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**Trajectories of engagement /
*Trajectoires d'implication***

One day, we met.

The story of this book begins and, in a certain way, culminates on September 15, 2023 during the international meeting “Trajectories of Engagement” (in French, *Trajectoires d’implication*) at the University of Paris Nanterre. That day brought together a group of researchers engaged in more than twenty projects in the humanities and social sciences, showcasing various participatory approaches: action research, co-design, collaborative ethnography, citizen science, and other forms of inquiry that invite, rely on, or negotiate the involvement of actors operating outside of academia. Despite their methodological diversity, a shared concern united these projects: the conditions, modalities, and consequences of research engagement and the material conditions on which it is based.

The aim of this event was to create a space for critical reflection on how we, as scholars, relate to the people, institutions, and issues that our research concerns. Rather than promoting a single normative model of participation, we examined the trajectories through which engagement unfolds in our projects, including framing, tension, shifting, and friction. The meeting was not only the outcome of a year-long collaboration but also the beginning of a collective inquiry, still ongoing, into the situated, evolving, and sometimes contradictory dynamics of engaged research.

The initial impulse for this meeting emerged from within different institutional contexts and disciplinary traditions yet was grounded in shared questions and frustrations. Marta Severo’s IUF project, *Data in Action*, set out to examine participation practices in media labs and digital research environments. Motivated by a sense that digital participatory methods were increasingly routinised and instrumentalised, reproduced as default procedures rather than questioned as situated acts, she sought new frameworks for critically rethinking how participation is performed and to what ends.

This concern resonated with the experiences of Donato Ricci and Robin de Mourat at the médialab of Sciences Po. They had long been experimenting with hybrid research formats and collective in-

quiry protocols stemming from participatory design research to involve concerned citizens, scholars from distant disciplines, and non-governmental organisations. What began as a potential field site evolved into a site of collaboration, as the distance between the “object of study” and the “partner in inquiry” dissolved into a shared investigation of methods, ethics, and politics. Despite significant institutional differences, including research cultures, disciplinary orientations, and funding structures, we found ourselves confronting similar challenges: how to articulate our responsibilities as researchers in the face of urgent public problems, how to navigate the fine line between relevance and co-optation, participation and tokenism, and experimentation and institutional constraint.

The notion of “trajectories of engagement” emerged as a way to name, make sense of, and problematise these questions. As a starting point, we defined trajectories of engagement as the evolving research pathways sparked by engaged social science and shaped by pressing social challenges. They bring different types of actors (notably academic and non-academic ones) into shifting roles, mediated by specific tools, infrastructures, and institutional settings. These trajectories make visible the tensions and power dynamics at the heart of collaborative, situated inquiry. Rather than assuming engagement as a stable category, we focused on the movements, translations, and transformations through which it takes shape over time. Trajectories are not linear paths. Discontinuities, redirections, and unexpected encounters shape them. They unfold through relational configurations involving researchers, publics, institutions, and material devices. Thinking in terms of trajectories allows us to attend not only to the intentions behind engagement but also to its development, transformation, (side) effects, compromises, and unintended or invisible consequences.

Building on this idea, we broadened our area of inquiry by reaching out to colleagues in our professional networks and issuing an open call for contributions. Our goal was to expand the conversation beyond our immediate circles and encourage other researchers and practitioners to engage with the concept of trajectories of engagement

and, through it, critically explore their own modes of engagement. The result was a heterogeneous but resonant constellation of contributions, shaped by different disciplines and national contexts

The September 2023 meeting was thus a pivotal moment. It marked the culmination of our initial work cycle, allowing us collectively to test and refine the concept of “trajectories of engagement.” But it also opened a longer process of reflection that continues in and through this book. The current volume is both a snapshot and a stepping stone, a moment of synthesis that is also a point of departure.

This introductory chapter outlines the project and explains the structure of the book. We begin by situating our inquiry within a broader scientific and political context, marked by a proliferation of calls for participatory, open, and socially relevant research. In the second section, we define the conceptual framework of “trajectories of engagement” and discuss its theoretical inspiration. The third section presents the methodological approach we developed, emphasising the role of visual tools and representations in mapping and interrogating these trajectories. We conclude by presenting the structure of the volume and the perspectives it opens toward a more reflexive, critical, and situated understanding of engagement in the humanities and social sciences.

Injunction of participation and its critique

The concept “trajectories of engagement” responds to a broader shift in the political and epistemic landscape of academic research, placing increasing emphasis on participation, collaboration, and social relevance. The September 2023 meeting, which served as both the culmination and the beginning of our collective inquiry, clarified that researchers across disciplines are navigating growing demands to open up their work to “actors from society,” to engage with pressing public issues, to create social and economic value, and to demonstrate the societal impact of their work.

However, this movement toward participation is problematic, marked by a tension that runs through the heart of contemporary research practices. On the one hand, the growing injunction to participate is institutionalised through funding calls, policy discourse, and academic norms. On the other hand, a rich body of critical scholarship calls into question the normative assumptions, structural constraints, and political blind spots of this injunction.

Over the last two decades, participation has become a central concern in science governance and academic policy. The shift toward participatory research is evident in how project calls are framed, how universities define their missions, and how legitimacy is increasingly tied to societal impact. Participation is no longer one possible approach or method among others to achieve specific academic goals; it is becoming a symbolic and institutional obligation. As Loïc Blondiaux (2022) pointed out, this injunction is often framed in soft, consensual terms. Its language speaks of democracy, empowerment, and inclusion, but managerial reasoning and policy frameworks rarely leave space for genuine negotiation or contestation. Participation is expected to address a range of contemporary crises, including trust in science, political legitimacy, and social fragmentation. Researchers are expected to deliver not only knowledge but also solutions, with publics engaged as validators or co-producers of that knowledge. At the same time, researchers are asked not to take political positions but rather to uphold the neutrality of science.

This tension is especially evident in fields dealing with high-stakes, high-speed public problems: climate change, artificial intelligence, digital disinformation, and public health emergencies. Faced with these urgencies, participation is often presented as the only viable epistemic model, ensuring transparency, legitimacy, and efficiency. But this framing tends to reduce participatory research to a series of pre-formatted tools, devices, or protocols, often built around digital infrastructures and governed by expectations of responsiveness and neutrality. Olivier Galibert (2013) analysed this trend in the context of online environmental debates, where participation is shaped not only by

institutional goals but also by the imaginaries of the digital. Platforms are expected to act as spaces of democratic dialogue. Still, in practice, they often function as normative devices, channelling behaviours and structuring what can be said, by whom, and how. What emerges is a form of “engaging communication” that frames participation as a behavioural script rather than a political act.

In response to this dominant model, numerous scholars have sought to denaturalise the participatory turn. A central concern is the normativity of the discourse itself. Erik Neveu (2011) identified terms such as “participation,” “engagement,” and “citizenship” as *mots du consensus*, words that circulate with little conceptual precision but immense symbolic weight. Their vagueness is what makes them powerful. They allow institutions to adopt the appearance of openness and democratic accountability while often foreclosing actual contestation.

One of the most pressing critiques is that of instrumentalisation. When participation becomes a bureaucratic requirement, publics are often reduced to mere resources, providers of (cheap) data, legitimacy, or affective resonance. Their involvement is framed not as a transformative contribution but as a form of input: an unimportant means to an unquestioned end. This view reproduces epistemic asymmetries; academic actors define the terms of participation and publics are invited only to fill in the blanks.

Closely related is the critique of routinisation. As participatory methods become institutionalised, they also become standardised, often through templates and toolkits meant to ensure replicability and impact. What is lost in the process is the specificity, contingency, and experimental nature of truly dialogical research. Blondiaux (2022) warned of technologising participation, of allowing digital tools to become turnkey solutions to complex political and epistemological problems. The tool, in this context, becomes a symbolic validator of engagement, while concealing the power relations it embodies.

Finally, critical scholars have pointed out the structural constraints imposed by funding regimes. Project-based research, with its short cycles and emphasis on deliverables, leaves little room for long-

term engagement, trust-building, or iterative learning. The temporalities of funding often clash with those of participatory research, which requires a slower pace, openness, and a willingness to accept failure. Participation, under these funding conditions, risks becoming a performative act, aimed at fulfilling institutional expectations rather than cultivating new forms of knowledge production.

These critiques are not arguments against participation. Instead, they are calls for deeper reflection on how we conduct participation and for taking seriously the conflicts, compromises, and material constraints that shape it. What is at stake is not whether to participate, but how, with whom, under what conditions, and with what effects.

This concern is the gravitational centre of our project. We propose to move beyond the static dichotomy between injunction and refusal, between genuine participation and instrumentalisation, by adopting a framework that emphasises the description of trajectories rather than the stabilisation of static models. Instead of defining what participation should be, we investigate why and how a spark generates engagement and how engagement unfolds over time, through a series of shifting configurations, material supports, and institutional framings. In doing so, we align with a reflexive tradition in participatory research, one that does not reject engagement but insists on attending to its frictions, politics, and evolutions (Mouffe, 2013; Severo, 2021; Ricci, 2019). Trajectories of engagement are ways to map, interrogate, and reimagine the participatory practices that define our social research landscape.

Thinking through trajectories

To move beyond the rigid dichotomy that pits the injunction to participate against the critiques that denounce its limitations, we propose a shift in perspective. Rather than asking whether research is participatory, we suggest focusing on how engagement arises and unfolds, how it begins, takes shape, changes, hesitates, accelerates, and falters. The

concept of “trajectories of engagement” emerges from this need to re-frame participation as a dynamic, situated process, shaped by relations, temporalities, and material conditions.

Our choice of the word “trajectory” is not incidental. It is a response to a desire to foreground the temporal dimension of participatory research. Too often, participatory practices are evaluated as snapshots. At a given moment, was the public involved? Were non-academic actors consulted? Did they contribute to the knowledge produced? Such static perspectives fail to account for how engagement begins and evolves, sometimes intensifying, sometimes receding, throughout the life of a research project and the consequences and outcomes it provokes beyond the official end of research funding timelines. By speaking of trajectories, we insist on the sparks of engagement and the processual nature of its unfolding. Over time, engagement undergoes shifting configurations that combine the “inside” (i.e., internal actors) and the “outside” (i.e., external actors).

Equally important is attention to materiality. As a trajectory is constantly drawn into a given ground or milieu, each phase of a participatory process is supported or constrained by specific devices, infrastructures, and institutional frameworks. From collaborative workshops or focus groups to digital platforms, from field notes to shared databases, the material forms through which participation occurs are never neutral. They frame who can speak and how knowledge can be circulated. Following scholars in media and communication studies, such as Jeanneret (2008), we understand materiality not only as the physicality of tools, but as the ensemble of affordances, constraints, and inscriptions that mediate communication and structure possible interactions. In this sense, tracing a trajectory of engagement means also accounting for the mediated and infrastructural conditions that shape the research process.

Another critical dimension concerns the second term, “engagement.” In French, the term “*implication*” carries a semantic richness that is difficult to translate. In English, we often speak of “engagement” or “involvement,” but these terms do not fully capture the depth and

ambiguity of “*implication*.” Etymologically, to be “implicated” is to be entangled, bound up, and possibly complicit. In legal or moral contexts, to be implicated is also to be partially responsible for an act, sometimes a crime. This connotation allows us to resist romanticised visions of participatory research as inherently democratic or virtuous and to foreground the fact that engagement is never innocent and always twofold. The connotation implies positioning, role redistribution, and often the negotiation of power and responsibility. It implies taking risks and also suffering the consequences. It also allows us to restore some symmetry in how we describe the effects of participation in our research, considering the consequences it can have on our own persons and collectives, whether political, interpersonal, or epistemological. We are not outside the phenomena we study; we are implicated in them through our social backgrounds, political motivations, methods, institutional affiliations, and relational commitments. We must respond to and consider the implications for the milieux with which we engage through participation, as well as our own positionality and activity within academia.

We would have liked, somewhat provocatively, to retain the French “*implication*” even in English-language discussions. Using this term would have allowed us to signal and clarify two ideas: the degree and intensity of involvement that participatory research often entails, not as a mere technique, but as a political choice and a transformation of the researcher’s role and of the knowledge production process and the ethical and political ambiguity of that involvement, as well as the risks, compromises, and frictions that come with being inside a problem rather than observing it from a distance. For the sake of linguistic ease, we kept the term “engagement,” but with it, we mean to convey the intense involvement and the risk-taking inherent in *implication*.

As stated earlier, we define trajectories of engagement as evolving research pathways sparked by engaged social science and shaped by pressing social challenges that bring different types of actors (even the distinction between “academic” and “non-academic” often proves too binary or imprecise) into shifting roles, mediated by specific tools, infrastructures, and institutional settings.

This definition underlines that a research project alternates in a non-linear way among moments of “internal” work only involving research professionals operating within academia for a specific funded project, moments inviting “external” actors into participating, co-producing, or reshaping the inquiry, and boundary situations in which motivations, interests, and material configurations of internal and external actors are shared, assembled, and sometimes redefined. External actors can include citizens, artists, associations, institutions, other scholars, and commercial organisations. As often emphasised during the workshop and in the materials collected in this book, avoiding a simplistic view that categorises academic and non-academic actors as internal and external players in the project is essential. Instead, “trajectory” helps capture both the role of actors who act as boundary agents facilitating collaboration and the material boundary situations that enable connections between the “inside” and the “outside” of research environments. Indeed, these human and non-human boundary agents allow the trajectory to exist and evolve. Each phase is anchored in a particular set of material and institutional structures: a grant or other type of funding, a technological platform, a workshop format, a set of ethical constraints, a digital device for collecting, processing, or visualising data, or a public controversy. All these structures condition the roles actors can play, the forms of knowledge that can emerge, and how problems are framed.

We named the beginning of each trajectory of engagement a “spark.” This spark is the key element that justifies the existence of the participatory research pathway and shapes its configuration over time. However, the spark does not come exclusively from outside (e.g., a pressing social challenge raised by external actors) or, conversely from inside (e.g., a need defined solely by researchers within the framework of engaged social science). A trajectory of engagement means that, from the very beginning, the spark itself, the encounter between internal and external actors, is essential precisely because it generates engagement.

What distinguishes our approach is the refusal to see participation as a single moment or a fixed model. Instead, we explore how engagement arises, evolves, and is transformed by and transforms the

parties it affects in the process: how it begins, intensifies, stabilises, fragments, vanishes, or ends. This perspective invites attention to the social dynamics, the institutional pressures, and the technological mediations that punctuate the life of a project. It also invites us to consider the temporality of engagement as a non-linear, sometimes discontinuous process, full of redirections, pauses, anomalies, improvisations, and failures.

Finally, the notion of trajectory allows us to describe participation realistically, avoiding the pitfall of naturalising it as a normative requirement or a fixed category. We seek to approach participation as an open-ended, generative, materially and socially situated practice. We mean to reflect on how we, as researchers, are drawn into problems; how we construct or inherit the materiality that structures our work; and how we can develop critical, reflexive tools to reimagine the forms that (our) engagement might take.

A visual approach

Our intention was never to deliver the notion of trajectory of engagement as a finalised, ready-made product. Instead, we sought to test, challenge, and refine it using actual empirical materials and research experiences. The first step in this process was to find a way to materialise these trajectories, making them visible and shareable so they could become objects of discussion and reflection.

“Trajectories of engagement” is not only meaningful from a theoretical standpoint. It also opens interesting paths of inquiry from a methodological perspective. Thinking in terms of trajectory suggests a temporal evolution – a progressive and dynamic unfolding – that resists simple typologies or snapshots. In this way, it is particularly amenable to a visual mode of inquiry grounded on a literal take of “trajectory.” In other words, a visual approach is not just an illustration technique but a way to engage with the temporal, material, and relational dimensions of involvement and implication and to foster discussion and reflection

about it. We can express and highlight what is often left implicit and invisible in textual narratives: the uncertain starting point of a spark, the role of boundary situations and genuine encounters, the coexistence of multiple non-linear rhythms, the layering of material devices and tools, and the complex and heterogeneous paths of various actors. In this context, the visual becomes a heuristic tool that does not aim to simplify reality but to apprehend its complexity better by giving form to the entanglements and discontinuities that constitute participatory research.

To capture the richness and complexity of these trajectories, we developed visual representations as both analytical and reflexive tools. These representations make visible the interplay of diverse elements (i.e., sparks, actors, tools, productions, activities, timeframes) that construct a trajectory of engagement. Far from reducing complexity, these diagrams help us unfold and describe it more closely, allowing a better grasp of variations and singularities.

If this ambition is theoretically sound, it raises several practical challenges. How do we move from a conceptual intuition to a workable method? How can we translate a research project into a visual trajectory without betraying its complexity or misrepresenting its stakes? How can we ensure that the visual representation is not only analytically rigorous but also faithful to the lived experience of those who carried out the project? Would the researchers involved recognise themselves in this visualisation? Would the diagram be understandable to others outside the project? Rather than treating these questions as obstacles, we turned them into hypotheses to explore. Our objective was not to prove the effectiveness of the method but to test its potential, to experiment with its limits and, if needed, to embrace the possibility of failure. In other words, our goal was to explore whether and how such a visual method could be generative: whether it could reveal hidden dimensions of engagement, whether it could foster reflexivity among those who use it, and whether it could serve as a shared language for discussing the trajectories of participatory research. These were open hypotheses that we tested in a situated and experimental way.

Practically, this visual methodology developed in three main phases, which were not strictly sequential steps. Rather, the process was iterative, non-linear, and shaped by ongoing negotiations between conceptual choices and empirical constraints. In the first phase, we set out to define a visual language capable of generating representations of research trajectories. Doing so required preliminary abstraction. We needed to identify the basic components of a trajectory, assign properties to each, and decide how they should be visually rendered. In the second phase, we conducted, with the support of our research assistant, Alex Pellier, a series of semi-structured interviews with researchers involved in the projects we aimed to represent. These interviews were essential not only for gathering information but also for understanding how the researchers themselves perceived and narrated their trajectories of engagement. We invited them to describe the spark, the evolution of their projects, the actors involved, the forms of production and circulation, and the difficulties they encountered. The idea was to work with them in identifying what mattered in their experience and what should be translated into visual form. In the third phase, we began translating each project into a diagram, using the visual grammar we had defined. However, this process revealed its own limitations. In practice, the grammar had to be adjusted several times. Each project raised specific issues that forced us to rethink some of our assumptions and refine our representational choices. This iterative dynamic was not a flaw but an integral part of the method, allowing us to move between abstraction and situatedness, between general patterns and particular cases.

Before presenting the grammar in detail, we should clarify participant recruitment for the workshop held on September 15, 2023. We used a mixed strategy. On the one hand, we contacted colleagues in different countries with whom we had already collaborated and whose work we knew was animated by similar scientific and ethical concerns regarding participatory and engaged research. On the other hand, we launched an open call on the project website (<https://trajectories.sciencespo.fr/>) and circulated it through major mailing lists in the field. In this way, we identified around twenty research projects. The list of

participants fluctuated slightly. Some researchers who initially expressed interest later became unavailable, while others joined for the interview but not the workshop. In this book, we focus on a subset of projects that were both presented and collectively discussed during the event. Within the workshop context, we sought to include both an academic team representative and an external actor on each project to capture multiple viewpoints. This inclusion was possible only for some projects.

We structured our visual grammar around three main categories of elements: agents, productions, and trajectories. Rather than listing them, we describe here how they operate within the diagrams (see Figure 1).

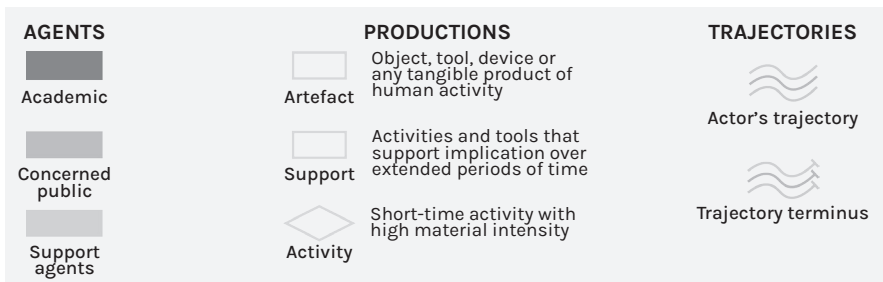


Figure 1. Visual grammar of the trajectories of engagement

Agents are the figures through which projects unfold and evolve. We distinguish among three types: (a) academic agents, researchers who typically initiate and coordinate the project, (b) concerned publics, citizens, artists, institutions, or activists who engage with the project in various forms and at different levels, and (c) support agents, technicians, developers, external consultants, investigators, or organisations that contribute to the material, technical, or logistical implementation of the project. Each of these agents plays a different role in shaping the trajectory, and their involvement might vary over time. They can act as internal, external, or boundary actors, alternatively, in different phases.

Productions are the outputs or devices that punctuate the project and often materially mediate the relationships among agents. We differentiate between artefacts (i.e., tools, objects, or platforms that materialise the project), supports (i.e., resources or operations that sustain long-term engagement), and activities (i.e., short, high-intensity events such as workshops, interviews, and exhibitions).

Trajectories are represented by several curved lines running from bottom to top and materialising the path of a specific agent or group of agents within the research process. This choice arose from practical constraints, primarily the need to make the diagrams readable on the poster-size sheets of paper used during the workshop. Trajectories begin on the left with a spark, the initial agent or group of agents who initiated the project. During the discussion workshop, the representation of the spark proved to be one of the most controversial points. In most cases, it was depicted as initiated by the researchers, reflecting a selection bias inherent to our recruitment method. Yet, during the workshop and in subsequent discussions with participants, it became clear that the spark is often collective, multi-situated, and at the boundary between different communities. The role of the researcher is simply to make it exist within an academic setting and to build a situation that allows the trajectory to evolve. It would be particularly interesting, in future developments of this methodology, to explore solutions for representing the complexity and multi-actor nature of the spark or to cope specifically with the challenge of grasping and representing the discontinuity and complexity of the beginning of a trajectory.

As the trajectory unfolds, the spark links with other agents, represented on the right as participants, which then unfold their own trajectories of engagement, and then passes through various productions and activities. A short horizontal mark indicates when the involvement of a particular agent ends. Some productions or activities might recur, captured in the diagram through iterative elements. Using this method, we generated one diagram per project. These diagrams served as the basis for discussion during the September 15 workshop, marking the culmination of our methodological experiment.

The workshop was structured around the visual representations we had designed and organised as an invitation to engage with trajectories of engagement through a constrained (and perhaps destabilising) organisation of activities and material formats (de Mourat & Ricci, 2021). Each researcher was asked to present their project using only the diagram as support (no other slides). Videos of the presentation are available on the project website: <https://trajectories.sciencespo.fr/>. We invited participants to tell the story of their project as a trajectory of engagement, using the visual diagram as a narrative anchor, following the affordances of this format for storytelling, and registering any potential critiques or missing points in the diagram. Unsurprisingly, this constraint created a certain tension. Some participants felt limited or frustrated by the format. A few attempted to bypass the rules or “detour” the dispositive. But these reactions were themselves instructive. They revealed the assumptions embedded in our model and its ability (or inability) to accommodate diverse ways of telling.

After each presentation, participants formed small groups around the posters to engage in collective discussion and annotation. Each group included other researchers and participants (about five in total). They were invited to annotate the diagrams directly, write comments on sticky notes, or propose modifications. Some groups engaged in the proposed methodology by generously enriching schemas with new agents, unexpected trajectories, or missing graphical conventions. Others engaged with the format in highly creative ways (e.g., drawing entirely new trajectories and pasting them onto the posters). These amended versions are reproduced in the following pages. The purpose of including them in the book is not to provide perfectly legible diagrams but to convey the spirit of the collective work. To this end, we chose not to build a version “2.0” of the diagram that would present an “improved” representation but to consider annotated diagrams as a vibrant and lively testimony of the experience, the situated questions it provoked and the reflections sparked by the generative and heuristic format of discussion we proposed through our graphical infrastructure.

The workshop concluded with a plenary session, during which each group shared its insights. This final moment was not intended as a validation exercise but as an open space for critique and exploration. We identified both the strengths and limitations of the visual method. We collectively discussed which elements were most useful, which were confusing or overly rigid, and how the grammar could be improved or adapted in future iterations.

As a further step, we engaged participants in a new phase of discussion that is presented in this book. Thanks to our collaboration with journalist Elie Petit, we recontacted all participants and invited them to respond to two open questions:

- 1 *Challenging trajectories of engagement as an experience*
How did the experience of the workshop transform (or not) your relationship with your research project and its actors? How did it reveal, confirm, or question your way of conducting research, in terms of its structure, content, contributors, partners, and their agency?
- 2 *Challenging trajectories of engagement as a concept*
We define trajectories of engagement as evolving research pathways sparked by engaged social science and shaped by pressing social challenges. They bring different types of actors (notably academic and non-academic ones) into shifting roles, mediated by specific tools, infrastructures, and institutional settings. These trajectories make visible the tensions and power dynamics at the heart of collaborative, situated inquiry. Based on this, we propose a writing game similar to a peer review. How would the concept of trajectory of engagement be challenged in your disciplinary area and milieu? How should it be modified to be welcomed in your own research? How should it be translated to be entirely relevant to your non-academic partners?

Participants could respond either by email or through an oral exchange with Elie Petit. The responses to these questions are reproduced in the following pages. In several cases, they were written by Elie Petit based on exchanges with the interviewee. Most respondents were the same individuals who took part in the workshop, although in a few cases, other participants provided answers based on collective discussions with project members. The name of the main respondent follows each response. We chose not to synthesise the answers or extract overarching themes. Instead, we let the participants speak for themselves to highlight the plurality of interpretations, resistances, and appropriations of the concept.

Opening the trajectories

The workshop discussions, as well as the answers to questions collected in this book, revealed a shared interest among participants in the heuristic potential of “trajectories of engagement.” Many expressed that the theoretical framework provided them with a helpful lens through which to reflect on their own research practices. They appreciated the possibility of representing material aspects beyond mere means or side effects but as constitutive elements of their research trajectories. These aspects, often rendered secondary in textual accounts, became central in the visual approach. The diagrams enabled a form of material literacy, allowing researchers to trace how tools, productions, activities, and devices actively shape research engagement over time.

Yet, as anticipated, the workshop and subsequent discussion of this book also raised a set of critiques, tensions, and open questions. Rather than seeing these points as failures of the method, we consider them invitations to deepen our reflexive approach and clarify our own assumptions. We can identify four main types of critiques of our experiment, each of which raises significant methodological and epistemological challenges.

First, some participants questioned the vertical orientation of the diagrams. Although this choice was initially based on practical considerations (e.g., poster format, legibility), its implications were not neutral. The verticality tended to suggest a linear, even hierarchical, development from the spark at the bottom to the later agents and activities at the top. This spatial “elevation” metaphor unintentionally reinforced a “top-down” interpretation, potentially obscuring feedback loops, circularities, or regressions that are part of many participatory processes. Moreover, because the spark appeared as a single agent, it reinforced the idea that the trajectory was generated solely by the academic actors. Indeed, the visual representations were unsatisfactory at conveying the complex mixture of actors and motivations that sparked the event.

Second, the visual grammar, while aiming to simplify without simplism, was seen as insufficiently attentive to interruptions, asymmetries, and invisible forces. Specific project dimensions, such as the impact of funding constraints, institutional agendas, political tensions, and physical and accessibility limitations, were challenging to show in the diagrams. Trajectories appeared as continuous lines, yet many projects experienced breakdowns, pauses, accelerations, and latency. Some participants noted that these ruptures were precisely what shaped their engagement practices and that the diagrams tended to smooth them over.

Third, several participants did not recognise themselves in the diagrams or felt that the representations overemphasised the role of academic researchers. Despite the intention to include various types of agents, the diagrams sometimes reinforced the idea that a project was “led” or “framed” by researchers rather than being co-constructed. This critique highlights the delicate balance between making a structure of engagement visible and acknowledging its distributed and negotiated nature. It also reflects a broader concern with the power asymmetries often present in collaborative research.

Fourth, and related to the third, the trajectories often failed to represent boundary situations or actors that, as previously noted, constituted the backbone of successful trajectories. Meetings and

dialogues between the “inside” and the “outside” of research projects are enabled by material configurations that allow actors with different interests to work together. Yet structuring the diagram into two areas (inside and outside) tended to undervalue and obscure the role of boundary artefacts, which appeared merely as products or contexts of encounters rather than their very operators, often acting as translators and mediators.

Beyond these critiques, a more profound, structural question emerged: does the act of visually representing trajectories not risk turning them into a model? If so, what are the consequences of such modelling? This issue is particularly sensitive. One of the key critiques of the participatory turn in the social sciences concerns its tendency to normativise and instrumentalise engagement. Participation becomes an injunction, a checkbox, a model to follow. If our diagrams were to be interpreted as prescriptive models of “how participation should happen,” they would reproduce the very problem we intended them to address. At the same time, the use of a shared visual grammar, necessary to allow comparison, inevitably invites pattern recognition and the search for regularities. While our objective was not to produce a model but rather to foster original discussion among the workshop participants, the risk of naturalisation remains and deserves further scrutiny.

For all these reasons, we did not conceive this work as the conclusion of the project, but as the beginning of a broader, collective reflection. Several participants expressed interest in revising or re-drawing their trajectories after the discussions. However, we chose not to revise the diagrams.

Our decision was based on a fundamental methodological principle. The diagrams were never meant to be realistic or definitive representations of the projects. Instead, they were designed as provocative tools, devices to support reflexivity and reveal the material dimensions of participation. Their value lies not in their accuracy, but in the conversations they generate. Instead of amending the diagrams, we considered it more fruitful to document the reactions and reflections of the participants.

This decision was also guided by a desire to avoid falling back into a binary logic between injunction and critique, between prescription and rejection. We believe that the notion of trajectory of engagement can serve as a “third path,” a way to think about participatory practices beyond celebration or denunciation. For this path to be meaningful, it must remain open, situated, and hospitable to disagreement. It must not become another ideological stance or elitist alternative that claims epistemic superiority. Our visual methodology is not a solution but an invitation, a device for description, dialogue, reflexivity, and shared learning.

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