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Mathieu Bonzom, Rim Latrache, Caroline Laurent, Yohann Le Moigne

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# France-Based Scholars Researching Minority Groups in the Field: A Symposium

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*by Mathieu Bonzom, Rim Latrache, Caroline Laurent, and Yohann Le Moigne*

**The editors asked four French scholars specializing in American studies a series of five questions regarding their experience of conducting fieldwork, the challenges they faced, and how they met them. The following is a collaborative contribution, a discussion among the four contributors. The four authors are Yohann Le Moigne (University of Angers), who is a specialist of turf-based gang rivalries in the Los Angeles metropolitan area; Caroline Laurent (University of Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne), who does research on casinos on Indian reservations in the Midwest; Rim Latrache (University of Paris 13 Villetaneuse), who specializes on the construction and expression of Arab and Muslim identities in the United States; and Mathieu Bonzom (University of Orléans), whose work focuses on Latin immigrants and their participation in the labor movement.**

## Background

**Can you briefly describe one research you did that was based on fieldwork? Why did you opt for a fieldwork-based approach to research? What kinds of data did you feel you could only collect in that way? How would you describe the way doing fieldwork contributes to your research? Do you sometimes find it necessary to complement fieldwork data with other sources?**

- 1 Yohann Le Moigne:** As a part of the PhD in Geography that I conducted between 2009 and 2014, which focused on the consequences of Latino immigration on the relations between African Americans and Latinos in gangs and local politics in the city of Compton (California), I spent more than 15 months in the field. The geopolitical approach that I applied to this research consisted in analyzing power rivalries on territory and attached particular importance to the protagonists' representations (the way they perceive history, their opponents and the stakes of the situation). It was therefore necessary to interview local residents (especially gang members as well as political and community leaders) in order to compare their respective experiences and record their feelings about the deterioration of interminority relations that had been observed by residents, journalists and social scientists since the mid-1990s.
- 2** Consequently, I conducted over 110 semi-structured interviews. Roughly half of these were not recorded, especially when conducted with gang members, for obvious confidentiality reasons. The interviews, whether recorded or not, were then transcribed as soon as possible in order for me to have the most faithful

written versions of them as possible. I supplemented these interviews with ethnographic observation, a regular involvement in four local organizations as well as a weekly attendance at various public meetings (city council meetings, school district board meetings, block-club meetings, etc.). In addition, fieldwork was also necessary to gather quantitative data about Compton voters' electoral practices and gang-related crime. More specifically, I worked extensively with the staff of the city clerk's office and of the local station of the Los Angeles Sheriff's Department in order to gain access to a large quantity of official documents (such as election rosters for the last 10 municipal elections and sensitive crime statistics and homicide maps).

- 3 Caroline Laurent: Were these documents hard to obtain? Or was it easy for you, once you introduced yourself, to get access to them?
- 4 Yohann Le Moigne: Election rosters were fairly easy to obtain, since they are public records. I just had to go to the city clerk's office and request them. As for crime statistics and homicide maps, I developed a lasting relationship with a gang detective from the Compton station of the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department. He introduced me to some people in the Homicide Division (the department in charge of investigating homicides in the whole county). I asked them if they could provide me with some geographical data about the location of all the gang-related homicides that had happened in the city in the course of the previous ten years. They sent my request to the Assistant Sheriff (no. 3 in the hierarchy of the Los Angeles Sheriff's Department) who asked me about my research via email and requested a letter from my academic institution to make sure that I really was who I was claiming to be. Once I provided the letter, I rapidly received all the documents that I had requested.
- 5 So only a long stay in the field could allow me to immerse myself in the territory that I was studying, to feel its atmosphere and to share the life of the people whose thoughts and actions I was trying to understand.
- 6 Lastly, my research also required an important work of contextualization: I needed a multiscale perspective, especially to know more about the causes and the intensity of Latino immigration in the Southwest of the US and more specifically in the Los Angeles greater area; I also adopted a regional and local historical perspective (studying the demographic and political evolutions of the Los Angeles area and the city of Compton was necessary to understand how cordial relations between two minority groups allied against a common enemy—conservative whites—had deteriorated within a few years against a background of growing competition for shrinking resources). Consequently, it was necessary to complement my fieldwork by reading various history, sociology, geography, anthropology or political science books related to the region, its ethno-racial groups or its gangs. Analyzing census data also proved extremely important.
- 7 **Caroline Laurent:** The subject of my PhD dissertation was the impact of Indian gaming on Native reservations in Minnesota, which is a relatively new phenomenon, historically speaking (last 30 years). There exists some literature

about the economic impact of tribal gaming on these communities, but there was no thorough study of all the consequences this economy has had on every aspect of tribal societies, such as their culture, their identity, and their political power. The need for fieldwork was clear and, over the three years I spent in Minnesota, I collected about 50 interviews with tribal leaders, political figures, managers, educators, employees, drug addicts, writers, journalists, professors, senators, house representatives, and with anyone who felt that they held part of the answers to my numerous questions—and who were hoping their voices might be heard. The objective was, of course, to collect some data from reliable sources, but also to record the feelings, reactions, and answers from a sample of the population as varied as possible, in order not to leave out some essential perspectives from the study. Unlike what is commonly believed, there are divisions between tribes regarding main political topics and there are disagreements within tribes themselves, among their members, as to whether gambling has brought a positive or a negative change in their lives. Depending on the location of a reservation (close to a city or not, for example), the number of members of a nation, and their cultural beliefs, casinos have been handled differently and have had an impact that differs from one tribe to another.

- 8 It became rapidly evident that I would have to choose one tribe among the eleven tribal nations of Minnesota, since all of them were so different and had had various results in their management of casinos. Focusing on one tribe did not mean that the others would be left out, only that this one tribe would become a point of reference which I would compare other tribes to. The choice was frustrating to make, but it came naturally after one of the eleven tribes' chief executive gave me the green light to interview some of the key members of her staff and generously shared documentation with me.
- 9 I also used primary sources such as federal, state, and tribal official documents that I was given or that I could consult, thanks to the numerous contacts I developed on reservations in Minnesota. Fieldwork was the substance of my research, although I had actually spent one full year prior to my trip researching books and articles that would give me an idea of all the facets my work would need to explore. I could have read ten times what I actually did read and it would not have given me the insight I gained from spending three years in the field and meeting all the people who were willing to share their stories with me. I complemented my field research with other sources such as books and articles which were easily available. These two types of sources, once they are confronted, open the range of perspectives available to a researcher.
- 10 **Rim Latrache:** The situation of Arabs/Muslims in the United States and in France is a sensitive topic that has political implications. It is related to US foreign policy, international events and the legacy of colonialism in the case of France. Researchers are very often exposed to official statements, to various declarations of Arab/Muslim organizations as well as constant streams of news and heated debates.

- 11 As a researcher, I felt I needed to go beyond the polished language of official declarations and statements as well as beyond the over-simplified analysis of domestic and international events. This can be done through exploratory research, i.e. by doing research in-context, and engaging with members of the group under study in order to understand their opinions and motivations. A researcher needs to be in direct contact with them over a long period of time; long enough to establish a relationship based on confidence and to gain trust of the participants. Fieldwork is essential to understand and explain the complexities of social/ethnic/political realities.
- 12 I interviewed members of the Arab American community in Washington, DC and in Michigan.
- 13 Caroline Laurent: How long did your fieldwork last? How long did you stay in the US and/or how much time was dedicated to communicating with American subjects (through phone or email)?
- 14 Rim Latrache: I spent one week in each city. The interviews were semi-structured. They were mainly about how this community deals with its constant negative visibility in spite of its various efforts to counter these stereotypes. The interviewees were Arab American academics and active members of Arab American organizations. I was able to conduct research in what I call 'a comfort zone.' Indeed, contact with them was easy as they were already aware of the importance of research and fieldwork. By contrast, gaining access to individuals not publicly affiliated to either academic institutions or community/political organizations was difficult when I conducted fieldwork in France in an 'uncertain terrain.' Part of the fieldwork was done through questionnaires (based on closed-ended questions with multiple choice answer options) about cultural diversity in one of the suburbs of Paris and about how Arabs/Muslims are perceived in France. Participants were randomly selected in various neighborhoods of the chosen suburb. Since the subject was the perception of Arabs/Muslims, the random selection of participants aimed at reflecting the diversity of opinions.
- 15 Yohann Le Moigne: Were both of these fieldworks part of the same study? If so, why did you choose not to conduct semi-structured interviews with the French participants?
- 16 Rim Latrache: These fieldworks were not part of the same study. The same protocol would be applied if the research was done in the United States. It has not been possible so far because this protocol requires being in the field for a long period.
- 17 **Mathieu Bonzom:** My doctoral research on Latino immigrant social movements in Chicago was based on fieldwork to a significant extent. I started out with a project to study low-wage workers' lives in Chicago, expecting that this project would lead me to investigate working and living conditions of Latino immigrants among others. As it happened, my first months-long stay in Chicago began in the spring of 2006, in the middle of what was fast becoming a nation-wide mass

movement of immigrant protests. I decided to seize that opportunity and shift my research project to center it on describing that movement and explaining its very existence and the way it developed into a major event. I wanted to try and bring to light the social resources which made millions of immigrants willing and able to organize such an unexpected, unusual and broad protest movement.

- 18 Yohann Le Moigne: This highlights the necessity of flexibility when we are in the field: We must be able to adapt at any time and be ready to reshape the form and the substance of our research. Does this unexpected shift mean that you started to study a social movement without specific knowledge in this field? (I guess it requires to be familiar with the sociology of organizations, for instance). As a social scientist by training, was it a problem for you? What kind of difficulties did this shift in research topic generate in the way you conceived and organized your fieldwork, and in the way you conceptualized your research?
- 19 Mathieu Bonzom: Initially, most of the academic knowledge I had on social movements actually had to do with the labor movement, and this was something else, at least in part. And then I had some knowledge about some of the specific features of the history of social movements in the US, rather than general theory of social movements or organizations. So I did have to broaden my horizons to some extent, which took work, but you always have to expect such work in the first years of a PhD, and indeed even more so if you want to do fieldwork. On the other hand, I think it's clear that happening to be there in 2006 was actually a huge opportunity—you can't plan for a mass movement to just happen at the right time and place for you to be able to do fieldwork in it, and the extra work it took proved very rewarding.
- 20 From the start, I knew that I wanted to use a fieldwork-based approach, as it was central in the training I had received during the previous two years, to obtain my Master's degree in social sciences (I had previously been studying English language, literature and American studies). What's more, my decision to focus on the 2006 movement made it a logical choice to use fieldwork as much as possible: it is a common approach to the study of protest movements, using participant observation to document various forms of collective action, as well as connect with other participants and organizers to become part of networks that could best be investigated from the inside, attending organizing meetings, following participants along their respective routines, etc. and eventually carrying out interviews which could then be analyzed in relation with the rest of the field data. Since such movements are relatively rare and do not necessarily translate into long-lasting organizations or institutions, it seemed to me that anyone who had the opportunity to do fieldwork and capture some otherwise inaccessible data on the movement, should do so.
- 21 Which is not to say that fieldwork was going to be the only source of data that I was going to rely on: it guaranteed I would be able to rely on decisive and original data, but such data would not be usable to produce a general political analysis of the movement, unless I also attempted to build a theoretical and empirical

framework to establish the historical conditions for such a political process.

- 22 And since completing my PhD and taking a job as an associate professor, I've decided to treat the short-term impossibility to start another fieldwork investigation as an opportunity to take a step back on the centrality of fieldwork in the Bourdieu school of sociology in which I had first been trained, and which carries a lot of weight in French intellectual debates. I reflected on the limitations of fieldwork (or the current uses of fieldwork), which arguably tended to be the basis for an atomized view of society and politics. To some extent, such uses of fieldwork were predicated on the idea that, along the way, major figures in fieldwork-based sociology (and especially Bourdieu himself) were supposed to work on the "synthesis" (as happened previously between ethnographic fieldwork and anthropological theory), except that was not as explicitly stated as before, perhaps as a result of an intellectual context in which the very possibility of synthesis was in doubt. Bourdieu's own work in this respect was arguably unfinished, and it seems unclear whether anyone else produced a more definitive and lasting synthesis. Reflecting on all this made me feel even more clearly the need for an approach of the social whole or 'totality,' as an essential element to make any new fieldwork project possible—at least that is something I feel I would need, and I would argue others might want to ask themselves the same kind of questions and take *theory* seriously (so as to reconcile fieldwork with it).
- 23 Yohann Le Moigne: I have been confronted with the same difficulty since I was recruited as an associate professor: I don't have the possibility to conduct fieldwork (not to mention *extensive* fieldwork), and I have almost published all the analyses based on the information gathered during my doctoral fieldwork, which means I have to rethink the way I do research and attach more importance to theory. Against the background that you mention, how do you intend to articulate the empirical and theoretical dimensions of your research? Do you plan to play the role of these 'major figures' who were supposed to work on the synthesis? Or would you rather try to rethink the alternative between inductive and deductive approaches?
- 24 Mathieu Bonzom: I guess I'd go with that second answer to your question. I am not trying to just place myself in a better position within the same division of academic labor. And I do think that we need to keep thinking about relations between the empirical and the theoretical. I hope it can become more acceptable, more relevant for colleagues, to actually discuss theory and not just take a certain approach for granted; I think that starts by making theoretical assumptions more visible than they are, showing how they can be intricately woven together with the empirical content, even when we have the illusion that we are reading something extremely empirical.

## Methods

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How did you learn to conduct fieldwork? Was it part of your original academic training? In what ways did the experience of doing fieldwork differ from the textbook variety of it? Did you sometimes feel you had to set boundaries—for example between interviewing, observing, and participating; or between yourself and your respondents? Or did you sometimes feel that you had to overstep boundaries you had originally defined?

- 25 **Yohann Le Moigne:** Learning how to conduct fieldwork was not part of my academic training. I spent the second year of my PhD in the field. I had prepared this long-term stay by reading books on the geographic, historical, sociological and demographic specificities of the Los Angeles area, especially on the theme of gangs in order to become more familiar with such a specific and potentially dangerous environment and make as few behavioral mistakes as possible.
- 26 Because the various methodologies of fieldwork had never been scientifically addressed during either my Master's degree or the first year of my PhD, I was not even aware of the existence of an ethnographic and sociological literature on this topic. I had only read a few rather brief articles about the way to conduct interviews. In contrast, I took inspiration from several classics of urban ethnographic research (such as Loïc Wacquant's *Urban Outcasts*, Elijah Anderson's *A Place on the Corner*, or Malcolm Klein's *The American Street Gang*) to think out and organize my fieldwork. Moreover, after I came back to France and read a few more important books on the topic (Philippe Bourgois' *In Search of Respect* and Susan Phillips' *Wallbangin'* for instance) I realized that I had undergone feelings, met problems, and adopted strategies that were similar to those many researchers experience in the field.
- 27 The books by gang specialists such as Malcolm Klein (a sociologist) and James D. Vigil (an anthropologist), that I read during the first year of my PhD, helped me a lot because their authors mentioned mistakes that they had made and explained what, according to their personal experience, was the best way to approach and establish relations with gang members. My PhD adviser was always extremely available and helpful. She played a fundamental role, among various other things, in the definition and clarification of my research questions. However, fieldwork methods were never discussed because it was not considered a fundamental issue for our department since it was neither a sociology nor an anthropology department. As a consequence, I mostly learned by doing, and more specifically by dealing with the unexpected. As I was confronted with the unreliability of many potential interviewees who didn't respect their commitment, I rapidly had to learn how to lighten up about unexpected disappearances and no-shows, to seize unforeseen opportunities and to get rid of my desire to always conduct interviews by the book.
- 28 As for the boundaries between interviewing, observing and participating, I hadn't given them much thought before starting my fieldwork since I was aware that I would be unable to draw a sharp distinction between these practices: As a foreign



and, what is more, white man in a poor, non-white and potentially very violent environment, I was expecting to run into serious difficulties to meet people, forge sustainable relationships with them, integrate into the network of community-based organizations and have the opportunity to do ethnographic observation. Interpersonal relations rapidly turned out to be less difficult than expected, but the problems related to many potential respondents' lack of reliability reinforced my willingness to seize any opportunity to meet, observe and participate without drawing any strict or even conscious boundary between these practices.

29 In contrast, the question of establishing boundaries between me and some of my respondents rapidly arose. Issues related to domination and the relation to power were very important in my research, and I was especially interested in having access to the people who pictured themselves as 'dominated,' who thought of themselves as being in opposition to the powers that be, whether it be political power (in the case of Latino opponents to the local black political majority) or the 'dominant' society (in the case of local gang members). I therefore had to establish different relations depending on the type of respondents and their relation to power. Since I was trying to establish relationships based on mutual trust with many local gang members, I had, for instance, to make sure not to be seen at the police station or with police officers, some of whom were however very reliable and interesting sources. In the same way, while I developed friendships with Latino parents from a local Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) who were fighting against the proposal made by the black-led school district to close down their school, I sometimes had to set boundaries with some African American political or community leaders who wanted to use some elements of my work to further their political agenda.

30 Caroline Laurent: How did you establish those boundaries?

31 Yohann Le Moigne: I simply didn't try as hard to establish lasting relationships. Many African American officials were suspicious about me and my work, and they often asked questions about my findings, especially as they related to the question of Latino exclusion and the way Latino activists were organizing against it. I knew that disclosing that kind of information would probably have bad and lasting consequences for the concerned activists and the local Latino community as a whole, so I just never provided any sensitive information to anyone whom I suspected not to sympathize with the local Latino struggle. Moreover, on one occasion, a former president of the local NAACP chapter who is now the president of a so-called civil-rights organization that he founded (which is actually a very conservative organization, although he is himself a registered Democrat) asked me to provide him with a copy of a map of gang territories and gang-related homicides that I had just designed. Since I knew he had a tough-on-crime approach, I did not want my work to be used in a way that would endanger the lives of many individuals already stigmatized and targeted by local law enforcement. So I found a sneaky way not to follow up with his demand and I did not send him the map. The flip side of this is that I actually never contacted him

again, even though I had previously planned to interview him.

32 These differences in the way I set boundaries didn't have major consequences on how I presented my research project to the various protagonists in the field: I always told them that the main goal of my dissertation was to understand the mechanisms behind the evolutions of race relations in Compton. However, it often led me to insist on some of these protagonists' representations as members of dominated groups when I was trying to gain their confidence. For instance, I often presented my research to gang members I wanted to interview by saying things like: "We often read or hear very negative things about gangs in the media, and most of the time we only have the point of view of the police. But what I am also interested in is to understand what gang members live and what they think."

33 **Caroline Laurent:** Conducting fieldwork was not part of my original academic training, so I followed anthropology lectures for a year and read books by Claude Levi-Strauss, Philippe Descola, and Maurice Godelier, people who had done fieldwork and knew the difficulties related to this type of research. I absolutely loved doing fieldwork and I knew it would be the most pleasant part of the whole process leading to the writing of my dissertation: meeting new people, visiting new places, and discovering new ideas. My personal life became unavoidably connected to my professional endeavors and it made everything more exciting, more challenging, and more essential to what I was working on. Boundaries between myself and some of my respondents had to be set. Some interviewees knew that I needed their cooperation for my work and a couple became over-familiar thinking they could take advantage of the situation (my being an isolated French woman in an Indian community, in need of information and support). In that case, the researcher that I was knew her limits. Personal safety and being faithful to my own values were natural tools to help me decide how far I could go with my sources.

34 Yohann Le Moigne: More specifically, did it contribute to move the cursor and reconsider the limits of what you could tolerate from your sources, knowing that failing to comply to what they wanted could have led to a negative chain reaction because of a potential proximity among all the members of the tribe? It was less the case for me in the field since I could take advantage of the fact that there is, for instance, a huge diversity of gangs in Compton and if some gang members did not want to cooperate, I could try to meet their rivals who were literally living a block away.

35 Caroline Laurent: If one source failed me, I could find other people to help me gather information. Tribal politics can be dreadful, there are usually at least two clans fighting for power. I was lucky enough to be introduced to the party in power at the time. The vice chairman of the richest tribe of Minnesota was overly familiar with me and I had to give up that track. It was a personal choice, but it helped me focus on the other tribe that ended up being my main subject.

36 On the other hand, some of these boundaries were sometimes overstepped either because the need for information required it or because some

relationships became more important to me than the work I was doing. Before being a researcher, I was a human being creating relationships with other people. If a precious source, for example, inadvertently shares some information with you that they were not supposed to and tells you that you should not use this information, then you have to make your own decision and weigh the pros and cons of using it. Will you favor the human/ethical component in you or the professional/ambitious one? One of my most prolific sources once gave me the amount of money the casino of his tribe made. This number was kept from tribal members as well as the rest of the public and I knew it. This person trusted me and I immediately deleted the information from my brain and memory so as to make sure I would not use it. I knew it would cause trouble to my source if it ever came out in any form, whether in an article or my dissertation, and I made the conscious choice not to use it. That is the risk one has to take when the research topic becomes so close to one's own interests. Balance between professionalism and humanity then becomes necessary and it is up to each researcher to know which part of their lives they will favor.

37 Mathieu Bonzom: I think that it's a very interesting example, and that there is more to it than this question of ethics. It can serve to illustrate the way we analyze the data we collect. We are not just collecting little pieces of truth which we will copy and paste into a coherent whole later on, we are always processing things. In this case, even if you cannot use the piece of information itself, the fact that it was given to you speaks volumes about your relationship with the interviewee, your position in the field; the fact that it's kept a secret from tribal members is also very revealing in itself; and as journalists know very well for instance, what you are told off the record can still help you a lot in your search for information that you *can* use.

38 **Rim Latrache:** Like the other contributors here, learning to conduct fieldwork was not part of my academic training. It was not, and still is not, part of the Master's or doctoral curriculums in Anglophone studies in France. My approach was first theoretical, i.e. reading books *about* conducting fieldwork. Then came the experience of being *on the ground* conducting fieldwork. The gap between *theory* and *practice* was sometimes challenging. Reading about difficulties is one thing, experiencing them is a different matter. For example, I was convinced at first that being a PhD student and later an academic would make access to respondents easier. I took the credibility of academic research and fieldwork for granted. But many interviewees and participants were skeptical about academic research, considering it as "too theoretical, disconnected from their social realities." Others were cautious and very reluctant to answer my questions. Some other participants expressed doubts about how I was going to use the data collected and accused me of "stigmatizing a group that was already victim of discrimination and stereotypes." It was very difficult to have a constructive conversation in those circumstances and to convince the participants that I was not serving any political agenda. Even if I tried to explain that cultural diversity is a reality that should be addressed and studied without necessarily stigmatizing a

specific group, many argued that the very use of terms such as “a group” or “a community” is already a stigmatization because it goes against the unitary character of the French Republic. This difficulty is specific to the French context, which is not the case in the United States, a country that acknowledges multiculturalism.

- 39 Yohann Le Moigne: Belonging to the community you are studying can in fact be a difficult issue to manage. Of course, that’s a card you can play to establish a climate of trust and confidence between you and your respondents. But in this case, being oneself an Arab/Muslim researcher could either serve or harm your research. And I suppose you did not have the same experience in your French and American fieldworks in this regard, because in the US you were not only a fellow Arab/Muslim, but you were also a French woman. Whether or not your respondents consider you as a member of their community is always a crucial factor in fieldwork.
- 40 **Mathieu Bonzom:** I learned fieldwork methods of investigation during my Master’s program in social sciences (at the ENS/EHESS in Paris) which was open to specialists of various disciplines within, or indeed outside of the field of social sciences (I was an English/American studies major until then). While we learned about many different approaches of social phenomena, we were encouraged, on the whole, to develop a fieldwork-based approach, inspired in no small part by the Bourdieu school of sociology. It was the result of the insistence that we choose a main dissertation topic that would allow for that type of methodology to be used (at least for part of the research project). We were also required to participate in some of the department’s ongoing fieldwork-based collective projects, and in a one-week fieldwork intensive training session during which the whole class went to conduct various “micro-fieldwork” projects in or around one small town.
- 41 As a result, I already had some fieldwork experience even before starting my doctoral research, and my fieldwork in the US. I could even say that I hardly ever knew the textbook variety of fieldwork, as I did not study fieldwork at all before I started this social sciences Master (since my Bachelor’s degree had more to do with English and literature), and proceeded to learn most of what I know about fieldwork from hands-on experience. For example, even if my decision to shift my research project to match fieldwork opportunities can seem like an easy decision to make in the context of an unexpected mass movement happening among some of the social strata that I was already planning to investigate, it was definitely made easier by lessons learned in previous fieldwork situations in which I had failed to adapt in that way—for instance, by selecting interviewees on the field by their degree of similarity to a certain social profile I expected to find there. I had also learned how to use such mistakes once they were discovered, even in hindsight when it is too late to go back in the field and complete the data somehow: virtually every decision made in the field has a kind of ‘feedback effect’ on relations between the investigator and the rest of the field, which can in turn

be analyzed.

- 42 Overall, my approach of the field did not lead me to set boundaries between field observation and participation, on the one hand, and interviews on the other hand. In fact, it seems to me that even when interviews seem to be separated from the rest of the data-collecting, there are still some links that need to be underlined and “objectivized” so as to clarify the situation in which the interview takes place. So when the situation led me to carry out interviews literally in the middle of observation sessions (between two meetings, in an interviewee’s office or car, for instance), it was arguably even better, in the sense that the relation between what was being said and the activities in the field could be made clearer. Of course, in some cases, it could appear necessary to create the conditions for a moment of quiet, which some interviewees needed so as to fully develop their answers and views. But even those situations were created as part of a ‘field relationship,’ which always had to be analyzed as part of the data analysis later on.
- 43 Yohann Le Moigne: Does it concretely mean that you often resorted to improvisation and unstructured interviews (which I often did as mentioned in my answer)?
- 44 Mathieu Bonzom: Yes and no. I should clarify what I meant: in some cases part of an interview, or an extra bit of interview, had to take place in unusual conditions, and it often turned out to be enlightening to be weaving in and out between interview and participant observation of the interviewee’s activities. So there was definitely an element of improvisation to it, which is one of the many ways fieldwork can bring unique insight (and frankly, it’s also part of the beauty and joy of fieldwork). However, whenever possible, I conducted at least part of the interview in a quieter setting, so that I ended up having semi-structured interviews with all my interviewees.
- 45 As for boundaries between respondents and myself, since my initial attitude towards the movement’s practices and goals was sympathetic and positive, I understood the need for a certain restraint, not only to permit a reflexive approach to the whole data-collecting process, but also to avoid giving the impression of having a very precise opinion, which would situate me too specifically among the various participants in the organizing process, at the risk of alienating some of the organizers. This proved difficult—perhaps because of some mistakes on my part, and also perhaps by the very nature of the relationships between the activists, which had been tense in the past and became tense again soon after the 2006 movement. In fact, this became a key issue for me in terms of positioning.

## Positioning

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Did you sometimes face ethical issues that you had trouble dealing with—for example expecting interviewees to be absolutely candid while you may not quite disclose your own research goals or personal opinions, etc.?

- 46 **Yohann Le Moigne:** The main ethical issue that I had to face in the field was related to the impression that I had nothing to give back to the people I interviewed, who concretely helped me and shared parts of their lives with me. I sometimes felt as though I was exploiting these people's lives to my own advantage and using the material and emotional difficulties they faced as a stepping stone for a possible academic career (this feeling was also mentioned by Susan Philipps in her book about Los Angeles gang graffiti that I only read after I came back to France). This feeling is hard to overcome and I counterbalanced it (probably unconsciously) by heavily resorting to participant observation: I tried as much as I could to take part in the life of local communities and to help people who made time for me, especially in the organizations I was involved with (the aforementioned example of the PTA is a good illustration). Moreover, I never lost sight of the fact that producing quality research would allow me to make a contribution to the understanding of race relations and pauperized urban territories, and could eventually be useful to the groups I was studying (this still has to materialize through the release of a significant publication in English, though...).
- 47 Besides this, I sometimes felt ill at ease with the fact that I had to lie by omission when I failed to inform some of my respondents that I was also in touch with people they considered rivals or even enemies: it was for instance difficult to tell gang members about the interviews I conducted with police officers, and the possibility that some of them, with whom I had lasting relationships, could find out about my frequent encounters with gang detectives turned out to be pretty stressful on some occasions. However, it was clear to me since the very beginning of my fieldwork that I had to avoid putting anyone at risk, myself included, and that this should occasionally be accomplished through some accommodations with reality. It was also sometimes difficult to remain impassive or not to express my disapproval of extremely conservative or explicitly racist comments during interviews, but my main goal was to gather all points of view and not to try to convince my respondents or to try to befriend them. But overall, I never lied about who I was or the purpose of my research, especially since, as I mention below, my status as a foreigner was largely beneficial to me.
- 48 As for candidly disclosing my personal opinions, I made a very pragmatic choice by deciding to be candid with the people who more or less shared my views, and more laconic with those I felt politically or philosophically less close to. Concretely, for instance, when I interviewed African American politicians who were known for their opposition to Latino political integration, I chose to play Devil's advocate while distancing myself from the arguments that I presented. I would ask them questions like: "Your opponents say that the local African American political class has consistently discriminated against Latinos. What do you think of those

accusations?" It seemed to me that it was the most judicious thing to do as a white outsider in the very specific context of Compton local politics (there is a huge sensitivity among black political leaders who are fed up with being described as racists and who often claim that they don't want white people to tell them what to do). As a consequence, I could not afford to let them know that I considered their practices as discriminatory because it would have closed many doors (and I absolutely needed to interview African American elected officials in order to understand their representations). And retrospectively, I am glad I used this strategy because it allowed me to meet some very articulate individuals who, as I mention later, allowed me to have a more holistic understanding of the situation.

- 49 As for interviewing gang members, I had previously read that it was necessary to show empathy and to adopt a non-judgmental attitude regarding delinquent behaviors. On a few occasions, I also had to restrain from disclosing any form of disagreement or utter disgust with the occasional justification of racist practices established by some Latino gang members (but these scenarios were very rare since the huge majority of the interviewed Latino gang members expressed a strong opposition to any form of racial discrimination).
- 50 **Caroline Laurent:** When you believe that Truth (understood as undeniable facts) is the dominating goal of your research, it feels easier to use all possible ways for your respondent to believe you are on their side only to know exactly where they stand.
- 51 **Yohann Le Moigne:** In many cases, I wasn't able to establish 'the truth,' because it requires specific evidence that I didn't always have at my disposal. I rapidly realized that I could not take anyone's word at face value: more often than not, we can only compare it to other protagonists' word and analyze strategies rather than facts. I thus came to the (maybe erroneous) conclusion that it is not necessarily my job to establish the truth. Rather, I think this task should fall to journalists or judges and I, as a social scientist, should focus on the protagonists' representations and the strategies they develop. Of course, it doesn't mean that social scientists should never be in a position to validate or contradict remarks that would be in conformity with, or that would go against, an established historical reality, but I am wondering if this is truly the purpose of our work as researchers (because I am convinced that it is often impossible to do so...).
- 52 **Caroline Laurent:** In the case of tribal casinos, there is a lot of ignorance and misunderstanding on the part of non-Indians who criticize the very existence of these establishments. When one looks at the laws (federal and state laws), and studies the history of why tribal casinos came to be, one can tell exactly why they are legal and exist the way they do (without the burden of state taxes for example). Some people I interviewed were totally ignorant of these facts and therefore their whole demonstration leading to their opinion was wrong, too, because they did not know the facts. Sometimes you will want to enlighten them, sometimes you will just want to listen to them to see how far their wrongness can go. It can be extremely strenuous to detect whether or not an interviewee is being

honest, and that is when making sure one has other sources comes in handy. Oftentimes, short debates can take place if you pretend to take the opposite stance to your interviewee's in order to make them use all their arguments to prove a point you might have shared with them from the beginning. The more information one has about a subject, the easier it becomes to interject some data as evidence that your interviewee is not being sincere and only trying to feed you their (erroneous) opinion. The interviewer's personal opinion should not be disclosed until the interview is over and only if the respondent is asking for it. Then there are tactful ways of not confronting someone's ideas entirely: either by giving counter-examples to the ones they have shared or by agreeing to part of their arguments while at the same time pointing at some reserves you may have, for example. I think the researcher should be as impartial as he or she possibly can, because in the end, they will never be totally objective. Personal feelings and experiences will always find their way into our discourse, even if we attempt to be as detached from our topic as possible. There are situations when a researcher can openly and passionately defend their deepest convictions, but it is wise not to show so much enthusiasm or anger in front of people who are their sources.

53 **Rim Latrache:** Doing research on Arabs/Muslims in the United States and in France is not an easy task. The visibility and the status of this group are very sensitive topics because they are related to US foreign policy, international events and the legacy of colonialism in the case of France. The policies of the American and the French governments towards this group have always been subject to controversies and heated debates. When the researcher is himself/herself an Arab/Muslim, doing fieldwork can be very challenging because he/she is personally involved. Should the researcher mention his/her identity or not? Would interviewees feel more comfortable talking about such sensitive issues to a member of the group under study? Or on the contrary, would they feel reluctant to express their opinions freely? Will the researcher's identity have an impact on their answers? My identity as a researcher was more challenging when I conducted fieldwork through questionnaires.

54 Yohann Le Moigne: Concretely, how did you do that?

55 Rim Latrache: Unlike the interviewees, the participants in the questionnaires were randomly selected without prior contact. Because they were asked about their perception of Arabs/Muslims in France, I chose not to mention my identity so that they would feel completely free to voice their concerns/criticism/complaints. And some participants did express negative opinions about Arabs/Muslims in France. I do not think they would have done it if they had known that I was an Arab and Muslim.

56 **Mathieu Bonzom:** At the risk of losing access to certain people or networks along the way, my tendency in carrying out my doctoral research project was to be fairly candid myself, regarding not only my broad research goals (which I believe is often the case in fieldwork) but also some of my personal opinions about the movement.



- 57 Some activists had a tendency to ask for my opinion, sometimes because of their perception of me as an academic-in-training, or in other cases because of their interest in France as a country with a lot of successful social movements, including the very recent student movement of early 2006 against the CPE bill, which they had asked me about. I hesitated about what to say at first, but what seemed clear was that I had to find some way to 'play along' ... and I ended up deciding that the best way to do that was actually to give honest answers, while avoiding bringing respondents' focus on me more than necessary. I accepted the place the field had given me, in order to analyze it—once again putting in practice the general principle of learning from situations which resist decisions or plans we make on the field.
- 58 Being relatively candid when asked for my opinion thus became part of my positioning as a participant-observer, it was a way to sustain revealing fieldwork relationships with many actors of the protest movement. And to the extent that it also did shut some doors that I would have liked to step through, even that fact could be treated as fieldwork data, as negative reactions can be very telling—bearing in mind that there is virtually no approach, in any fieldwork situation, that can completely prevent the possibility of dead ends due to uncooperative respondents. In sum, I believe this approach allowed me to avoid certain ethical issues without compromising my project.

## Empathy

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How do you handle empathy—or the lack thereof—with causes (social movement or other) that have strong political implications? Do you think doing fieldwork on social movements poses specific challenges that fieldwork on other topics does not?

- 59 **Yohann Le Moigne:** The question of empathy was one of the most difficult to deal with in the field. This is probably very common among researchers doing ethnographic work on groups involved in power rivalries, especially if these groups are basically 'fighting for crumbs.' As I started to grasp the nature of the processes of political exclusion that Compton Latinos had to face (processes that were shaped and maintained by the local African American political elite), it was more and more difficult for me to remain neutral. Indeed, I started to take up the cause of Latino political leaders, voters and residents in their opposition to the black political elite. However, interviews with the man considered by many as the main architect of these exclusive practices, a former black mayor of Compton, also made me fully aware of many African Americans' state of mind. It opened my eyes to the legitimate fears they had in a very specific socio-economic and demographic context that (1) fueled competition between two groups located at the bottom of the socio-racial ladder and (2) raised the specter of sustainable downgrading and loss of power for African Americans in a city considered a historical symbol of black political empowerment and resistance to segregation.

- 60 That was when I felt the need to go beyond the belief that I absolutely had to give my opinion on the situation and judge the various protagonists (I had probably been influenced in that way by my republican/Jacobin upbringing as well as by my position as a white French academic who was therefore ‘necessarily’ more knowledgeable on issues related to race...). By the way, it is this methodological questioning that largely helped shake up my conceptions of universalism, of the political importance of race as a social construct and challenge my supposedly color-blind perception of American and French societies. I was able to handle the issue of empathy and the impetus to identify who was right and who was wrong by refocusing on the methodological basics of my academic training: a geopolitical analysis partly based on a study of the representations of the various protagonists (why they thought and acted the way they did). It allowed me to take some distance from my research topic.
- 61 Caroline Laurent: I agree, I think the question of why protagonists thought and acted the way they did is crucial.
- 62 Mathieu Bonzom: I feel that in such situations (minorities ‘fighting for crumbs’ as you say), there are other options than a) picking a side or b) remaining neutral, although I admit they are not always easy to see and sometimes one has to ‘make them up’ (for example, in this case, to put it broadly: can research like yours help pave the way to an overcoming of conflicts between minorities?). Just because we don’t necessarily see exactly what stance we should/want to take, does not mean that neutrality is the best option—or even an option at all, if we really get to the bottom of things.
- 63 **Caroline Laurent:** Real empathy means it does not matter if one agrees with the person they are talking to or not, they will be able to understand where the respondent is coming from. If one is unable to share the perspective of their interviewee, and of course it is even more difficult when touching political ideals, then it might be necessary to at least pretend to share some of the interviewee’s opinions, and to honestly challenge the way we feel about a topic by trying to comprehend some of the interviewee’s arguments or logic. As long as the researcher keeps in mind that the ultimate goal is to gather more data and create more understanding, pretending to share some opinions is worth the cost of a piece of our ethical principles.
- 64 Unfortunately, the notoriously anti-Indian people I attempted to interview declined meeting with me. For instance, I met with a person who was on the board of Mille Lacs County at the annual State of the Band Address of the Mille Lacs Band in 2014. At first absolutely cordial, sharing his card with me and interested in who I was, this person never responded to my attempts at setting up a meeting to interview him once he saw how close I was to the tribal members of Mille Lacs (the County and the Tribe have been at odds for years, the County even declaring that the reservation of the Band does not exist). Another rebuttal came from a House representative who could have found the opportunity to tell her side of the story valuable. But once I introduced myself, her assistant told me

she would not be able to meet with me or even talk to me on the phone. Reflecting about their reaction, it is possible that they knew about my numerous relationships with tribal people and that they did not believe I would give them an honest and open ear. It also seems to me that they lacked courage and faith in their own beliefs. A PhD student doing research could have presented their perspective (I know I would have) but they seemed to think they would have been misrepresented or ridiculed had they shared their opinions with me. Being identified as an 'Indian sympathizer' can thus prevent the researcher from obtaining some useful information. The best solution is to make friends on both sides of the debate, but it is rarely easy once you have spent so much time with only one of the two parties at stake.

65 Yohann Le Moigne: Do you think the fact that you are French and white played a role, or could have played a role, in their decision? They could, for instance, have perceived you as a 'de facto ally' since you are not a Native American—assuming that these elected officials were white—and tried to use you to get ideas across. On the other hand, they may have rather considered the young French student as a progressive and a defender of Native American rights before getting to know you...

66 Caroline Laurent: Sadly, my visible connections with tribal members became a handicap in that regard. It was good for me as long as the goal was to approach tribal people, but when it came to non-tribal people, my friendships became a problem and prevented me from digging further into these avenues.

67 It is remarkable that during those three years of research, I was also accused of being the opposite (a federal and county informer under the disguise of an Indian sympathizer) by a couple Native individuals who were against the tribal government of Mille Lacs and who were trying to fester my relation with the chief executive and the secretary treasurer. Several false accusations were uttered against me and I had to counter at least 5 different rumors that would have indicated that I was an informer rather than a friend.

68 Yohann Le Moigne: How did you manage this situation and did you feel physically threatened during this period?

69 Caroline Laurent: Although I did not feel "physically" threatened, my professional life was definitely in a rough spot. The intensity of the hatred and the continuous lies were extremely hard to bear. I was lucky enough to have good and powerful people on my side and I cleared up the situation through conversations with the people in charge. I was even reported to the student conduct office where I spent half an hour defending my case. To be more specific, at the beginning of my first year in the Master of Tribal Administration and Governance that I was part of, I had put up together a document asking all my classmates to either agree or disagree to the fact that I would be quoting them in my PhD dissertation (using their comments on the online program we were using to communicate between each other and with our professors about the topics studied). At first, 90% of them said yes and signed. Then one by one they came to me to tell me they had

changed their minds... At first I did not know why (I understood later, given all the false rumours about my intentions). Then the director of the program was asked to build a new policy of privacy forbidding any student in the program from using any quotes by other students. At that point I knew this avenue was dead for me, I would have to use other sources—and I agreed to it completely. I was still accused by one student (who wanted me out of the program) of using other students' quotes. I had to justify myself on a permanent basis for a few weeks. It was a very trying time. Tribal politics are vicious and vindictive. Even if you try to remain neutral, at some point you are going to have to belong to one group or the other, people will not let you stay on a middle ground.

70 **Rim Latrache:** Neutrality and objectivity are often regarded as “must-dos” of academic research, and when conducting interviews, researchers are expected to aim at neutrality, i.e. not influencing the answers of the participants. But researchers do have political opinions and support some causes. It is even more complex when the researcher is a member of the group under study; it is not easy to remain neutral and objective for the sake of research when faced with racist ideas and comments from the participants. It is not easy to refrain from disclosing your personal opinions when faced with the very clichés and stereotypes you are fighting against. For instance, when conducting questionnaires in one of the suburbs of Paris, a woman told me “you know, certain things need to be said. The real problem in this country [France] is the presence of Arabs/Muslims. They live on welfare and they take the money that should be given to French people. They don't belong here because they have a different culture and a different religion.” The dilemma I faced then was the following: as a researcher asking people to express their opinions, I had to make sure that they felt entirely free to do so. I was supposed to listen without influencing their answers and without condemning or approving their ideas. Yet, I really wanted to give this participant arguments and facts to counter her racist ideas and stereotypes. Isn't that what academics are supposed to do eventually? Shouldn't I have disclosed my personal opinions and have had a discussion with her?

71 Yet I chose to listen to her in silence and to write down her answers without making any comments. In this specific stage of fieldwork (collecting data), I was interested in knowing the various opinions of the different participants without challenging them. This would be done in the next stage, i.e. analyzing the data.

72 **Mathieu Bonzom:** As I explained earlier, I gave sincere answers when asked for my opinion about the movement I was studying. This was made easier, of course, by what we can call empathy—by the fact that I had chosen to study the lives and activities of people who I felt had a right to be doing what they were doing—which would not necessarily have been the case if I had made other choices (this would have been a problem if I had tried to study white supremacist protests, for instance). I tend to think that this kind of problem exists for any type of fieldwork, or any research in social sciences more generally. I think whenever we see something as not affected by politics in any way, we need to look again. It is a

tired trope to say that everything is political—but I believe it is true. And I think it holds true for the research we carry out, and that is another aspect of my more recent work on relations between research and politics, the necessity and limitations of sociological reflexivity, the inevitability of being situated in social and political relations and therefore the necessity to take it into account in our work process instead of trying to escape it... Everything is political—so maybe specializing in the study of the political field means that we are actually better trained to understand that... I don't know. We do have a greater responsibility in the matter too, in that sense: we should be able to shine this kind of light on other kinds of research, which are less ostensibly political.

## Geographical and Cultural Distance

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How do you handle the distance between you and your object—be it the distance that comes from not being based in the United States, or not being American, or not being a member of the society or of the group(s) you are studying? In what ways is being an outsider detrimental or sometimes also helpful?

- 73 **Yohann Le Moigne:** When I arrived in the field, my initial idea was to compensate the potential drawbacks of being an outsider with an emphasis on a certain cultural proximity with many young African Americans and Latinos (i.e. my great interest for urban cultures and especially hip-hop). I also felt the need to highlight the fact that I was young myself and that I didn't look like the stereotypical image of the serious and uptight academic.
- 74 Yet, if being an outsider sometimes proved detrimental (I, for instance, had a fragmentary knowledge of African American and Latino cultures as well as a poor command of Spanish), it happened to be a huge advantage most of the time. Many people that I met were very surprised and often flattered and grateful that a young French man traveled thousands of miles to take an interest in their lives, their suffering, their mobilizations or their gang.
- 75 Moreover, I largely benefited from my status as a French person (the first that most of my respondents had ever seen), which allowed me in some cases to become a sort of local curiosity and imbued me with an 'exotic touch' that was not always pleasant, but often useful. This was also expressed by other researchers such as Loïc Wacquant or Philippe Bourgois. In the end, I don't think I had to handle this outsider status. I just took advantage of it since it served as an ice-breaker and introduced me into circles where I probably wouldn't have been able to set foot otherwise.
- 76 Nevertheless, I also think that in my daily activities (going to the supermarket, doing laundry or just walking down the street) I benefited from the fact that I was usually not identified as a white person (here I use the term 'white' as a physical characteristic but also as a social condition). I was usually mistaken for a Latino, which allowed me to get around without drawing too much attention. Here I am

not trying to refer to the fallacious concept of 'reverse racism' or to depict South Central Los Angeles or Compton residents as potential aggressors, but looking like a lost middle- or upper-class white tourist *can* turn someone into a designated target in some neighborhoods.

- 77 Finally, I totally agree with what Mathieu previously mentioned about the necessity to refocus on the theoretical dimension of research in order to make do with the geographic distance between us and our field location. I also think that it can be a blessing in disguise in the sense that it allows us to take a step back, which is not an easy thing to do when one lives and conducts research in the same geographical area.
- 78 Caroline Laurent: It made everything easier to be able to meet people in person and to be available to meet with them when they were free to do so. Being French rather than American helped a lot in all my relations with interviewees. The Ojibway and the French have a long history of cooperation and it was refreshing for my interviewees to be able to tell their stories to an impartial and friendly listener.
- 79 Yohann Le Moigne: Do you think this common history might have influenced the aforementioned elected officials (maybe unconsciously)? You were French so you were "probably an Indian sympathizer."
- 80 Caroline Laurent: Absolutely—although non-Indian Americans are also interested in French people and the reasons why they would come to Duluth, Minnesota ... Being an outsider is detrimental when one does not know the culture and expects things to be done their way instead of the respondent's way.
- 81 Yohann Le Moigne: Your Native American respondents could have suspected you to be affected by the 'white savior complex,' which is something that we often see in Hollywood movies dealing with White/Native relations. Did you feel such a distrust on the part of some of them?
- 82 Caroline Laurent: I was prepared for some of my interviewees being suspicious of my intentions and wondering if I suffered from the 'white saviour complex.' But fortunately, they did not show any kind of resentment towards me. They were only trying hard to explain to me what their lives were like. They did not see me as the usual white/non-Indian person coming to their reservations, because I was French. As long as one behaves respectfully and knows how to show proper patience, being an outsider is often helpful. More often than not, respondents try to influence your perception by being extremely helpful and pleasant.
- 83 Mathieu Bonzom: Perhaps you were also in the position of offering to listen to a group who is rarely listened to at all. That would explain a certain eagerness to establish a good relationship with you, on the part of group leaders for instance.
- 84 Rim Latrache: Doing research on Muslims/Arabs in the USA while living and working in France is not an easy task. Academics can do research in the field only during the holidays. But because of budget restrictions and scarce financial

resources, trips to the tend to be shorter and less frequent. The geographical distance between the researcher and the object of his/her research creates many obstacles. For instance, it can lead to a kind of gap between the researcher and the group under study and other researchers who are already in the USA, doing research in-context and being constantly in the field.

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