

DOCTORAL AND GRADUATE SEMINAR 21 – 22 November 2022 Free of charge

Raconter la vie / Lifestories told

Venue: The American University of Paris, 6, rue du Colonel Combes, 75007 Paris

The focus of this workshop is on the research methodologies that can create / have created democratic knowledge. We will explore: ‘What is democratic knowledge?’; ‘What are the characteristics of democratizing research?’ and ‘What methodologies support democratization as research?’ Not to fall into a performative contradiction; the knowledge creation practices of the presenters as well as of the participants will be discussed and examined. The theme of social studies and democratization raises the question: ‘What knowledge does (can) social studies produce in support of genuine self-expression and governance?’

There is a long tradition of social studies dedicated to discovering life as lived and empirically experienced. The research methodology is less interested in ‘generalizability’ than in ‘authenticity’; it answers to an ethics of respect and democracy. It is research that mistrusts cliché and celebrates openness to other. Its research methodology is more informed by communitarian ethics than by the will to abstraction, repetition or control. Edmund Husserl is one of the philosophical sources; especially in his insistence that the refusal to actually see, hear or attend to the lives of others has been a crucial source of (twentieth century) political violence. This is a research tradition of ‘care’, democracy and respect for the other.

Past examples include the Chicago School of Sociology which was dedicated to the respectful examination of lives not normally seen, valued or esteemed by academe. Or, Studs Turkle’s radio ethnographies that revealed how ordinary people feared atom war and possible extermination. Or, James Agee’s ‘Let us now praise famous men’ that researched the poorest of the poor during the great depression. Or, Kathleen Stewart’s contemporary return to the same villages Agee had visited. The attention for felt circumstances has been featured in a research balanced somewhere between anthropology and sociology; it has also been featured in organization and accountability studies. Contemporary examples include: investigating the ‘commons’ (Hardt & Negri) and Graeber’s anthropological economics.

To achieve research that supports and defends democracy the ‘rule of the people’ has somehow to be constituted; but how can this be done? Democracy is the ‘rule of the people’ but ‘the people’ is an abstraction and one open to abuse. More specifically, how does research co-constitute a democratic culture and/or democratic knowledge attune to ‘the people’? We wish to ask this question not *per se* as politically engaged, but as organization and accountability researchers.

To turn to French examples: Pierre Rosanvallon towards the end of his College de France period (2001-2018) created an experimental project: ‘Raconter la vie’, which was a form of radical ethnographic research. Howard Becker (2014) placed the project in the line of Agee, Turkle and the Chicago School. Rosanvallon’s life work centered on studying the defining and creating of ‘democracy’. A crucial issue is the ‘people’; on one level, democracy is ‘government by the people’ --- but what hereby is the ‘people’? As a category the ‘people’ can be an invitation to anti-democratic essentialism; for instance when identified with the leader in a populist authoritarian politics.

To investigate what is ‘the people’, Rosanvallon launched the ‘Racontar la vie’ initiative inviting persons outside of the normal literary or social studies cannon to write about themselves. The project produced a series of short books (+/- 60 pages each) and a series of ‘blogs’. The aim was to create space for the expression of personal unicity and give expression to ‘ordinary life. Rosanvallon was a champion of ‘autogestion’ or a democratically organized economy and society; ‘Racontar la vie’ was meant to be a way of letting social studies contribute to the awareness needed to support democratic action.

There are other French research examples calling for and/or demonstrating the ‘voice of the people’. We think of Jacques Ranciere’s description of democratic awareness and action; and/or Bernard Stiegler’s projects for an economy of contribution.

To achieve democracy the ‘rule of the people’ has to be constituted somehow; but how does one do this? Rosanvallon asked this question not as a politician but as a researcher. Unicity and generalization are a crucial tension to his project. The researcher can pledge to reject her (his) power position, but does the researcher actually achieve any such renunciation and how so? Social Studies has a long history of becoming (as Foucault claimed) a tool of hegemony and power. In its history anthropologists have had the task of creating the knowledge needed for successful colonial rule; and psychologists provided the tests needed to quickly form efficient armies. The addressing of the ‘social problem’ by sociologists or of economic depression by Keynesian economists are much more positive illustrations of the uses of social studies power.

Thus, taking the potential contradictions and pitfalls of research as a means of democratization into account; what research methods and models do we propose and why so?

Specifically we propose to examine:

- The ‘Racontar la vie’ project --- its goals and methods;
- Democratic research methods;
- Democratic *transdisciplinarity* --- methods of researching complexity;
- The ‘ethnographies of accountability’ project – its methodologies and challenges;
- Researching the voiceless --- (paradoxes) of ‘giving voice’.

Participants:

- Stephen Sawyer (U of Chicago Paris & Professor at AUP) assessing ‘Racontar la vie’;
- Hugo Letiche (IMT-BS): research as (potential) democratization.
- Ivo de Loo (Nyenrode BS) / Hugo Letiche (IMT-BS) / Jean-Luc Moriceau (IMT-BS): ‘Ethnographies of Accountability’ and the dilemmas of social studies in democratic accountability.
- Jean-Luc Moriceau (IMT-BS): a critique of ‘Racontar la vie’
- Phillippe Mairesse (ICN & Chaire Unesco): reflections and images.
- Robert Earhart (AUP): researching outcastes.
- Albert Cath (AUP): tales of sustainability.

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