak confidently about "the social". Some hundred years ago, early sociological scholars set out to explain the behaviour of the masses, "out there" in society. Humans in society, sociologists said, are immersed in a "social structure" that formats their behaviours. The challenge is to uncover the fundamental laws of this social structure, much like a physicist that studies the secrets of elementary particles. Placing themselves as far away as possible from the humans, and using tools such as statistics, the sociologists discerned aggregate patterns of behaviour. Thus, sociology gained the confidence with which to describe, explain and predict the actions of great numbers of people. Not only that – it did so with the certainty that only objective science can provide.

As the 20th century progressed, ever larger sections of social life was conquered by such sociological certainty: More and more of the curious behaviours exhibited by the people out there could be explained with reference to social structure. Thus, sociologists would point to disparate events happening out there in society and argue that they are mere epiphenomena of an underlying structure. Thus, if you've seen one riot, you've seen them all.

How does this relate to what we see when we look at photographs? Looking at photos, or examining phenomena like riots, one question is crucial: Do we see details or archetypes? Consider the two images on the opposite page: The first picture is from Liverpool, August 2011; the second is from Paris, November 2005. On the one hand, these images may be seen as depicting different events, in different places, at different times. On the other hand, these images may be seen as depictions of some underlying, common cause. The two situations may look somewhat different, but this is merely an appearance that hides the fundamental

Liverpool, August 2011. Creative Commons BY-SA 2.0: Andy Miah.

Paris, November 2005. Creative Commons BY-SA 3.0: Alex P at nl.wikimedia

sameness of rioting behaviour. This latter position has been the default position of classical sociology: Though concrete events out there in society may display a certain variability, the endeavour of the sociologist is to tie disparate events to a conceptual ideal type. The world is not big enough *not* to contain the same social archetypes, repeated in various settings. Indeed, if you squint, the two images seem to show *essentially* the same thing.

JUST-THISNESS

There is however a alternative strand of sociological literature, which reverses this argument. According to these sociologists, the world is huge, constantly re-inventing itself to the point where we can only glimpse a tiny fraction of all that it can do. Therefore, the world is full of a dizzying multitude of local, concrete events – all of which carry their own "just-thisness". This implies a concern with how one particular event unfolds "just here, just now, with just what is at hand, with just who is here" (Garfinkel, 2002: 99). This perspective does not state that the world is total chaos; that there is no order. Nor does it deny that events may be linked by some common cause. However, it reverses the line of questioning: How is it, given the singular nature and "just-thisness" of each event, and given the sheer diversity of sites and general inventiveness of the world, that there can be order? How are the unique details of each just-this-instance – each so-called "haeccity" – arranged in such a way that one can discern patterns in the world?

So – going back to the photographs of burnt-out cars – what we see on the image is not only the archetypal burnt-out car. We see a plethora of details, that convey the just-thisness of the situation: Street signs, license plates, building architectures. This information is not to be disregarded – ignored through squinting – but used in the explanation of how *just this* event occurred, and why it might resemble other events. Therefore, this approach necessitates close and careful attention to detail, and to the specificity of the case. Rather than trying to recognise a general archetype of a burnt-out car, the sociologist instead tries to understand why the actors – just then, just there, with just that *stuff* available at just that time – constructed something that looks like other burnt-out cars elsewhere.

Turning the tables on sociology, this alternative literature asks questions like:

- Could it be that sociology should *not* be about explaining behaviours with reference to a pre-given social structure, but

instead about explaining how such structures and regularities emerge in the first place?

- Could it be that those structures and regularities emerge because the people out there in society are themselves "sociologists", constructing various accounts of how society hangs together, and enacting them in their everyday activities?
- Could it be that sociologists do not hold a privileged position that enables them to state what "really goes on out there"; could it be that the theories of sociologists are on the same level as the accounts of the world espoused by a random person hailed on the highstreet?

Answering "yes" to these questions does not spell the end of sociological inquiry. Indeed, there are many sociologists who do answer in the positive on all points, and still endeavour to say something about society. However, doing so requires the social researcher to let go of the gesture of doing analysis-at-a-distance, and instead get close to the people and objects out there in society. In short, it requires the researcher to do fieldwork.

OBJECTIVITY AND CLOSENESS

By fieldwork, I mean the type of qualitative empirical exploration of a site and its inhabitants, as practiced within the ethnographic tradition. Within that tradition, there is a lot that can be said about the notion of "field" – but we'll get to that in due course. At this point, it suffices to say that fieldwork implies an up-and-close interaction with the site and its inhabitants – be they human or non-human. This interaction is generally pursued during a long-ish time span. This allows the fieldworker to get beyond initial expectations and first impressions, and even undergo personal changes during the encounter with the field. In any case, the fieldworker is to get into the particularities of a particular (sub)culture, thus becoming initiated into practices and beliefs taken for granted by "insiders" of that culture.

First, however – before we leave the issue of getting close to the object of research – let's expand on the question: Why head to the field? One rationale for doing fieldwork sounds as follows: Heading to the field enables us to subject our supposedly global and omnipotent theories to the scrutiny of a recalcitrant reality. By doing so, this reality may well *object* to the rendering that we propose. For some philosophers of science, this is a key criterion in the pursuit of scientific objectivity: Is the object of research given the opportunity to object to the researcher's

rendering of it? Is the object rendered talkative or not? (Stengers, 1997)

A natural scientist invariably uses laboratory equipment to place the object of research in a position to object. Indeed, the laboratory is the only way to get the natural scientific object – say, an electron or a chromosome – to "speak". Fortunately, the social scientist can do away with laboratory equipment, because s/he can simply talk directly to the object of study. Indeed, why analyse at a distance when you have the great opportunity to get close to the object of your studies?

One example: During the London riots, social analysts were quick to apply motives to rioters, and causes of the uprisings. The socialist left argued that the rioting was produced by cuts in government spending, the conservative right argued that it was produced by a decline in traditional values. Interestingly though, the rioters themselves were rarely allowed to speak on their own behalf. In other words, the object at issue was scarcely allowed to object to how they were rendered by social analysts, sitting in TV sofas and writing in op-ed sections of English newspapers.

One could argue that this type of social-analysis-at-a-distance is natural, given the political nature of the issue. In other words, the issue should not be "depoliticised" and turned cold by social researchers shouting "wait, before jumping to conclusions, let's at least speak to one rioter!". However, one can equally say that by stating "nothing new going on here, the rioting is just another case of what we already know – the rise of neoliberalism/lack of traditional values", social analysts are indeed depoliticising and cooling down the event. Instead of being genuinely interested in the phenomenon – asking what new things it can teach us, how it can produce a *difference* in how we see the world – such social analysis forces the phenomenon into an already ossified, prefabricated theory of what the world is like. As such, it shuts down the political openings that might be contained within this phenomenon.

BECOMING PERTURBED

Going to the field cannot, however, prevent researchers from pressing the world into their prefab social theories. Fieldwork can be abused. Therefore, the privilege of getting close to the objects of study should not be wasted on treating objects and persons from the field as a canvas on which to project preconcieved conceptions of the world. The study of a particular site should not simply *illustrate something already known* – something already formulated somewhere else, for some other purpose. (Barry, 2010: 89) The field should be allowed to make a difference, to produce an "indentations" on the researcher's view of the world. The

more indentations, the more ”material” the ethnographer possesses.

Having collected that kind of material, the ethnographer will be able to produce a rendering of the site which is “rich” – but in what sense? One way of thinking about richness is ask the question “who is doing the interesting talking here?” (Latour, 2005: 30) If the rendering of the site is high in dazzling theories, intriguing worldviews, alluring depths – all displayed by the human or nonhuman inhabitants of the site – then there is richness in the description. If it is the ethnographer, unperturbed and “non-indented” by the on-site encounters, that comes across as dazzling, intriguing and alluring – well, then s/he could simply have written the same text as a novel, without bothering with going to the field. That would have been cheaper, more climate-friendly – and again, it would not serve the unfortunate purpose of shutting down the opportunity for the field to say something new.

Another way of phrasing this point is that the ethnographic text should “convey a doubling of perspective”. (Sennett, 2009: 67) As such, the text should contain (at least) two voices: the voice(s) of the individual(s) studied, as well as the voice of the ethnographer. This implies that the ethnographer must make a her or his best effort to write “as if” s/he actually is the object of research – no matter how little s/he sympathises with this position. Having done so, the ethnographer may also step out of this “as if” position, asking naïve questions or making normative claims that may counter the ones espoused by the object of study.

In any case, interesting ethnography is rarely produced by unperturbed, know-it-all-already researchers. Ethnography can be understood as a literary genre which traces the researcher’s movement over time, charting the metamorphosis that this movement produces in and around the researcher. This movement often follows a distinct pattern: Having gained access to the site, the newly-arrived ethnographer feels like an outsider in this new setting. Then, gradually, the researcher starts to decipher local meanings, processes, and taken-for-granted assumptions of the world. Increasingly feeling at home on site, and making new friends, the ethnographer starts to take a liking to it, not wanting to leave. The exit from the site may well be painful, but necessary: Only at home, at the desk, is it possible to write up the material.

So, to sum up this section: Choosing the route of fieldwork may be a thankless task. You make pains to enter a site, only to have to sever the ties to it – and when you leave, you feel as though know less than before. Moreover, fieldworking is slow, tedious, and is less likely to generate “the Great Critic high”: Fieldwork is *not* going to give you that rush of omniscience, that feeling of being able to see through everyone and

everything. Nor will it offer you that peace of mind experienced by the researcher that has reduced the world into one simple category. Another drawback is the fact that you have to constantly grapple with the ethical aspects of ethnographic work. (Fine, 1993) There are, indeed, inevitable tensions in very setup of such fieldwork: For instance, how do you deal with the fact that you are getting to know people in order to write about them?

FIELDS, DESKS, TEXTS

The above-mentioned terminology – gaining ”access” to ”the field”, making an ”exit” to write things up at ”the desk” – stems from the anthropological tradition. More specifically, the field-desk separation was developed by Bronislaw Malinowski, whose 1922 *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* is sometimes deemed the genesis of modern ethnographic fieldwork. (van Maanen, 2011: 10) The origins of this book is testimony to the colonial heritage of anthropology, with researchers from the Western powers travelling to the colonies to explore local cultures. Prior to the Malinowskian shift towards participant observation of local cultures, early anthropology often observed at a safe distance. Some anthropologists even opted out of the chores of travelling: Letting junior researchers collect materials, their work was entirely office-based – hence the term ”armchair anthropology”.

However, as hinted in the section on just-thisness, there is also a sociological lineage within the ethnographic tradition. This lineage emerges from mid-twentieth century ethnographic studies of sub-cultures in the rich world: Starting with William Foote Whyte’s 1943 *Street Corner Society*, it passes via the so-called Chicago school of urban sociology, and on to ethnomethodological so-called ”breaching experiments”. In the latter experiments, the participant observer-researcher deliberately breaches taken-for-granted rules of conduct, thus exposing the constant ”repair work” needed to maintain the everyday social order. In other words, one can speak of an ethnographic division of labour, as noted by anthropologist Marshall Sahlins: ”Sociologists study the West, anthropologists get the rest” (cited in Van Maanen, 2011: 21).

Today, however, such separations are breaking down. Anthropologists and sociologists are now doing ethnography all over the globe, and ever new sub-cultures are now deemed interesting as sites for doing ethnography. For instance, ethnographic studies of scientists and engineers – science and technology studies, notably actor-network theory – has had a considerable impact on the recent development of social theory.

Interestingly, the field-desk separation is also breaking down. When Malinowski first introduced the terms, they implied that the ethnographer would sever all the ties to the field, thus being free to write about the place. Moreover, the objects of the ethnographic study were not expected to read the final text. Today, such separations between field and desk are becoming increasingly difficult to maintain. This is partly due to the simple fact that texts travel more easily today. However, there is also a deeper issue at stake here: Since contemporary ethnography often explores powerful communities with an interest in how they are portrayed, ethnographers may never be completely free to write whatever they like. In early anthropological studies, getting access was the key problem – how do you get to the remote site, how do you become accepted by the members of the community? Today, the ethnographer may well get access to an interesting site – but the threat of litigation may prevent her or him from really exiting it.

In this way, the classic Malinowskiesque ethnography may well be drifting towards obsolescence. Instead, ethnographic work may become an iterative process, in which the representation of a site is passed back and forth between the ethnographer and the on-site participants. (Mosse, 2006) No exit, no closure.

ETHNOGRAPHY MEETS PHOTOGRAPHY

Another tendency in contemporary ethnography is the increased usage of photography and film. Richard Sennett concludes his lecture *How I Write: Sociology as literature* by suggesting that we are indeed going through a visual turn in ethnographic rendering of social life. Today, many of his students present their work on "minute data-sticks containing hundreds of photographs or hours of computerised film" (Sennett, 2009: 73).

For Sennett, writing up ethnography has always been a literary endeavour – a matter of conveying the lived experience of the fieldworker to the reader. As such, ethnography may well make use of photography to achieve this very effect. The practice of photography can even be *more* suited to this purpose than the practice of writing: Sennett cites the street photography of Thomas Struth as one example of an expression that is difficult to match in writing. The photographer-fieldworker of today is however faced with a particular difficulty: The contemporary world is saturated with images, leaving the photographer with the challenge of prompting the viewer to dwell on the photographs presented to them. In other words, the "visual analyst of society will have to create a counter-culture to the surfing of images; he or she will have to find new

techniques for making visual experiences."

Let's follow Sennett's example, and conclude this text on the cross-breeding of ethnographic and photographic practices. For ethnography and sociology, there is much to be gained from this development. Not only can the ethnographer-photographer potentially express things that the ethnographer-writer cannot: As alluded to above, the photography can also be used as a device for expressing the just-thisness of a site – provided that the audience dwells on the image, and is not compelled to squint.

For photography, current debates within anthropology and ethnographic sociology may well inspire new approaches to documentary photography. Indeed, the issues raised above are in many ways applicable to photography. It is, for instance, tempting to compare studio-based photography to the type of "studiowork" performed either by fiction authors in their "writing studios", or by social analysts in TV studios. Like some of the best literature, studio-based photography can engage with social and political issues through fiction. However, it is also important to recognise some of its limitations in terms of dealing with the actual. Just like TV studio-based social analysis, it can only re-tell that which we already know, which invariably curtails the claims that it can make about the world.

Studio-based photography *may be* thought of as a rendering of the world "out there"; staged photographs can be understood as elegant and highly stylised representations of archetypes. However, seeing studio photography in this way requires us to adhere to a worldview that stipulates that the world is small, and essentially consists of archetypes. Field-based photography, on the other hand, allows us to see the world as irreducible to such archetypes, because it is simply too huge and too diverse to already exist in the minds of photographers or social analysts, sitting in their respective studios. The field-based photographer heads to the field, hoping to make it object to what we think we already know about it. In this way, fieldwork may counter the "nothing new going on here" mantra that sometimes emanates from studios.

In heading to the field, the fieldworker-photographer knows full well that there are two politics at stake: On the one hand, the politics of subjecting something or someone to the gaze; on the other, the endeavour to *not depoliticise the sheer inventiveness of the world* by stating that we already know everything about it. The wager of the fieldworker-photographer is that the gaze-related risks are more than offset by the political potentials of granting events and phenomena a chance to express difference.

This political potential can be captured through the French verb *expérimenter*, which denotes both practices of "experiencing" and practices of "testing" or "trying out". (Stengers, 2008: 109) In the studio,

photographers and social analysts may speak, and reconnect already existing meanings – but the world remains mute. In the field, lived experience may provide us with new propositions regarding what *other* things the world can do; what other things it can become.

/. Uddevalla, October 2011

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