Chapter 5

The Methodological “I”: Implication and Explicitation in Fieldwork

Introduction

Classic, more or less Durkheimian positivism is now a thing of the past, as was mentioned previously. In the social sciences, the exponential progression of texts written in the first person testifies to the fact that author subjectivity is no longer discreditable. It now seems in good taste to make a discrete—and sometimes not so discrete—display of subjectivity. Field journals, researchers’ biographies and autobiographies, reflexivity, more or less methodological self-analysis, and all manner of reflection on the question of subjectivity are some of the ways in which the “I” is invading sociological, anthropological, and even historical texts. It is true that this invasion occurs at various levels: the first person is sometimes used to sign a parallel product that is clearly distinct from the classic scientific work derived from the same material; sometimes the first person flags an intention to join a self-proclaimed epistemological revolution; sometimes it claims to be the expression of new methodological vigilance; sometimes it slips absentmindedly or systematically into the final writing up of a research report; sometimes it is in itself an object of reflection. Drawing inspiration from Lourau (1988), who distinguishes the text (the scholarly work) from the off text (the field journal), we could say that the subjectivity of the researcher, formerly confined in the off text, is now increasingly expressed within the text, becoming at times the specific object of a metatext (i.e., of a reflection on the subjective aspects of the texts).1
Anthropology is indisputably the field in which the “I” is the most prevalent and entrenched. The work of Favret-Saada features among the most frequently cited contemporary references and seems to have opened the way for this trend in the 1980s and 1990s, alongside Rabinow. Yet we must recall that even from the inception of ethnological fieldwork, Boas, Malinowski, or Evans-Pritchard did not reject the use of the first person. Nor should we forget that more than 60 years ago Laura Bohannan published a very personal account of her anthropological experience in the field (albeit under a false name, and in a fictionalized form: Smith Bowen, 1954). This work was followed by that of Hortense Powdermaker (1967). In France, Lévi-Strauss occasionally used the first person (for his famous *Tristes Tropiques*). Of course, Lévi-Strauss emblematically illustrated the fact that the narration of subjective experience is not incompatible with the production of otherwise classically “objectivist” work of the type often characterized as “intellectualist.” It suffices, then, to make a clear distinction between these different approaches.

Berreman used his personal experience in a lengthy paper of overtly methodological intent, entirely devoted to the question of impression management (a concept borrowed from Goffman) in the relationship linking the anthropologist, interpreters, and local actors. Yet his name is often forgotten in the list of the trailblazers. He was the one to combine, perhaps for the first time, the text, the off text, and the metatext. In his work, the mobilization of the lived experience of field inquiry became simultaneously the object of methodological thought and the topic of scholarly publication.

The American postmodern wave produced, from the 1980s onward, a profusion of works on the anthropologist’s subjective relationship to his field, the nature of his relationships with the subjects of his inquiry, and the narrativization of his personal experiences, fortunes, misfortunes, or emotions.

Over the last 30 years at least, French sociology, which was formerly on the sidelines of this phenomenon, has progressively adopted writing in the first person. Self-analysis has taken root in such a journal as *Genèses*, despite its situation at the crossroads of traditions we would have expected to have little inclination for subjectivism, namely Marxism and Canguilhem’s sociological legacy. It is true that this self-analysis is presented as the precondition for enhanced objectivity. Similar remarks may be made regarding Bourdieu’s disciples, following his call for reflexivity.

Given such antecedents, it is surprising to see neophytes in the dance of the “I” striking postures of pioneers or methodological adventurers,