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**The man with the leaking bucket. Ethnography, journalism and
the quest for the transformative self**

Abstract

This paper looks into the status of ethnography by paying attention to the ideas of transformation and becoming, and to the meanings of ‘reality’ in post-post-modern times. Based on a personal reflection about the intellectual journey of the author, and his transition from journalism to academic research, it first provides an illustration of the conflicting relationship between journalistic practices and social research during the 20th century. It further addresses the revived dialogue between academic inquiry and other forms of social analysis. Following the post-modern turn reflexivity has taken centre stage in ethnographic methods, but this has not diminished the differences within social sciences and humanities in the way the role of the researcher is interpreted. This point is further complicated by the status of ‘reality’ in the age of the implosion of social life through the conflation of the private and the public brought about by the digital revolution.

Introduction

Who is the man with the leaking bucket? The question is either extremely simple or complex, difficult to answer, depending on the perspective of who is asking, the historical moment in which one lives and belongs to, and their epistemological reference points. As elusive as it can be, it is a question that has influenced my decision to formally abandon journalism to do research in an academic environment. In this paper I will therefore reflect on the implications of the question and on the kind of answers I have been able, over the years, to produce. It will also be an opportunity to come to terms with the impact that immersive qualitative research has on the researcher (their identity, their *Weltanschauung*). My discussion will mainly draw on a long-term ethnographic study on young people, migration and belonging conducted in Ireland (Mauro, 2019) and on a qualitative study conducted in Italy (Mauro, 2016). Before moving any further, however, I wish to alert the reader about a potential hermeneutic problem: The bucket is *now* empty (and I will try to clarify why).

Extraterritorial journey

In one of his illuminating journalistic essays on life in Berlin in the 1920s, Siegfried Kracauer writes:

I have visited many job centres across Berlin. Not for the desire of the reporter to indulge, *he [sic] who commonly draws from life with a leaking bucket*, rather to appreciate the position that the unemployed factually take in the system of our society (2009, p. 72; italics are mine).

In numerous pieces written for the influential daily *Frankfurter Zeitung* during the Weimar years, Kracauer applied his studies of sociology and philosophy and his interest in Marxism and popular culture, to the investigation of urban life in Berlin and other cities. This proved particularly efficacious in his study of the *Salaried masses* (1998), the growing numbers of white-collar workers who were the main public of what Kracauer called the ‘distraction industries’. The book has been defined an early example of ‘ethnographic inquiry’ (Jay, 1985). At the start of his journalistic career, in 1922, he had published an essay emphatically titled ‘Sociology as science’ (2006), in which he challenged Husserl’s phenomenology while at the same time advancing the belief in a new ‘science’, sociology, which would combine observation and interpretation ‘as a basis on which to offer a diagnosis of contemporary society’ (Koch 2000: 14). His focus was timely, as the first German chair of sociology had been created at Frankfurt University only in 1919.

The man with a leaking bucket is thus the reporter, the journalist, who does not possess (or is interested in utilising) proper theoretical instruments to make sense of what he reports upon. He or she is left with a limited, partial grasp of reality. This is an intriguing metaphor, but I think it would be misleading to accept it at face value, particularly because it comes from someone, like Kracauer, who never worked as a sociologist and was never properly an academic. It is also for this reason that he has been defined an ‘outsider’ among Weimar intellectuals (Traverso 1998), although he preferred for himself the definition of ‘extraterritorial’ (Jay, 1975), someone who keeps an intellectual distance from cliques and established disciplines to cultivate a more objective perspective. The concept of ‘extraterritoriality’ took a sinister biographical meaning when he was forced to leave Germany the moment Hitler took power, and after living for almost ten years in France, he finally reached the USA, where he spent the last twenty-five years of his life.

Siegfried Kracauer is among the less celebrated (and possibly less understood) of the German intellectuals who gravitated around the Institute for Social Research, at the Goethe University Frankfurt, in the 1920s. However, if there were a figure that could epitomize the eclectic interest for the manifestations of popular culture of the so-called Frankfurt School during the Weimar years, that would be Kracauer. In a sense, he is an unrecognised pioneer of Cultural Studies. Trained as an architect, he studied sociology with Georg Simmel, he became one of the main experts of German cinema, wrote journalistic reportages on urban lives in Berlin and other cities, and published novels and studies on 19th century operetta and on the crime novel genre. Finally, as the editor of the cultural pages of the *Frankfurter Zeitung*, he attracted some key personalities of his time, such as Walter Benjamin, Theodor Adorno, Joseph Roth, and Leo Lowenthal.

I have to admit that, as a young journalist and aspiring writer growing up in a border region of Italy in the 1990s, I found particularly inspiring what Traverso (1998) calls the ‘intellectual nomadism’ of Kracauer. I felt attracted to his unusual intellectual and creative trajectory. However, when I enrolled in a PhD programme in Ireland in 2008 I realised that his ‘transdisciplinary’ approach was difficult to translate into formal academic scholarship. Although I was to some degree prepared for it, and I actually looked forward to this challenge, the transition was nonetheless a bit brusque. It was a matter of deciding once and for all which side I wanted to stand on: I was no longer ‘the man with the leaking bucket’, I had to learn to become someone else, to do things differently. This was what I had to do if I wanted to be admitted into the academic community. But how different should things actually be? How distant was the urban ethnography and immersive qualitative research I aspired to carry out, from my previous experience in investigative journalism on issues of labour and migration? Was it really possible to approach social life with the purpose of learning about it and analysing it, with a bucket which was not, at least in some little part, *leaking*? Which theoretical armour can completely protect us from the messiness of social life as experienced (and represented) by the ethnographer?

Worlds apart?

For most of the twentieth century, after the early experiments of Kracauer and Robert S. Park (who defined the sociologist as ‘a kind of superreporter’, cited in Denzin 1997: 285) journalism and social sciences have been distant from each other, like remote relatives who had a disagreement and stopped communicating. Sociologists would usually treat journalism with a level of disdain, seeing it at best as a superficial form of social analysis and at worst as cheap propaganda. Conversely, journalists would point out the abstruse language used by social scientists, and their apparent lack of interest in communicating to and for the ‘people’. At different levels, it has been, in the words of Golding (2005: 165), a ‘dialogue of the deaf’. This distance has arguably been reduced. Over the last few decades, qualitative sociologists, social anthropologists, and media scholars have called for a change of approach within their disciplines. For example, Marcus argues that ethnographers and anthropologists ‘often function nowadays like the best and deepest journalists – certainly their experiences of other places, of sites of research and reporting, are similar today’ (2008: 4). Beckett (2012) believes that core functions of journalism such as ‘observation, investigation and deliberation ... can add dynamism to the often preconceived and over structured thought processes that the Academy encourages’. Back (2012) and Becker (2007) invite academics to look beyond their disciplinary fields and to appropriate different forms of representation. Back (2012: 19) reminds us that ‘sociologists, anthropologists or those from any number of disciplines in the humanities have never had the monopoly on social analysis’. Becker (2007) suggests to pay attention to the ways in which visual artists, playwrights, novelists, and filmmakers go about the process of telling about society, as it ‘will show analytical dimensions and possibilities that social science has often ignored that may otherwise be useful’ (2007, p. 6). It is a feeling that is shared also by Ruth Behar (2008).

An early authoritative proponent of this renewed dialogue between social sciences, literature and journalism has arguably been Norman Denzin. His ‘Interpretive ethnography’ (1997) includes many references to journalism practices and to points of intersections between

different fields. His vision both encompasses and surpasses the auspices of the other cited authors. To him, is not simply about the practice of ethnography (Marcus) or the issue of representation (Back, Becker, Behar), but about the need for a deeper reflection about the aims, the forms and the outcomes of social research following the post-modern turn. He writes:

Reality as it is known is mediated by symbolic representation, by narrative texts, and by cinematic and televisual structures that stand between the person and the so-called real world. In critically reading these texts, the new ethnographers radically subvert the realist agenda because the real world is no longer the referent for analysis. Ethnographies of group life are now directed to this world of televisual and cinematic narrativity and its place in the dreams, fantasies, and interactions of everyday people. Malinowski's definition of ethnography is no longer workable (1997: xvi).

His starting point is the 'representational crisis' that, along with the 'legitimation' and the 'praxis' crisis, have unsettled the foundations of qualitative and ethnographic writing. Consequently, he emphasises the importance of seeing language not simply as part of the representational process. According to him, 'language and speech do not mirror experience. They create experience and in the process of creation constantly transform and defer that which is being described' (ibid.: 5).

Looking in to look out

As a journalist for periodicals and dailies I suffered the lack of time to properly grasp the topics I was asked to write upon. I felt there was always more to understand than what I could communicate to the reader. To some extent, the 'Why' was for me the most urgent and significant among the classic five 'W' questions of journalism. It was also the most challenging. At some point, I realised I needed *that* time more than anything else if I wanted to write something that was meaningful and, more importantly, in some way useful for society. This realisation conflicted with the new demands of a media industry going through deep structural and cultural changes brought about by the digital revolution (Miller, 2016).

I further felt the urgency to deepen my comprehension of the author's position: the role of the subject in the process of representation. Understandably, reflexivity was something that Kracauer in his socio-journalistic writings had overlooked. According to Mülder-Bach, 'he undoubtedly underestimated the precariousness of his own position and the problematic nature of delimitation and distancing as means of constituting the object of his observation and description' (1998, p. 18). I understood reflexivity to be my point of departure from Kracauer. At the same time, there was something else in his method that could be preserved and actualised. It was the idea of 'montage', which Mülder-Bach attributes to Kracauer's cinematic eye.

Microscopic description on the one hand, construction on the other: the representational methods that Kracauer seeks to combine are indeed so near to film close-up and montage that one could argue a posteriori from them how he visualized a good film (Mülder-Bach, 1998, p. 15).

But the problem was reflexivity. It is not surprising that Kracauer did not take it into account, as in the first decades on the 20th century it was unthinkable for any social researcher to acknowledge the role of the subject in the research process. In fact, even the founding text of participant observation as a fieldwork technique, Bronislaw Malinowski's *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, published in 1922, shared the positivistic belief in the 'scientific method'. It was only after the death of its author, and through the publication of Malinowski's diaries in 1967, that the fallacy of such a belief appeared in a clear light. In his private diaries, Malinowski confessed his racist prejudices against the communities he studied, and his sexual desires toward the young women of the Trobriand islands; all things he had wished to keep removed and concealed from his scientific endeavour, failing to acknowledge that they also played a role in his writing about people (ethno-graphy). The diaries heralded a crisis of anthropology and anticipated the postmodern turn in the discipline.

Since then, ethnography has become a popular research practice among sociologists, anthropologists, and human geographers, and reflexivity has taken centre stage. As noted by Hammersley and Atkinson, 'the concept of reflexivity acknowledges that the orientation of researchers will be shaped by their socio-historical locations, including values and interests that these locations confer to them' (2007, p. 15). Ethnography cannot be non-reflexive, because the position of the researcher and its subjects, the dynamics of power at hand, will influence the type of 'partial truths' (Clifford, 1997) or 'distributed knowledge' (Marcus, 1998) that will be the outcome of the research. Ethnicity, genre, class, age, are all elements that come into play in his/her ethnographic experience and in his/her writing. The biography of the researcher is entangled in the ethnographic endeavour (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). These days, all this appears reasonable and acceptable to most people, but nevertheless there are significantly different ways to interpret and conduct ethnography, and different ways to look at the position of the subject.

Returning to Kracauer's metaphor, we could argue that on one side are those who would accept that the bucket is leaking, and will always leak, and we can only try to adjust our position to reduce the leaking, making the reader/viewer aware of this. On the other hand, there are those who would claim that they can stop the bucket to leak altogether, by fixing it or throwing it away and maybe getting a brand new one (like we are induced to do with mobile phones and all our electronic and home devices). Their effort of reflexivity will be limited to showing to the reader/viewer that they have been able to keep the bucket intact. They will consequently ask the reader to trust what they see. The proponents of the non-leaking bucket would assume a neo-positivist or realist position: their attention to the researcher's role will only serve as a supporting argument to the assumed objectivity and neutrality of the ethnographic intervention. Authors operating within this epistemological milieu may produce powerful books, books which appear 'truthful', 'realistic' documents of social struggles. Because of the underlining claims of telling the story straight, of being an objective account of the events and of often overlooked social dynamics, they may even generate interest from the general public. This is the case, for example, of 'Body and Soul', by Loic Wacquant (2004), and 'Sidewalk', by Mitchell Duneier (1999). Both ethnographies read, at least in part, like non-fiction rather than academic studies, and they make a case for challenging traditional forms of representation of research outcomes. They provide strong

arguments and plenty of ‘facts’. However, a critical problem emerges from these intellectual interventions: can we really think of a world outside the politics of representation? Can ethnography be anything else from ‘auto-ethnography’ (and therefore losing authority in the eyes of ‘science’)?

Intense, solid messiness

I want the reader to accept that what I am sharing here are reflections on a personal, intellectual journey which is probably bound to incompleteness. It is made of considerations and re-considerations, and moments in which I allow myself to be confused about possibilities, ramifications. I want to understand what impact ethnography has on the researcher (the self), and on the participants, and what it truly means for someone (male, adult, white, Western-Southern European, working class background...) to research other peoples’ lives, to represent people who are different from him/herself (Hall, 1997). When I first read books like the ones that I mentioned, and others, I was intrigued, at times even enthralled. I was captivated by the realistic narrative, and the ‘solid’ arguments. I thought I had found what I was looking for: a way to fix the bucket and finally put it to good use. It took some time to realise that I was deluding myself. This realisation was hard to take at the beginning. When I embarked on my project I needed examples, models of ethnographic work that I could refer to, that could resonate with my background and reflect my aspirations. These books provided that. However, over the months and years spent ‘doing fieldwork’ I started to see things differently.

I need here to make a brief biographical detour. There was a further reason that influenced my decision to start a PhD after twelve years working as a journalist. In 2005 I had published in Italy the book *La Mia Casa è Dove Sono Felice* (My Home is Where I am Happy), in which I tried to create a dialogue between Italy’s long history of emigration and its recent history of immigration through the life-stories of Italian emigrants and immigrants of different origin living in Italy. I am not afraid to admit that the book was inspired by Kracauer’s work (particularly *The Salaried Masses*) although at that time I was ashamed to acknowledge it. Quite surprisingly, the book was praised also by academics and was re-published. Writing this book was for me a way to reflect on my own family history (both my parents – father housepainter, mother factory worker – migrated to Switzerland in the 1960s, where I was born), and to engage with the understanding of contemporary migration flows and identity formations. After its publication I felt the desire to keep up with my investigation, focusing on the second generation of immigrants. I envisioned this to be the next step in my journey as a writer/researcher. But then a sort of intellectual crisis held back my enthusiasm. In my book I had combined the passion of the journalist and the writer for biographical stories with the methodological tools of sociology and history acquired during my university education. The result was a hybrid object, part journalistic reportage, part sociological inquiry. Despite the relative success of the book, I felt that if I wanted to focus on young people I had to do things differently, to deepen my epistemological and theoretical understanding of the challenge ahead. I kept this interest alive for a few years, waiting for the right opportunity to undertake my project. It is during this time that ‘ethnography’ properly entered my perspective, and ended occupying my thoughts.

For some time, my reading of ethnographies was essentially a private, intimate endeavour. It was only when I started doing fieldwork in Ireland that I realised what it actually meant to participate and observe, to observe while participating. Most of the time, it was emotionally more than practically, a complete mess. How could anyone claim a ‘scientific’ status of what I was going through and of what I endeavoured to (re)create on the page at the end of every day (or the next day when I was too exhausted to do it the same day)? But then, this could be said of any effort to produce ‘data’ out of human behaviour through statistics, experiments, or interviews in the age of people ‘broadcasting themselves’ (YouTube), and people being the first observers in their own lives (through closely monitored online social networks).

I spent about three years with two youth football (soccer) teams in a Dublin suburb, the most ethnically diverse area of the Republic of Ireland. I did not know anyone there before moving to Ireland, and gaining access to the first team took a few months of negotiation and pre-fieldwork research. Over three football seasons I was presented with many ‘revelatory moments’, ethnographic events which, once written down, analysed, mentally revisited, provided a special type of evidence. It was an evidence which told me that ethnography, and any meaningful form of social research aimed at learning about social interactions and social dynamics, is performative (Conquergood, 2002), conjunctural, fragile and precious like a beautiful painting on a newspapers’ page. If ethnography wants to tell the truth, to be truthful to itself, it needs to accept that ‘truth’ is a socially constructed event, the result of interactions between the researcher and the participants, whose roles may shift, evolve, disappear, if researcher and participants really engage with each other.

Tensions in the researcher’s position have been acknowledged and explored by Adler and Adler (1987, 2012), who identified different levels of ‘membership’ in the ethnographic community (‘peripheral’, ‘active’, ‘full’), depending on the type of rapport being created and the characteristics of the setting and topic. Johnson, Avenarius and Weatherford (2006) discuss the merits of the ‘active participant-observer’, focusing on one particular type of ethnographic ‘membership’ which has gained prominence in the current times. According to the DeWalt and DeWalt (2010: 27), however, ‘the balance between observation and participation achieved by an individual researcher can fall anywhere along the continuum’. As the role of the researcher, and their relationship with the participants, may change and shift, the same happens to the quality of knowledge being produced – misunderstandings, ‘distractions’, and diversions are natural occurrences of the process. What remains of this fluid and intense engagement is arguably the text, a narrative. Nothing meaningfully exists outside the process of representation (Hall, 1997). To try to make this point clear, I will use a vignette from my ethnography in Ireland.

Ciprian and Adrian are two friends born in Romania and taken to Ireland at different stages of their childhoods. When I met them, they were 17-year old, and played football in a team coached by two Nigerian former professional footballers called Insaka. The players in the team were mostly (black) Africans, from different countries of that continent. There were a few white players alongside the two Romanians, all Eastern Europeans, but no Irish. It was a unique team in the Dublin youth football leagues. I had previously spent two years with another youth team based in the same area, and a friend, member of the NGO Sport Against Racism Ireland (SARI), who was helping the Nigerian coaches, invited me to spend some time

with Insaka, to 'document their struggles'. I accepted and with the help of a small video camera I negotiated my access to the team as an observer and team-assistant (I had been introduced as a 'PhD student and former journalist from Italy'). Ciprian and Adrian were quite open to me from the start and in the time spent at the training pitch or travelling to games, I learnt more about their lives, and they learnt something about mine. Once I asked Ciprian what music he was listening to through his headphones. He said it was Romanian rap. This struck me as odd since he had been living in Ireland for most of his life and had only been back once to his country of origin. But, even more surprisingly, Ciprian was not only listening to Romanian rap but also writing songs in Romanian, recording them and putting them on YouTube. And he was doing this with Adrian: they were a hip hop duo. I instinctively decided to take the opportunity to move away from the pitch as my main fieldwork site. It was an unexpected development in a project which focused on the sporting practices of teenagers, but I thought I could not miss this serendipitous opportunity. After attending a rehearsal and more conversations, I proposed to Adrian and Ciprian to collaborate in a video I was producing about the annual SARI Soccer Fest. It was a documentation of the event, with interviews and footage of the games. They agreed to collaborate and offered to record a version of one of their songs to be used as a soundtrack. They explained to me that the song was about poor people, street life, nasty policemen and such things that are often the focus of hip hop music, in Romania as elsewhere.

Our video received good feedback and SARI posted it on their website. After a couple of months since its publication on the web, however, a member of the Romanian immigrant community contacted SARI to question the content of the lyrics, asking if they were in accordance with 'SARI ethics'. He sent a translation which was forwarded to me. According to this translation, the lyrics included expletives, also of a sexist nature, and this understandably made the organisation uncomfortable. SARI asked me to edit a shorter version, taking out the most controversial parts, which I did after having discussed the issue with Adrian and Ciprian.

This ethnographic event posed critical questions, but also taught me some important lessons. Despite some embarrassment in receiving the email, I was excited by the unexpected turn of the story. It appeared to me as a sort of rhizomatic development from my initial interest in sport, and I deemed it a rich ethnographic moment. Through my intervention more people had been introduced to the boys' music and, following this controversy, some had learnt what they had to say about their lives divided between Ireland and Romania. This story was real, but at the same completely fictional as it was created by the researcher and the participants, and it only took form as a 'story', with a narrative, and a 'meaning', through our representations (mine, Ciprian's, Adrian's, SARI's, that of the unknown complainer, or of other observers) of it. From an epistemological point of view, the story confirmed my perception that what I experienced in the field and *after* the field work, at the time of writing, in this and other occasions, was as important as the dynamics I could 'observe' and 'witness'. Nothing existed outside of the process of representation. The representation is selective, filtered through the body of the researcher and that of the participants as co-authors, and takes place in the text, by means of words and possibly images. Denzin argues that,

In dealing with the truth of life's fiction, the dividing line between fact and fiction is tested, and reality and text become one. Narrative in its many storied, performance and textual forms, is all that we have (1997, p. 266).

A matter of becoming

I want now to look to the issue of transformation, on how research impacts on the subject(s) involved, particularly the researcher. I will try to explain how I believe these apparently different dimensions of the doings of research are interlinked and dependent on each other. In interviews and public lectures, Michel Foucault often reflected on the ways he had been transformed, at different levels, by his research work. For example, in an interview for the journal *Ethos*, in 1982, he said:

I am not interested in the academic status of what I am doing because my problem is my own transformation. That's the reason also why, when people say, 'Well, you thought this a few years ago and now you say something else,' my answer is ... [Laughs] 'Well, do you think I have worked like that all those years to say the same thing and not to be changed?' This transformation of one's self by one's own knowledge is, I think, something rather close to the aesthetic experience. Why should a painter work if he is not transformed by his own painting? (1994, p. 131).

I often found myself thinking that if this is what happened to him, who carried out his research essentially in archives, through documents and dusty papers, what should social researchers, and ethnographers in particular, make of their own experiences of trying to learn about people's social worlds by interacting with them, even trying to appropriate their own perspectives, going 'native' without actually going 'native' (Behar, 2008)? Drawing on their theoretical model of ethnographic membership, Adler and Adler (1987, pp. 87) argue that 'Membership role research is transformative in character. The researcher will be changed by gathering data through this powerfully intensive mode'. But the question would be: what type of transformation will the researcher go through? To me, doing and writing research on human relations, on social dynamics, and particularly on issues of belonging, racialization and migration, is a matter of becoming. If that is not the case it will mean to betray the essence, the only element of 'truth', of doing research. In order to be able to do this, ethnography needs to be alert to the senses, and to the imagination of all the people involved. In a way, ethnography cannot be anything else than 'sensuous scholarship', which in the words of Stoller (1997, p. 91) is 'a fully sensuous scholarship in which experience and reality, imagination and reason, difference and commonality are fused and celebrated in both rigorous and imaginative practices as well as in expository and evocative expression'. Understandably, this is a clear alternative to what many researchers do. Stoller (ibid., 91) argues that 'the goal of many scholars - scientists and humanists alike - is to aspire to competence practiced with a dead hand'. If we want to avoid the 'dead hand' we should embrace the idea of 'becoming'. 'Becoming' is a key concept of the theoretical project developed by Deleuze and Guattari (2017), and has manifest political implications. They write:

A point is always a point of origin. But a line of becoming has neither beginning nor end, departure nor arrival, origin nor destination; to speak of the absence of an origin, to make the absence of an origin the origin, is a bad play on words. A line of becoming has only a middle. The middle is not an average; it is fast motion, it is the absolute speed of movement. A becoming is always in the middle; one can only get it by the middle (Deleuze and Guattari 2017, p. 342).

Becoming is something that does not lead to a point, points are made to be left behind. It is about deterritorializing the self, to become minoritarian (not a minority). 'One reterritorializes, or allows oneself to be reterritorialized, on a minority as a state; but in becoming one is deterritorialized' (ibid., p. 339). Becoming is becoming-minoritarian, to become everything that is not majoritarian. Importantly, and central to Deleuze and Guattari's political message: 'Majority implies a state of domination' (ibid., p. 339).

When we say majority, we are referring not to a greater relative quantity but to the determination of a state or standard in relation to which larger quantities, as well as the smallest, can be said to be minoritarian: white-man, adult-male, etc (ibid., p. 339).

Embracing the becoming in our research, and in our lives, is a political and pedagogical project. 'Becoming-minoritarian is a political affair and necessitates a labor of power (puissance), an active micropolitics' (ibid., p. 340). We should all become minoritarian. 'We can be thrown into a becoming by anything at all, by the most unexpected, most insignificant things' (ibid., p. 340). The doings of research provide the unexpected, if we are ready to accept it and welcome it. Broadly speaking, in the project of doing research we can identify two dimensions of the self. On the one hand, the transformative self is one that is aware that, in the words of Denzin (2006, p. 422),

Our research practices are performative, pedagogical, and political. Through our writing and our talk, we enact the words we study. These performances are messy and pedagogical. They instruct our readers about this world and how we see it. The pedagogical is always moral and political; by enacting a way of seeing and being, it challenges, contests, or endorses the official, hegemonic ways of seeing and representing the other.

On the other hand, the researcher as transformative self understands that change has to happen at the level of the subject, the researcher, the self. S/he needs to allow her/himself to be deterritorialized. This process can take many forms, and ethnography, the ethnographic experience, is a powerful means to foster creative and politically empowering deterritorializations. For example, during the first months of fieldwork with a mixed group of teenagers (white Irish and black African) in a working class area of suburban Dublin, I went through different stages of the 'identity work' which according to Hammersley and Atkinson (2007, p. 79) is intrinsic to participant observation. Our participants cast us into certain identities, while at the same time we consciously or unconsciously tend to adapt our

demeanour and appearance to the situation in order to fit in (Goffman, 1967), to be accepted as observers and participants.

In my first fieldwork I 'lost' the identity associate to my name the day a fourteen-year old Irish boy called me 'Maximo', probably following the coach early distortion of my name. From that moment on I was 'Maximo' for everybody. It probably sounded more Italian than 'Max'. This apparently light and even playful event, in fact made uncomfortable. Since my early childhood I hated being called Massimo (the Italian form for 'Maximo'), while I would passively accept being called 'Massimiliano' (my official name on the passport). But in fact, throughout my childhood, everyone called me simply Max, and I liked it because it testified of my particular origin; the fact of being born in a small German-speaking town of Switzerland, and being known as 'Maximilian'. Although I had the opportunity to explain my background to some research participants, young and adults, I never contested the use of Maximo, as I felt it was attached to the 'me-ethnographer', the 'performative-I' (Madison, 2011), which I wanted to believe was slightly different from the other 'me'.

In fact, through this and other experiences, I learnt about the fragility of our understanding of ourselves. It was not simply about me embracing this superficial 'identity', but to accept the fact that multiple identities were, as they are, possible, real, necessary to avoid being 'majoritarian'. Maximo stayed with me, it represents an idea of myself I was initially not ready to accept. We cannot overlook the fact that the way others see us influences how we see ourselves (what in Communication Studies is called 'perception'). Something similar happens with regards to social class positioning. Would my rural, working class background help me get closer to the working class communities I am interest to learn about and share the struggles of? Not really. Most of the times, in their eyes I am an 'educated' person, someone from the 'higher echelons', who for some reason is interested to spend time with them and to learn about their lives. More importantly, for my black participants, with precarious legal statuses in Europe, I am a white, male, adult, possessing an EU passport.

Doing research in Ireland and Italy made me more conscious about the ways society constructs us individuals, supposed members of 'national cultures', and how racialization and whiteness are structural power dimensions of the European 'nation-form' (Balibar, 1991). It made me more willing to challenge hegemonic constructions and fight inequality, injustice, and racism in all the forms they take in the society or societies I happen to live in. The transformative self is one that aspires to enact the words that s/he writes, but is, maybe more importantly, someone who accepts to be changed by the research practice. Otherwise, all we be reduced to 'projects', 'fund applications', and 'career steps', with as little as possible attention to critical readings of society. Unfortunately, this is increasingly what corporate universities would prefer academics to do these days. In the scheme of things of corporate universities, we should learn to be insensitive to the topics/subjects that we study and to master the 'dead hand' better than the others (as this will take our institutions higher in the university tables).

Conclusion: The bucket is empty

This paper started as a reflection on the hybrid identity of ethnography in the post post-modern stage. It looked at early examples of ethnographic inquiry which combined journalistic reportage with sociological analysis, and highlighted the importance of further

experimentations of form and practice if ethnography and social research want to be relevant to the contemporary times. Specific attention has been paid to reflexivity and to the issue of transformation. An ethnography which aims to address and challenge hegemonic discourses cannot ignore the transformative potential of research on the subject/researcher. Research cannot obviously be 'neutral', it will contradict itself. It needs to embrace the political and pedagogical significance of the social struggles it aims to illuminate. This is particularly important in researching migration, youth cultures in multicultural societies, the multiple forms of racism and racialization, and state policies informed by histories of imperialism and colonialism. It is also an urgent project in the face of the rise of authoritarian regimes and xenophobic movements across the world, growing inequality, restriction of human mobility while capital is free to roam and exploit, and finally, dramatic environmental global challenges (which encapsulate and magnify all these issues).

However, a final question emerges from this discussion, which pertains to the 'reality' at the centre of our investigations. I ended the introductory paragraph with a provocative claim: The bucket is *now* empty. I mentioned en passant the present circumstances of 'social life', implicated in continuous, uninterrupted flows of communication which conflate and confuse reality. With the emergence of social media, the private and the public have collapsed: social life is at the same time lived and represented by individuals and groups. The words of Baudrillard, written in 1981, appear in this regard prophetic:

There is an escalation of the true, of the lived experience; a resurrection of the figurative where the object and substance have disappeared. And there is a panicstricken production of the real and the referential, above and parallel to the panic of material production (1988, p. 169).

For Baudrillard 'a perfect model of all the entangled orders of simulation' was Disneyland. Today, Disneyland is everywhere, we are all Disneyland. Our task as researchers, intellectuals, writers, journalists, critical thinkers is, on the one hand, to move even closer to reality, to embrace the struggles of the disempowered and marginalised, being true to the moral mission of exposing and dismantling discourses of power, domination, and exploitation. Within this scenario, the role of the ethnographer is particularly important, as their texts and their narratives are informed by empirical materials which are analysed, compared and interpreted through conceptual lenses. In their eyes, the histories of ideas and potential solutions are not forgotten or erased but enlivened by the social dynamics observed and represented. On the other hand, we cannot ignore the call of Giorgio Agamben of what it means to be 'contemporary':

To be contemporary is, first and foremost, a question of courage, because it means being able not only to fix your gaze on the darkness of the epoch, but also to perceive in this darkness a light that, while directed toward us, infinitely distances itself from us. In other words, it is like being on time for an appointment that one cannot but miss (2011, p. 46).

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