

For an Anthropology of Gaps, Discrepancies and Contradictions

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Abstract

The propensity of anthropology to highlight the homogeneity of the groups it studied, related to the “primitivist” and “peasantist” contexts associated with the emergence of the discipline, can be referred to as “culturalism”. Such a scientific ideology underestimates the contradictions and diversities deployed within any social group studied by anthropologists, as well as the discrepancy between the rules of the social game and the actors’ real practices. Nevertheless, various anthropologists have long expressed an interest in both the internal inconsistencies of social orders and the non-compliant practices. Some examples are given of these considerations for differences, from Malinowski or the Manchester school to legal pluralism or the anthropology of organizations. The European anthropology of development, extended to-day into an anthropology of public actions and public policies, is undoubtedly the sub-discipline that has developed the most an empirically grounded approach of gaps and discrepancies, alongside a dialogue with sociology and political science. It has put the richness of ethnographic investigation and qualitative research to the service of investigating the implementation gaps of public policies and the behavioural gaps of public agents. This opens the way for a reconsideration of Max Weber’s ideal-type as a methodological gap.

Keywords: Anthropology of public action, Culturalism, Development anthropology, Implementation gap, Ideal-type, Dissonances

The chronic underestimation of internal divisions: culturalism¹

Anthropology has been criticized for a certain propensity to highlight the homogeneity of the groups it studied, among others by researchers who are them-

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1 In this text dedicated to an overview of anthropology from the particular perspective of the consideration or ignoring of ‘gaps and discrepancies’, it is not possible unfortunately to go into each of the points mentioned in brief here or to refer to all of the sources as should be done.

selves anthropologists². Several historical currents within the discipline made a major contribution to this “unanimous” vision of the object of study. While theoretical orientations that have now become unfashionable, for example the “culture and personality” school (Linton), structural-functionalism (Radcliffe-Brown,) and French structuralism (Lévi-Strauss), played a historical role in this process, albeit in very different forms, the responsibility of a scientific ideology that extended across various paradigms and is still very much alive today should not be forgotten. The ideology in question is “culturalist ideology”, which presupposes the existence of “shared world visions” based on collective traditions within a discrete social community (ethnic group, people).

I define “scientific ideology” as a coherent set of presuppositions and normative postulates which are routinely held as true (“go without saying”) and constitute an intellectual and theoretical reference frame for numerous research studies at the expense of an openness to new areas of empirical knowledge. In general, a scientific ideology exceeds the strictly scientific world and is also widespread in intellectual circles in the form of received ideas. My definition goes half way to meeting the perspectives of Canguilhem’s (2009) and Ricoeur (1974) and posits that: (a) the basic ambition of knowledge that is specific to every scientific undertaking is distinct in its principle of the multiple systems of preferences and collective beliefs that prevail among the intelligentsia; (b) however, a clear demarcation line (of the type “epistemological break”³) can never be established between these two registers, and science has never rid itself for once and for all of the ideology that constantly infiltrates it; (c) in the scientific space, ideology becomes scientific ideology in that it presents itself as a theory (or perspective or paradigm) that is essential to all knowledge-related endeavours and discredits those who do not adhere to it⁴. The social sciences are still much more exposed to associated ideologies than the biological sciences (which Canguilhem considered) and must “dialogue” – or “argue” – incessantly with one or other of their multiple historical forms. Evolutionism is a classical example of a scientific ideology, as are “ideological holism” and “ideological populism” as distinct from “methodological holism” and “methodological populism”⁵. The influence of a scientific ideology on a researcher does not disqualify his work (and even less his reputation; on the contrary, at least while the ideology in question remains active in intellectual circles), however, it constitutes nonetheless an important bias in a perspective of renewal and extension of knowledge.

2 Among others: Pelto & Pelto 1978; Boster 1985.

3 The belief (as it is one) in the possibility of an epistemological break, coming from Bachelard, was shared by Althusser (1970) and Bourdieu, Chamboredon and Passeron (1968).

4 See also Guédon 1984, Macherey 2008.

5 See Olivier de Sardan 2015a.

In this way the culturalist scientific ideology forms an almost constitutive bias of anthropology. Of course, it was related originally to the “primitivist” and “peasantist” contexts associated with the emergence of the discipline: western intellectuals (anthropologists were all western intellectuals at the time) discovered a peasant people with a certain populist fascination, just as they discovered distant peoples on the other hand. Obviously they were clearly more interested in what it was that made these groups different from the erudite and urbane west than in what might differentiate them within themselves. The discovery of the practices and knowledge of these social classes or “ethnic groups”, which were undeniably dominated, ignored, despised or excluded, also involved an inevitable amount of rehabilitation and even embellishment or idealization, which is conducive to the effects of homogenization (Grignon Passeron 1989), and a corresponding omission of their differences – if only that established very generally between the different (official, militant or self-proclaimed) representatives of these groups and their respective “bases” (which differ in themselves), or within “dominated” groups, between their “internal dominators” and “internal dominated” (Berger 1974, Olivier de Sardan 2015a).

At a very aggregated level, the search for a similarity characteristic of the subordinated groups or exotic peoples, which were always presented as being in opposition to modern civilization, was expressed in different ways, from the formulation of a “primitive mentality”, to use the obsolete language of Lévy-Bruhl (1931), to the numerous variants subsequently recycled by many authors under different titles and using other rhetorics: an anti-state logic for Clastres (1978), a holistic logic for Dumont (1983), a logic of the gift for Caillé (2000), and a “peasant logic” for Foster (1965)⁶.

However, the question arises as to which principle is invoked when it is decreed that populations who differ from the intellectual bourgeoisie and western middle classes are guided only by a single logic, irrespective of what kind of logic? It is very difficult to find plausible empirical arguments which justify the grouping of one people or another under a central principle or single identity while ignoring its diversities. Of course, this was a world vision that was largely dominant in the early twentieth century and was behind the real birth of anthropology. From Mauss to Lévi-Strauss and from Tonnies to Durkheim, the discipline’s great totemic ancestors were all participants. However, this is an area in which it would be better not to follow their example. After all, although *Essai sur le don* (Mauss 1983 [1950]) is remarkable in the context of the history of ideas, it has scarcely any empirical value today because it was based on second-hand data that have proved erroneous (Keesing 1989, Kilani 1990) and it assumed the existence of a constitutive similarity between non-western peoples, a typical stereotype of the early twentieth century that seems untenable a century later.

6 Summarized by the expression “image of limited goods”.

Beyond these great classical oppositions – between mechanical solidarity and organic solidarity, *gemeinschaft* and *gesellschaft*, ascription and achievement, and tradition and modernity – on whose outdated nature it is easy to agree, for a century now the culturalist version of anthropology has accommodated multiple particular quests that are more discrete or low key and centred on limited populations rather than universal aggregates, on the modern world rather than “illiterate societies”. However, these too have focused on the more or less irreducible specificity of a collective group constituted in an object of study while willingly “forgetting” the internal differences within this group.

The increasing detachment of the concept of “culture” from all solid empirical references (in other words, its progressive “abstractification”) enabled the culturalist ideology to outlive primitivism and peasantism, which still exist, of course, but in a relatively residual form, and to redevelop itself in the ins and outs of globalization, the thousand and one forms of contemporary exoticism and the study of “modern tribes”. Parsons and Geertz played an important role in the production of the modern version of the cultural ideology⁷ – which already existed but in other forms, particularly in American anthropology since Boas – by “planting in the minds” (and at a considerable distance from practice) the concept of culture, which has become a system of meaning, values, symbols and visions of the world that defines the identity-based membership of a specific community. Needless to say, the entire relevance of the concept of culture should not be dismissed, however I intend to limit its use to “a set of practices and representations that investigation has shown to be shared to a significant degree by a given group (or sub-group), in given fields and in given contexts” (Olivier de Sardan 2015b, p. 84). This cautious interpretation of the concept makes it possible to avoid the assumption of consubstantive homogeneity, which underestimates or masks the contradictions and diversities deployed within any social group studied by anthropologists. From an empirical perspective, it is more productive (and more realistic) to posit the existence of internal divisions (which does not preclude the documentation of shared representations and practices) than to posit the existence of cultural homogeneity – an assumption that works like a self-fulfilling prophecy and prevents the perception and documentation of internal divisions.

A chronic underestimation of non-compliant practices

Another type of discrepancy has also been broadly underestimated (but not ignored) by the discipline of anthropology: the discrepancy between the

7 See Kuper 1999, Olivier de Sardan 2015b.

rules of the social game and the real practices of actors. In effect, classical anthropology revealed the existence of official norms and social norms which differ from those that govern western society: other religions, other political structures, other codes of decorum, other legal systems, other forms of economic regulation, other types of marriage, other “elementary structures of kinship”. This considerable extension of the space of the social rules that exists throughout the world represents a salutary victory over institutional western ethnocentrism and the evolutionist legacies it incorporates. However, in doing this, classical anthropology focused more on the rules of the game than on the deviations from the rules or the strategies adopted by actors to circumvent these norms. It theorized a great deal about the “exotic” norms but very little about the liberties actually taken with these norms. Just as the discourses are far from reflecting practices, the real practices are far bearing any similarity to the prescribed practices. Of course, the entirely banal observation that individual behaviour never scrupulously and fully respects the official norms (which are guaranteed by political authority) or the social norms (which are guaranteed by the collective morality or decency) has often been made. However, beyond this observation, which may simply go back to the irreducible singularity of the individual, *the question of the form and regulation of these gaps as a social phenomenon* in its own right would appear to be broadly neglected.

Hence, compared to the sometimes overgrazed pastures of (official or social) norms, which the practices are supposed to apply, the vast space of “non-compliant” practices, which can be referred to as the “behavioural gap”, has been explored relatively little, systematically at least.

Some examples of the consideration of differences

Nevertheless, various anthropologists – at times on the periphery of the discipline and at times at its centre – have long expressed an interest in both the internal contradictions, inconsistencies and differences and the gaps between discourse and practice, and also in the non-compliant practices that arise in many sectors and countries. However, these perspectives have sometimes been forgotten or gone out of fashion and they did not succeed in undermining the culturalist ideology. Examples of such perspectives and their limitations are presented in brief below.

First and foremost, Malinowski (1984 [1922]), the father of empirical anthropology, attached great importance to the gaps between rules and practices⁸. This is a largely neglected aspect of his work which was, nevertheless, more or less adopted by the Manchester School led by Gluckman.

8 See Kuper 1996, Chapter 1

Thanks to its interest in demonstrating the effects of the “colonial situation” (Barnes, Mitchell and Gluckman 1949, Balandier 1963, Gluckman 1971), the processes of change (Gluckman 1961), the role of internal conflicts within local societies (Gluckman 1956), urbanization processes (Mitchell 1965), and network effects (Mitchell 1969), the work of this school marked a major advance in anthropology (Kuper 1996). We are also indebted to the Manchester School for a series of pioneering studies on the “shop floor” (Emmett, Morgan 1987) in England itself, which heralded a new approach in the anthropology of organizations (cf. below). Other currents in British anthropology sometimes associated with the Manchester School and led by Leach and then Barth and Bailey also attempted to evade culturalism (Kuper 1996). It is true that all three of the latter attempted to conjugate the weight of communal rules and the deployment of individual strategies. The work of Bailey (1969), in particular, represents an original attempt at thinking about the regulations, strategies and practices “around” official norms and at demonstrating power strategies.

The French Marxist economic anthropology of the 1960s-70s, particularly in its Africanist form, of which the work of Claude Meillassoux was emblematic, had the merit of focusing on the internal contradictions within colonial and post-colonial societies: between elders and juniors (Meillassoux 1964, 1977), chiefs and their subjects (Olivier de Sardan 1984), nobles and slaves (Meillassoux 1986), and men and women (Meillassoux 1975), etc. However, its Marxist predilections prompted a preference for focusing on either the past – pre-colonial modes of production (Terry 1972, 1975; Bloch 1975) – or macrostructures – the articulation of modes of production (Rey 1971, van Binsbergen Geschiere 1985), neglecting the concrete analysis of both development policies and institutions and the construction of post-colonial states and bureaucracies, and allocating very little space to the strategies of actors and their tactics, ambiguities and routines.

James Scott (originally a political scientist but whose work constitutes a major reference in anthropology in many respects) highlighted the “everyday forms of peasant resistance” (1986) – often based on a “moral economy” (1976) – and gave academic visibility to the different forms of strategies of rejection or deception developed by populations from “the bottom up” as “weapons of the weak” (1985) in the face of the elites, particularly state elites. However, he subsequently overgeneralized this perspective. In transforming all of the non-compliant practices into acts of resistance vis-à-vis the state – which is viewed exclusively as an enslavement enterprise (1998) – he reduces them to a logic of the dominated equated to a logic of resistance – expression of a “hidden transcript” (1990), and gives them an heroic status which takes little account of the opportunistic, ambivalent or routine attitudes (path dependency) that are far from marginal or exceptional on the part of the dominated. What has happened to the multiple and varied

logics that can be observed empirically on the part of both the state and the dominated?

Thus, each in his own way, Meillassoux and Scott ultimately reduce the multiple social contradictions to one major contradiction (what Mao Tsé-tung referred to in his time as the “main contradiction”) of the “dominator-dominated” type based on a typically “domination-centred” perspective – which assumes a “resistance-centred” sub-form in Scott (Olivier de Sardan 2015a). The latter gradually became, in turn, another form of scientific ideology, forgetful of the diversities and ambiguities of the social world, but in a different way than culturalism. The numerous epigones of Foucault and Bourdieu within the discipline of anthropology fall within this same ideology.

Legal anthropology is without doubt the sub-discipline of the field that has allocated the greatest space to various rules by standing up to the normative and universalist conceptions of the law and focusing on providing a description of the diversity of formal and informal norms. The so-called school of “legal pluralism” is indicative of this orientation⁹. Using the concept of the “semi-autonomous social field”, Sally Falk Moore (1973) demonstrated the diversity of sites for the production of regulations. However, in most cases this extension of official (legal, state and contractual) rules in the direction of the social norms (customs, family education, religious prescriptions) was limited to the different registers of *explicit* norms. Although the existence of routine practices that conform to neither official nor social norms was acknowledged, systematic analyses of the *implicit* regulations (practical norms) governing these non-compliant practices were not developed.

The situation with regard to the anthropology of organizations is ambiguous and paradoxical. Having assumed a rather marginal position in the disciplinary field of anthropology – despite the fact that anthropologists were the first scientists to study human relationships in company settings (Wright 1994) – and having been almost inexistent with regard to the countries of the South, this branch of anthropology is divided between a culturalist approach (which proposes a homogenous vision of corporate culture and/or the national cultures that constitute the environment of organizations) and an approach that is interested in conflicts and informal practices in contrast with managerial rules (Bate 1997, Hirsch Gellner 2001, Van Maanen 2001). The latter approach as applied to the countries of the North is now catching up on the anthropology of development as applied to the countries of the South (Mosse 2001).

In effect, the anthropology of development is undoubtedly the sub-discipline that has done most in terms of clearing the way most for the consideration of gaps and discrepancies, particularly by gradually transforming itself into an anthropology of public action.

9 See among others Griffiths 1986, Moore 2001, Woodman 1998.

From the anthropology of development to the anthropology of public action

The “new anthropology of development”, which emerged in the 1980s, is essentially European in origin¹⁰ and went on to become Euro-African¹¹. From the outset it focused on researching diversity and differences,¹² not only between the “developers” and “the developed” but also between “the developed” themselves and within the world of the “developers” (Dozon 1978).

Far from the hasty generalizations of the “deconstructivist” anthropology of development *à la* Escobar (1995), which reduces development to a western plot solely on the basis of purposely selected discourses, from the beginning this anthropology set out to establish itself on the basis of empirical studies and to provide interpretations arising from field observation – of the “grounded theory” (Glaser Strauss 1973) type. Accordingly, it exposed the intertwining of multiple social logics around development interventions (Bierschenk 1988, Olivier de Sardan 2005).

It also developed the concept of “drift” as experienced by development projects in the course of their implementation, in other words an inevitable gap between the projects as they exist on paper and in reality.

However, given that it focused on the interventions of development institutions and agencies and ignored the local bureaucracies, national public services and decision-makers of the southern hemisphere, development was too specific as a research object. Hence the anthropology of development gradually expanded to incorporate the broad spectrum of public action in the countries of the South. In effect, development policies are merely a particular form of public policy (for the most part developed and funded from

10 Boiral Lantéri Olivier de Sardan 1985, Elwert & Bierschenk 1988, Long 1989. See also the overviews provided by Long (2001) and Olivier de Sardan (2005).

11 The APAD (a Euro-African association for the study of social change and development: <http://apad-association.org>) brought together a large number of social science (in particular anthropological) researchers around this kind of perspective, irrespective of whether they were European or African. In Africa, LASDEL (www.lasdel.net) played an important role in terms of empirical research and doctoral education. In the United Kingdom, certain studies in the anthropology of development, which were carried out independently and not restricted to Africa, resulted in similar and complementary approaches (see Mosse 2005, Lewis Mosse 2006, Mosse 2011, Gardner Lewis 2015).

12 The headings of the texts by the main promoters of this anthropology of development in the 1980s are indicative of these diversity-based approaches. The sub-title of a study by Long (1989), founder of the “Wageningen School” is: “*A perspective on social discontinuities in rural development*”. That of the work by Olivier de Sardan (1984) is “*Chefs, guerriers, esclaves, paysans...*”. An article by Elwert (1983) is titled “*Conflicts inside and outside the household. A West African case study*” and another one by Bierschenk (1988) is headed “*Development projects as an arena of negotiation for strategic groups*”.

outside) in countries “under an aid regime” (Lavigne Delville 2010). Concurring with Bierschenk (2014), it can also be said that the anthropology of development transformed into an anthropology of social engineering. Its research objects include the processes involved in public policy agenda-setting and formulation, however it is more on the level of their implementation that the diversity of the social logics is expressed and that the different “strategic groups” and stakeholders confront each other: this is the source of the “implementation gap”, in other words, the difference between a public policy on paper and a public policy as it plays out in reality.

With regard to the “behavioural gap”, it is very indicative of the everyday behaviour of public sector actors who do not always follow the official laws and regulations – far from it. Like the development projects, the bureaucracies of the countries of the South and the ex-Soviet empire are an ideal location for observing the gaps between formal rules and actor behaviour; such gaps exist, of course, in all organizations, however they are more visible in Africa than in Europe (Anders 2010, Blundo Le Meur 2009, Bierschenk Olivier de Sardan 2014). These “non compliant” practices within public services are neither pathological nor criminal, nor are they anarchic or anomic: they are routine and constitute the object of informal regulations which can be referred to as “practical norms” and have become a research object of anthropological study (De Herdt Olivier de Sardan 2015). The studies on corruption clearly provided the initial set of empirical studies on these non-compliant practices and on the gaps between actual behaviour and the official norms, and still remain a major supplier of such research (Blundo 2000, Blundo Olivier de Sardan 2006). However the perspective has since been extended to include the entire array of practical norms which cannot be reduced to “transgressive practical norms” alone (of which corruption is the typical example). They can also involve adaptive, palliative and coping strategies in the context of shortages or major inadequacies of the official norms in relation to work contexts.

The contribution of other disciplines

Apart from the various attempts made to move away from consensual and homogenizing visions of its research objects from within the discipline of anthropology, many of which have been referred to above, it is also important to mention the contribution of other disciplines, which are sometimes more sensitive to the gaps and discrepancies than anthropology. It will come as no surprise to learn that the anthropology of public action has been very receptive to references originating from these disciplines (while mainstream

anthropology tends to turn to philosophy¹³ for its references rather than to other empirical social sciences).

Numerous political science studies, which are admittedly far removed from the dominant trends in their own discipline which focus mainly on comparative politics and quantitative studies, have described the multiple and contradictory trajectories of state-building in the South, the role of the elites and forms of hybridization (Bayart 1989, Bayart, Ellis and Hibou 1997).

The contradictions within a professional milieu or the diversity of strategies within one and the same institution were the object of a large number of studies in the sociology of organizations and sociology of professions (Crozier 1963, Crozier Friedberg, 1977), and also in political science. The analyses of interaction between public servants and service users amply demonstrated the margin of manoeuvre available to the former and how they use the discretionary dimensions of their powers.¹⁴

Moreover, the gaps between public policies as they are developed and public policies as they are actually implemented gave rise to an entire current of “implementation studies”,¹⁵ which, in disciplinary terms, are located at the intersection of political science and public management. Hence, the gradually established concept of the “implementation gap” is very close to that of “drift” as developed by the anthropology of development. It highlights the fact that however well prepared a public policy may be (starting with the optimistic hypothesis that the policy is “evidence-based”¹⁶), its implementation inevitably prompts the intervention of a wide range of stakeholders and strategic groups with their own logics and interests, and whose practices unavoidably result in the “deviation” from the intended public policy and in the creation of an inevitable gap (which may vary in scale and form) between the policy as it is formulated and as it is implemented in reality.

One of the major developments in anthropology over the last 20 years or so would appear to me to be this opening up to the other empirical social sciences of modernity (which is joined, conversely, by the new interest shown by researchers from these disciplines in the anthropological approach). This represents a salutary distancing from the exotic tropism that characterized anthropology for a long time (for better in its early days but for worse thereafter), a deep-seated renewal of its subjects (to put it bluntly:

13 Apart from Foucault, Wittgenstein, Agamben, Butler, Bashkar and others also come to mind here.

14 Lipsky (1980) is the author of a pioneer study on street-level bureaucrats in the USA; for France, see Warin 2002.

15 Bierschenk (1988) already quoted long time ago Pressman and Wildavski’s fundamental text (1973).

16 This hypothesis was frequently contested and the subject of various debates: Appell 1989; Head 2010; Deeming 2013.

public policies and bureaucracies have replaced kinship and rituals) and the reconfiguration of the mental libraries of anthropologists (bluntly, again: less Mauss, Boas and Lévi-Strauss and more Weber, Becker and Strauss). Admittedly, this development is not prevalent on the academic scene; the most “fashionable” currents, particularly in the USA, are far from disciples of it (the culturalist ideology is still strong there) and the media more or less ignore it completely. However, through the emergence of new research objects like public action and thanks to the interest shown in it by increasing numbers of doctoral students and young researchers, an anthropology that is sensitive to the gaps and discrepancies is assuming an admittedly minority but nonetheless significant place within the discipline.

A return to method

Internal contradictions and divergences, on the one hand, implementation gap and behavioural gap, on the other: these heuristic perspectives offer the considerable advantage of distancing anthropology from some of its basic orientations which should preferably be consigned to the history of the discipline and left in peace there: i.e. primitivist exoticism, unanimous populism, egalitarian myths, the holistic primacy, the belief in an original anarchism and, more generally, the culturalist ideology.

Some people regret this development and express a nostalgia in this regard. I am among those who welcome it. In any case, it is evidence of the fact that the discipline of anthropology is also pervaded by profound contradictions.

Other people will ask themselves what remains of anthropology if it is not (or no longer) the science of primordial societies. My response to this is: what remains is the essence of the discipline, that is the method of enquiry. Ethnographic investigation was, of course, invented by Malinowski and Boas, in particular¹⁷, in the context of the discovery of “exotic” peoples from a western perspective. Fortunately, qualitative investigation succeeded in moving away from this initial context and directing itself at other research objects (for example, institutions, professional bodies, public policies, health systems, modern justice systems and bureaucracies) and towards other disciplines, first and foremost sociology (the Chicago School comes to mind here, of course) and political science, even if it is not central to them.

Intensive field investigation of a qualitative nature remains particularly suitable for revealing social diversities and the plurality of actors and strategies. It enables the detailed description of the configuration of an “arena”, the alliances and antagonisms that arise there, and the practices, repre-

17 See Stocking 1974.

sentations and – explicit or concealed (Blundo 2003) – strategies of the various individual and collective actors that confront each other there. The so-called “ethnographic” method is indispensable for anyone with any kind of interest in differences: interviews, targeted observations, case studies, the combination of sources, data triangulation etc. (Olivier de Sardan 2015a).

This is equally applicable to the study of the discrepancies between a public policy as it exists on paper and its implementation in the field. Field research bridges a methodological void in “implementation studies” which were based on secondary sources rather than indepth investigations for a considerable time.

Quantitative research (through questionnaires) has major handicaps in these two areas. First, it is based solely on declarative data relating to opinions or practices and not on observations of actual practices. Second, these declarative data are collected in an artificial situation (administration of a questionnaire) which is conducive to the production of agreed or stereotypical answers in the context of what could be referred to as an “interrogation”. In contrast, qualitative research is based on repeated observations and on interviews that are as close to private conversations as possible, in other words natural situations in which the informant can feel at ease and express himself in his own way.

Obviously, ad-hoc exploratory concepts are necessary to guide qualitative studies in the exploration of the “gaps” and “discrepancies” of the social world. A large number of them have been proposed over two decades at the intersection of the anthropology of development and the anthropology of public action. It is possible to refer here, *inter alia*, to the description of “arenas” and to the approach based on “strategic groups”, and ask which are the different actor groups with different logics and strategies who confront each other in an arena (Bierschenk Olivier de Sardan 1997). One can choose to research “practical norms” and ask how routine non-compliant behaviour is regulated in an implicit way (Olivier de Sardan 2015c), or dress the inventory of “multi-accountabilities” and question which types of actors is a public servant accountable for, not just formally but also informally (Blundo 2015). The focus can be on the identification of “brokers” and the description of the intermediaries between the developers and the developed, the experts and the beneficiaries, the decision-makers and the users (Bierschenk, Chauveau and Olivier de Sardan 2000, Lewis Mosse 2006). It is finally possible to study “translation” processes and analyse how a planned intervention is reconsidered, recomposed, redeveloped and retold by the different networks and institutions which compete in its implementation (Callon 1986, Mosse Lewis 2006).

Conclusion: Max Weber and the methodological gap

The work of Max Weber is an indispensable reference in sociology and political science. Although he is not considered one of the totemic ancestors of anthropology, he is not ignored by it either. In any case it may be considered that his influence concerns all of the social sciences and that he evades any narrow disciplinary assignation. I would like to present one of his methodological contributions here.

It is not my intention, however, to embark on any kind of “Weberolatry”. Weber was mistaken sometimes, he also made pronouncements that are outmoded or outdated today, particularly on the substantive level (like all the founding fathers of the social sciences, he worked on second-hand material currently often outdated). Even on the methodological level, the comprehensive approach (understanding the meaning of an action for its actor), which is one of his two remarkable innovations in this area, should be examined closely as it is very questionable in relation to the practical modalities it advocates: for Weber, what is involved in effect is a purely intellectual process of the order of the mental experience (projecting oneself into the place of the actor): “For the verifiable accuracy of interpretation of the meaning of a phenomenon, it is a great help to be able to put one’s self imaginatively in the place of the actor and thus sympathetically to participate in his experience” (Weber 1994). As opposed to this, anthropology adds a solid empirical basis to Weber’s approach: the collection of the representations and perceptions of the actors themselves – the famous “native”’s point of view” (Geertz 1976).

Regarding his second great methodological contribution, the ideal type, this relates directly to our subject: based on the ideal-type approach, Weber is the father of a social science of gaps and discrepancies.

Contrary to a common erroneous interpretation, for Weber, an ideal type is not a concentrated substantial representation of reality and even less a kind of truth produced on this basis. An ideal type is above all an artificial model, a methodological abstraction that should enable the evaluation of the gaps between this model and the actual empirical realities.

In order to give a precise meaning to these terms, it is necessary for the sociologist to formulate pure ideal types of the corresponding forms of action which in each case involve the highest possible degree of logical integration by virtue of their complete adequacy on the level of meaning. But precisely because this is true, it is probably seldom if ever that a real phenomenon can be found which corresponds exactly to one of these ideally constructed pure types (Weber 1978, p.20).

The ideal type is by no means a “hidden essence” which the researcher must strive to bring to light (as structure appears to be for Lévi-Strauss), but

instead an ensemble constructed of explicit or latent properties that constitute the implicit theory of an organized system of action or a particular form of collective action.

For example, for Weber, who mainly drew his inspiration from Prussian bureaucracy, the ideal type of bureaucracy is by no means the promotion of a desirable normative model or the culmination of an inevitable development, it is an artificial “yardstick”, a pattern that enables the evaluation of the particularities of different real bureaucracies associated with the modern state (let us say: Prussian, English, French, colonial, Chinese or Senegalese) and the differences they present compared to the ideal type. The latter constitutes, therefore, an appeal for the empirical investigation of the gap it maintains with reality. In a sense, it is absurd to characterize European bureaucracies as “Weberian” by contrasting them with African bureaucracies which are not so¹⁸. No real bureaucracy is Weberian, they all present a (variable) deviation from the (Weberian) ideal type of the modern bureaucracy.

Hence the ideal type consists in the production of a “methodological gap” by the researcher which enables the comparison of complex and “impure” empirical realities with a simplified and “pure” intellectual model constructed on the basis of logical reasoning¹⁹. However, some “natural” equivalent of this methodological gap exists today in the field of public policy and, more broadly, of all planned voluntary interventions in a social context. In effect, the experts who develop these interventions or policies themselves construct an ideal model of reality (“a project”) that they would like to establish, a model which is based in most cases on an (implicit or sometimes explicit) “theory” of the factors of change used. In other words, all public policies (including development policies) assume a model of intervention based on supposedly effective “mechanisms”²⁰. The comparison between the pure “project” of the intervention (and its mechanisms) and the impure reality of its implementation reveals far-reaching similarities with the methodological process of the ideal type. While the model for a project is established ex-ante by experts with the intention of framing the future, the Weberian ideal type is constructed ex-post by the researcher, with the intention of understanding the present. However both create gaps to be investigated, and the researcher may use the project model “methodologically” as an ideal type. The analysis of an “implementation gap” is nothing more than a well thought out comparison between the “ideal” characteristics of the project (for a public policy on paper) and what happens to it when tested in reality.

18 See Bierschenk Olivier de Sardan 2014, pp. 10-16.

19 But Weber was also interested in the diversity of regulations, the hybridity of practices and the “contradictory logics”: see de Herdt 2015.

20 Examples of ‘mechanisms’ widely used in the world of development to name but one of many: performance-based funding, cash transfers, micro-credit, participative engineering, health flowcharts etc.

In a sense, the anthropologist does not have to construct the ideal type: the experts have already constructed it. Moreover, this is what some professional evaluators claim in promoting a new type of policy evaluation (theory-based evaluation) which compares the unfolding of public action in the field with the implicit and explicit theory adopted by those who designed it (White 2009, Coryn et al. 2011, Marchal et al. 2012).

Thus Weber's ideal type method based on the methodological gap encounters objects – public interventions – which are well suited to it the more so as the gaps between the planned and actual interventions are constitutive of this object itself. What applies to the implementation gap is also applicable to the behavioural gap: the gaps between the prescribed and actual behaviours are a feature of organizations and professional bodies which prompt the anthropology to apply the methodological gap in a routine manner. Moreover, it would be possible analyse retrospectively the construction of the ideal type of the modern bureaucracy by Weber as if it was his reconstruction of a latent model (of an implicit theory) that would have guided the governing actors in the establishment of this new institutional architecture in Prussia. Today, Bismarck would ask his collaborators to create a “logical framework” which would probably take up the different characteristics of the ideal type of the bureaucracy presented by Weber... Paradoxically, we concur with one of Malinowski's (1984 [1922]) intuitions here, which established a parallel between the model constructed by the anthropologist and the model proposed by the “natives” as being two very close forms of the idealization of reality that is often refuted by everyday practice: hence it is incumbent on the anthropologist to compare the model and reality.²¹

To conclude, let us hand over to Weber himself while simply adding some comments (in italics) to the text:

The ideal-types of social action which for instance are used in economic theory (*or in development policies or in public policies*) are thus “unrealistic” or abstract in that they always ask what course of action would take place if it were purely rational and oriented to economic ends alone (*this is also the purpose of public policies' models and their mechanisms*). But this construction can be used to aid in the understanding of action not purely economically determined but which involves **deviations** (*my emphasis*) arising from traditional restraints, affects, errors, and the intrusion of other than economic purposes or considerations (*and contexts, routines, informal regulations, practical norms, social norms*). This can take place in two ways. First, in analysing the extent to which in the concrete case, or on the average for a class of cases, the action was in part economically determined along with the other factors (*multi factorial approach, instead of the quest of one – or two – independent*

21 See Kuper 1996.

variables). Secondly, by throwing the **discrepancy** (*my emphasis*) between the actual course of events and the ideal-type into relief (*i.e. analyzing behavioral gaps or implementation gaps*), the analysis of the non-economic motives actually involved is facilitated (Weber 1978, p.21).

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