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Les sciences sociales en question :
grandes controverses épistémologiques et méthodologiques

Proceedings of the 66th session

Ethnography of Organized Crime: The Case of Brazil

9 October 2023

Nonna Mayer (Sciences Po, CEE, CNRS) opens the session with a thought for her friend and colleague Fariba Adelkhah,¹ before introducing the topic of the session session².

Today's seminar is about ethnography. Ethnography involves spending time in the field, establishing trust and intimacy with the people observed. But how is this possible when one investigates illegal, often violent, activities and networks? Drawing from his ethnographic fieldwork on various criminal groups in Brazil, Gabriel Feltran³ (Sciences Po, CEE, CNRS) tells us how he faced the epistemological, ethical, and practical

¹ At the time still forbidden to leave the country, but happily back in France since October 17.

² Proceedings recounted by Justine Brisson, reviewed by the two presenters.

³ Gabriel Feltran has recently published "Variations in Homicide Rates in Brazil: An Explanation Centred on Criminal Group Conflicts", *Dilemmas, Rev. Estud. Conflito Controle Soc.*, 4, 2022; "(Il)licit Economies in Brazil: An Ethnographic Perspective", *Journal of Illicit Economies and Development*, 2 (1), 2019; *The Entangled City: Crime as Urban Fabric in São Paulo*, Manchester University Press, 2020; *Stolen Cars: A Journey through São Paulo's Urban Conflict*, Wiley, 2022.

challenges involved in this task. Federico Varese⁴ (Sciences Po, CEE), a specialist on organized crime, discusses his methodology, drawing from his own research.

Gabriel Feltran's intervention

To give an idea of his ethnographic fieldwork, the first part of Gabriel Feltran's presentation tells the story of Ricardo, an 18-year-old whom he knew, who took part in a homicide and then was killed in the year 2000.

Ricardo was absorbed into the revenge cycle that was usual at that time – linked with the arrival of international cocaine trafficking in São Paulo and very high levels of homicide. One week after Ricardo's death, Gabriel interviewed his mother three or four times; she didn't cry because she thought she had already lost him two years previously, when he entered the "world of crime" as she said. His death really moved Gabriel. At the time, he was not yet a social scientist but Ricardo's story helped him to become one.

Ricardo's death occurred before the Primeiro Comando da Capital (PCC), the most powerful crime network in Brazil, had become hegemonic in São Paulo's poor neighborhoods. When Gabriel went back to Ricardo's old neighborhood to do fieldwork in 2004, he was told that there were no longer lethal crimes in this area. Killing was no longer allowed; to kill someone you had to go through "a lot of bureaucracy". Even up until today, he gets a lot of information on the regulation of homicides in São Paulo, especially videos.

He shows one video with two men arguing, one telling the other that he is not "a good criminal". This type of video circulates a lot in São Paulo through the criminal networks. Gabriel has been receiving them on WhatsApp for years. The important thing is that they are filming a man who says that he is against the PCC. This man was kidnapped,

⁴ Federico Varese has recently published "The Determinants of Group Membership in Organized Crime in the UK: A Network Study", *Global Crime*, 23 (1), 2022 (with Paolo Campana); "Rigorous Ethnography" in Klarita Gërxhani, Nan de Graaf, Werner Raub eds., *Handbook of Sociological Science*, Edward Elgar Publishing, 2022; "Ethnographies of Organized Crime" in Sandra M. Bucerius, Kevin D. Haggerty, and Luca Berardi eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Ethnographies of Crime and Criminal Justice*, Oxford University Press, 2021; *Mafia Life*, Profile Books, 2018.

judged by the criminal group, and eventually killed. His killing would have been shown everywhere in the neighborhood where people are against the PCC. It is recorded on another video Gabriel won't play, due to the violence it shows.

Gabriel insists on the fact that there is a huge difference between Ricardo's homicide (which is part of a vendetta system, common before the PCC era) and the type of homicide foreshadowed by the video he showed (which is part of an organized and institutionalized procedure). However, the victim's profile is the same – Black, young, male, coming from a very poor neighborhood. Gabriel explains that there has been a huge decrease in homicide rates, not only in São Paulo but in all cities where the PCC is in command. Showing aggregated data for four cities in Brazil, he explains that these rates are not chaotic at all, as the press and the police say, but are in fact strictly controlled by different criminal groups. He suggests that rather than having a dichotomic and polarized vision of organized crime, it is necessary to adopt a more sophisticated approach.

The second part of Gabriel's presentation discusses the ethical and epistemological issues related to his study of a criminal organization. For this kind of research, he is convinced that it is important to have a very long-term inscription in the field. One must be very clear about what one is doing in this type of environment. He chose for instance not to use hidden recorders or cameras and to always introduce himself as a researcher. In terms of substantive ethics, he insists on taking the other person's perspective very seriously. It is important for him to be available for long-term exchanges even after fieldwork. Also, he explains that introducing himself and his goals as academic is essential. He doesn't ask permission to do his research: it is a legitimate and public activity. He does sometimes have to negotiate his presence as a researcher for safety reasons. But it is important for him to know that he is free to conduct his research and to publish his results – a question of academic freedom. In terms of institutional and professional deontology, he tries to protect his interlocutors, himself, and his institution. Those are three dimensions that he always keeps in mind. He explains that he also anonymizes people in his field diaries (people and places). He is careful to safely store his data, documents, notes, and transcriptions.

The key epistemological point Gabriel makes, drawing on his own experience, is that ethnography is always comparative. It is comparative in terms of fieldwork, and in terms of normative assumptions. For instance, sometimes he rereads the notes he took when he was in the field and, in retrospect, no longer agrees with himself. He doesn't recognize what he was thinking back in the field. This means that, for him, ethnography is not only a method but also a mode of knowledge. It is important for him to reflect on the clash between his normative/moral frameworks and the similar/different frameworks of his interlocutors. The limits of what can be done in the field (and in writing) are ethical both from a substantive point of view and from a professional/deontological point of view – but they are not taken for granted even if legally regulated. They are not intellectual limits. They are always situational frameworks, according to Dennis Rodgers's famous article, "Pour une ethnographie délinquante".⁵

For example, things can be done in the field that are not completely legal. Let's imagine that the ethnographer knows that someone in the field is stealing a car. According to the law, he should go to the police and denounce the person. But at the same time, deontologically, he should protect his informants. There is a kind of clash of ethical values. Gabriel gives the example of the sociologist Alice Goffman, who was doing this kind of ethnography in the United States. She was part of a gang, for her fieldwork, and wanted to prove how deep her immersion was. As she was there, she witnessed a murder attempt. She wrote about that experience in her book. Gabriel thinks that this is not an intellectual problem; it is clearly an ethical and legal problem. She was there doing ethnographic observation while someone was trying to commit a murder – it goes beyond every limit that researchers must set in the field. Thus, he doesn't think that theory, epistemology, and methods can be dissociated.

The third part of Gabriel's presentation is focused on procedures in the field. From a classic neighborhood ethnography, he has recently moved to an ethnography of global value chains. He follows empirically the journeys of stolen cars and cocaine. He therefore must choose critical spots to set up observation. He has access to local sources about illegal value chains. He conducts interviews, but he also uses

⁵ Dennis Rodgers, "Pour une "ethnographie délinquante". Vingt ans avec les gangs au Nicaragua", *Cultures & Conflits*, 110-111, 2018, pp. 59-76.

documents and secondary data. He mentions that he learned how to produce good field notes with Bruno Latour. His method includes thick description of situations/journeys (the unit of analysis) after a lived day. He notes mostly analytical thoughts related to his research question and general insights. In terms of interviews, the selection of interlocutors is crucial, as well as the way of introducing oneself to them. The researcher needs to give precise and clear information to their interlocutors. One must show interest in people's stories and must ask for details. It is a process of exchanging information, so it can be useful to let the interlocutor know the researcher as well. Gabriel thinks that it is important to ask for narratives more than for analysis. He wants to show sensitivity for touchy issues, such as safety and symbolic violence. He usually writes field notes after the interviews. He wants long-term interaction with those he interviews, so if the person doesn't want to speak, he doesn't try to dig further. He uses multiple types of documents, formal ones (labor registers, insurance, etc.) and informal ones (letters, photos, videos, etc.). He also uses primary audiovisual recordings and secondary material (tables, data, social media, etc.). In terms of analysis, he thinks that it is part of the work of an ethnographer to have a reflexive approach on his/her research. But with self-analysis comes the risk of an egotrip, something he tries to avoid. In his case, he has always come back to the field many times, trying to fill in the gaps in his understanding. Of course, there are sometimes personal constraints, family constraints for example. He often wonders how an intersubjective encounter can become objective knowledge. Rereading all the material one collects is crucial. Extracting categories of analysis from field material is also important, as well as reviewing the literature on these categories studied in their relational framework. He is now trying to theorize this relationship between categories for using them in other contexts.

Federico Varese's discussion of Gabriel Feltran's presentation

Federico Varese thanks Gabriel Feltran for his outstanding presentation. He then presents himself briefly. He started his PhD in the 1990s with a study of post-Soviet Russia. He focused on the social structure of markets in the early 90s. He is still doing ethnography but not as intensely as during his PhD years studying Russia. Some of the points mentioned by Gabriel about ethnography are in tune with his own research.

For him, ethnography is *one* method of data collection – but not the only one. Data can be collected in different ways, and spending an extensive period in the field is one such way. In the field, the researcher is not only doing interviews, but also observing. According to him, one must distinguish between ethnography and field interviews. Ethnography is about collecting primary data. There is an essential difference between raw primary data (“uncooked”) and secondary data (“cooked”) (a distinction he borrows from the title of the book *Le cru et le cuit*). Collecting documents and reading newspapers are important, but this is not ethnography *per se*. Ethnography is also about capturing not only events but also the meaning people attach to those events.

Federico explains that the department in which he did his PhD was very oriented toward quantitative research. He thinks he was the only one doing ethnography at the time. One of the typical critiques he received, not only from his supervisor but also from other researchers, was captured in the phrase “it is just *one* case”. He disagrees, because during ethnography the researcher encounters many people, and there is a lot of variation and interactions that take place in the field. For him, the criticism made by quantitative scholars, even though he respects them, are mostly misguided.

Federico comes back to the point Gabriel made regarding anonymity and ways to collect fieldwork evidence. He thinks that there are many trade-offs. For example, back in the days of his field research in Russia, he was trying to study a kiosk-owner in the street. He went there with his tape recorder. And then, as he switched off the tape recorder, the kiosk-owner declared: “Ok, now we can talk”. It is complicated because the tape recorder provides accuracy: one can go back to it and listen carefully to what was said. But also, at the same time, it can weaken the trust of the interlocutors. And the researcher doesn’t want to deceive them because doing so can be very dangerous. A balance must be found between tape recording and live discussion, as well as between total anonymization and none. If anonymization is too strong, it is extremely hard to check on the information. And anonymization can produce a fake sense of security. Nowadays, in the age of social media, anonymization is becoming less and less feasible. The issue is really ethical. Also, some people don’t want to be anonymized. If one studies the victims of the mafia, it can be the case that those victims don’t want anonymization. They might want to be known. Federico also very much agrees with the comparative dimension of ethnography outlined by Gabriel.

Federico then comes back to Alice Goffman and her famous book, *On the Run: Fugitive Life in an American City* (2014). He acknowledges that it is a very well-written book, but also a problematic one – to the point that she has since left academia. While she was considered as a rising star (winning prizes, having a good academic position, and so on), she was heavily criticized. The popularity of her book put the practice of ethnography under scrutiny. There were two kinds of critics. First, she appeared to have taken part in a crime. Second, there are allegations of data fabrication. Goffman may have manipulated data. In particular, she did not double-check the information she was given by her informant. Also, the way she wrote the book was peculiar: adopting a deliberate rhetorical strategy, she portrayed police officers as one-dimensional, without even giving them names, while providing deep descriptions of the personality and character of the gang members she was studying. Finally, she exaggerated the poverty the gang leader lived in, and although she made the point that black communities are overpoliced, she failed to mention that the gang she was connected to engaged in serious crime (major robberies) and terrified the black community. For these reasons, Federico thinks criticism of her work is justified.

Federico advises reading a classic and very famous book of ethnography: *Street Corner Society* (1943), written by William Foote Whyte. The appendix is like a manifesto for ethnographers. Of course, ethnography has a lot of risks: the risk of informants faking data, the risk of poorly representing what one sees, etc. But every branch of the social sciences faces these kinds of risks. Risks are present in every type of data collection. This is an aspect of any project that one must always keep in mind. Ethnography is just one method of data collection amongst others. Still, it is a method that can allow the researcher to obtain data that she couldn't obtain otherwise.

Marcela Alonso Ferreira's question

Marcela Alonso Ferreira (Sciences Po, CEE) is a PhD candidate. She wants to know more about Gabriel's most recent book, *Stolen Cars: A Journey through São Paulo's Urban Conflict* (2022). She wonders if Gabriel kept the same strategy of recruitment

as in his previous studies. She has the feeling that he favors more and more the time spent with an interviewee rather than the number of interviewees.

Gabriel Feltran's response

Gabriel agrees that long-term inscription in the field became crucial for him in his recent research. He prefers going deep with just a few interviewees rather than multiplying his interlocutors but engaging with them in a more superficial way. He is really oriented toward qualitative methods. He tries to delve into the daily lives of his interviewees.

David Jacobson's question

David Jacobson (University of South Florida, CERI Fellow) thanks Gabriel for his presentation. He is curious about Gabriel's claim regarding ethnography being a mode of knowledge rather than a method. He wants to hear more about this. Couldn't this be said about every branch of social science? Then he wants to come back to the profile of the regular homicide victim Gabriel previously provided. He mentions a study stating that an important death producer factor of homicide is the proportion of single-mother families.

Gabriel Feltran's response

Gabriel agrees with David: the idea that ethnography is a mode of knowledge rather than just a method could be applied to other branches of social science. With regard to the factors that influence homicide rates, he explains that the literature on homicide is generally full of single-cause explanations, pointing the finger at demography, education, low-income families, single-mother families, and so on. But the literature he relies on is a more political one, with a focus on State hegemony. He is convinced that violence is really connected to politics, power struggles, political theories, and so on. He thus prefers multi-cause explanations.

Ely Orrego Torres's question

Ely Orrego Torres (Sciences Po, CERI) is a PhD candidate. She is also dealing with questions of anonymization in her own ethnographic work. She wonders to what extent Gabriel anonymizes people who want to be known and how he presents them. She also wonders how Gabriel organizes his data after he leaves the field.

Gabriel Feltran's response

Gabriel agrees with what Federico Varese said: generally speaking, the less we anonymize, the better – but at the same time, the researcher must listen to the people he communicates with. It is a question of balance. It must be decided case by case. Anonymization is a strong ethical commitment. Some people must be anonymized, and some must be publicized. Scientific work makes it possible to publicize certain problems. Gabriel explains that he has a method he uses when he rereads his own work: he tries to read it as if he were a far-right policeman from Brazil. Then he tries to identify where he is judging, and where he is analyzing. It is not the scholar's mission to judge, but sometimes one does it unconsciously. He really tries to avoid this. At the end, once the paper is done, he rereads it trying to wear "different caps". When he was young, he was more judgmental, and felt more like an activist. This is luckily less the case now.

Federico Varese's question

Federico wonders if Gabriel is really legally obliged to report a crime if he sees one. Is it only the case in Brazil? In Italy, it is not mandatory. He agrees with Gabriel regarding the fact that the researcher is not an activist. However, academic work can have an impact. When he was a PhD student at Oxford, writing about Russia, he knew that what he wrote would be read.

Gabriel Feltran's response

Gabriel confirms the legal obligation to report knowledge of a crime, and not only in Brazil: it is also the case in France for example. If one is aware that someone is stealing a car, one must denounce it. If someone is dealing drugs, you must report it. It is tricky.

Francesco Nardone's question

Francesco Nardone (Sciences Po, CEE) thanks Gabriel. He wants to know more about the issue of data accuracy. What exactly is accurate data? Is there really a dichotomy between "sincere" or "authentic" data versus "non-authentic" data? He also wants to know more about the notion of "situation" Gabriel mentioned during his presentation.

Gabriel Feltran's response

Gabriel doesn't think that there is something differentiating a priori good quality data and bad quality data. This is determined by the field. The reception of the researcher's work will decide whether it was good work or not. About the notion of "situation", he recalls that he was supervised by Daniel Cefaï, a French pragmatist, during his PhD. The idea of "situation" comes from this tradition.

Marcos Lanna's question

Marcos Lanna (Universidade federal São Carlos) is a professor of anthropology and a former colleague of Gabriel. As an anthropologist, he is glad that sociologists are using ethnography more and more. Just like David Jacobson, he is intrigued by Gabriel's claim regarding ethnography being a mode of knowledge rather than a method. He agrees that it is more than a method. Ethnography, historical research, and quantitative approaches are always blended. He considers that this is precisely what Gabriel Feltran is doing in his work. In anthropology, it is necessary to adopt an ethnographic approach because what is studied is not objectified. It is all about going from a subjective encounter to an objective method.

Gabriel Feltran's response

Gabriel considers that it is important to include epistemology. He agrees that ethnography should be understood as a whole and must be blended with other approaches.

Sara Lancieri's question

Sarah Lancieri is a master's student at Sciences Po. She would like to know more about organized crime. She is particularly interested in the assumption made by Gabriel about the decline in homicide rates. She is more familiar with the Italian mafia, and she observes the same dynamic in this context.

Gabriel Feltran's response

Gabriel considers that the decline in homicide rates must be understood in relation to the State. In the case of São Paulo, mega-incarceration policies have brought thousands of young criminals into a prison system already controlled by the PCC. This has led to young people integrating into the PCC system and, when they get back out onto the streets, they spread the PCC's word of criminal pacification. In other words, State policies have contributed to pacification, but this is because they have strengthened the criminal world rather than weakened it.

Côme Salvaire's question

Côme Salvaire (Sciences Po, CERI) points out a common issue that arises for ethnographers dealing with criminal networks: criminal organizations such as the PCC are not known and rarely claim to be such. Ethnographers, in such cases, are only working on small parts of networks, on some neighborhoods, some specific cases. He considers that, due to this difficulty of having a general idea of what criminal organizations are, ethnographers tend to use a generic terminology of "mafia". He wonders if Gabriel has been confronted with these issues. He adds that, from his point of view, Dennis Rodgers, a researcher Gabriel mentioned in his presentation, went much further than Alice Goffman in his approach. He was actively involved in his field

and took part in violent action. He thus produced unprecedented knowledge on the life of gangs in America.

Gabriel Feltran's response

Gabriel considers that there are different ways to approach organized crime. For example, he is currently trying to obtain data from the French police. They have a lot of wire tapes from PCC men operating in Europe. This is not ethnography but an examination of official documents. Police officers listen to those tapes all the time, but they don't understand how the whole thing works, how the PCC is structured, because they have other purposes in listening to these recordings. He took ten years to arrive at the conclusion that the PCC works as a secret society. The construction of a broader picture is thus very subjective but arrives at a more objective construction.

Nonna Mayer's question

Nonna Mayer thanks Gabriel and Federico for their stimulating discussion. She reminds the audience that one of the first sessions of the "Les sciences sociales en question" seminar was about ethnography, based on Loulouwa Al-Rachid's fieldwork in Iraq during the time of Saddam Hussein. She mentions that the next session will be about field experiments with a presentation by sociologist Martin Aranguren. He will show the added value of field experiments compared to correspondence studies (testings). Then she wonders what is *not* ethnography. What is the frontier between what ethnography is and what it is not? It seems to her to be a rather loosely defined term. She also wonders what is harder for the researcher: dealing with the police or dealing with mafia? Who are the most dangerous? Last, she is curious to know more about the number and the profile of the people who refused to be interviewed. Can such refusal not bias research findings?

Gabriel Feltran's response

Gabriel considers that it was much more difficult to deal with the police in São Paulo than with criminals. When his work became more known in the area, he started being invited to talk with the police. But he was not considered useful to them. When

Bolsonaro came to government, Gabriel's name appeared in a list of "guys who are against the government". The list came from the police. But he never had any problem with the PCC men. He considers that this is due to the fact that the PCC is very decentralized, while the police is very centralized. As for the people who refuse to talk to him, he agrees that this means he loses important information and that this is regrettable. It may affect his findings, but not his general conclusions.