Reflections

Fieldwork in Algeria

Jean Peneff
University of Nantes, France

Abstract: This paper describes fieldwork experiences in Algeria following the revolution of the 1960s. It is generally known that political context affects both the methodology and findings of research. Although it is assumed that the political scene and the economic circumstances profoundly affect fieldwork, we have few descriptions of how this occurs. We need more reports of the way sponsorship determines access to the setting, permission to study there and the researcher's relationship with informants. Sociologists are influenced as much by their own ethnic and political identification as they are by sponsorship. How do these factors interact? This reflection on the fieldwork in Algeria offers a case study of the various factors influencing access to informants. It contrasts two approaches—the overt and covert presentation of self as a sociologist. I present this note as a contribution towards a sociology of fieldwork conditions.

I studied Algerian entrepreneurs after the revolution of the 1960s—a war between the French army and the Muslim people. This war led Algeria to independence, completely changed its economy and its social structure, and also disrupted France, where the democracy was twice threatened by rebellions in the army. In Algeria, the French army was very repressive, with torture practiced on a large scale. The French extremists decreed a scorched earth policy and, in the last months of the war, destroyed large parts of big cities. Nevertheless, the peace treaty between Algeria and France indicated that former French soldiers could be recruited by Algeria as civil servants to help construct the new country. Most of the French people living in Algeria: engineers, doctors, teachers, clerks—almost a million persons—left Algeria suddenly in 1962.

The idea of this paper stemmed from a talk given at the Department of Sociology at Northwestern University. I thank the members of the Department and especially Howard Becker who suggested that I write this piece. I must acknowledge my debt to Arlene K. Daniels and Shulamit Reinharz who helped me by providing advice and suggestions to improve the draft. I thank, too, Ch. Tucker for editing assistance in English. Address correspondence to: Department of Sociology Ensemble L BP1025 44036 Nantes.
Consequently, Algeria needed new personnel to pursue the tasks of administration and economic activity. I was one of a group of four or five French people who found ourselves heading the department of sociology at the University of Algiers, abandoned by the French professors of the colonial era. We were each around twenty-five years old and suddenly, incredibly, we were in charge of a department of one hundred students. It was a strange situation. The ancient and venerable University of Algeria, the former center of French terrorist activities, was now opened to Muslim students, among them old militants of the Revolution whom the government allowed to resume their studies. I was chosen as chairman, probably because I was the oldest and already had my PhD. I was probably the first chairman in the history of sociology departments who had never before taught or done any research.

This report draws on personal anecdotes from that period to show how I was able and not able to conduct research.

In my study of Algerian entrepreneurs, I faced many problems, created by the political context which had to be solved as I discovered them. As it turned out, the study of business entrepreneurs meant taking into account the political scene (different powers competing in a young country), the legacy of the past (how an Algerian and a French person could engage in a dialogue and how the latter could study the former after a terrible war), the cultural differences between the Algerian and the French (language, mores), and the ideological contradictions of the economic system (how to conduct an inquiry on capitalists in a socialist country claiming that capitalism is going to disappear).

Overt Fieldwork, or Political Scene and Sponsors

In the 1960s, Algeria was moving quickly, building a new economy and social order. This rapid social change led to my interest in a part of the economic system: new industrialists around the city of Algiers. That seemed interesting to me because Algeria was thought to have no industry and to be unable to create any after the departure of the French. The French had predicted the country would remain poor and restricted to agriculture. But, a few years after the Revolution, industry was thriving in Algeria, new plants were launched and native Muslims were beginning to meet the industrial challenge.

How had this industrialization come about? It was an interesting field for study because it was also a political issue. The government faced social policy questions about the form of political economy that