

“No comments”? Can commentary be a means of expression for the social scientist?

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ABSTRACT:

Commenting is often what social scientists are asked to do when they intervene in the media. In this article, we propose to analyze such commentary in the context of the relationship between the media and researchers. We will try to understand what the researcher is doing and where he stands when he makes his comments. We will also try to determine in which position the comment places him: that of a commentator, an expert or a scientist? If the principal characteristic of the comment is to bring to light what it comments upon, what is the difference between such comment and a sociological description?

KEYWORDS: comment, reflexivity, sociology of sciences

RESUMO:

‘Comentário’ é muitas vezes o que é pedido aos cientistas sociais quando falam nos meios de comunicação. Neste artigo, propomo-nos a analisar tal comentário no contexto da relação entre os media e investigadores. Vamos tentar entender o que o pesquisador está a fazer qual o seu posicionamento quando elabora esse comentário. Vamos também tentar determinar em que posição o comentário o coloca: a de um comentador, de um especialista ou de um cientista? Se a principal característica do comentário é esclarecer o objecto que comenta, qual é a diferença entre tal comentário e uma descrição sociológica?

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: comentário; reflexividade; sociologia da ciência

Introduction

The origin of this reflection about social research and reflexivity was a proposal from the sociologist Marie-Anne Dujarier for me to intervene in the media and comment, as a social scientist, scenes from a documentary produced for public television in France. This documentary, for which Marie-Anne had been a scientific advisor, was unusually aired in primetime; unusually if we consider its subject: work and companies’ management issues. The scenes and the commentaries were intended to be included as a “bonus” in a DVD version of the documentary. They were also intended to function as a means of promoting the film on the broadcaster website¹. Just after, a forum was proposed, in order to promote the discussion around the film’s matters.

Guest social scientists – three sociologists, including Marie-Anne Dujarier, an ergonomist, and an anthropologist, myself – had to comment the movie discourses about work or, more precisely, about the

company and forms of management portrayed. Work, companies, and management-related issues were objects of our researches. This led me to accept the idea of having “something to say”. Other reasons for accepting the invitation to participate in this event were my confidence in Marie-Anne Dujarier as a person, my confidence in Marie-Anne’s scientific work and her conviction in collective action (“*I spend my time saying that people need to be collective in their work so I won’t go alone to comment the scenes! It would be a paradox. We should intervene as a collective!*”). Such was her belief: instead of intervening alone, in close shots, as the television channel initially asked her to do, she had constituted a small group of commentators and imposed a polyphonic intervention.

I would like to question here the word but also the action of commenting. We know that commentary is often what is asked of researchers who intervene in the media. It’s also the case for any other person from “outside” the media or the program – external journalists, politicians, and celebrities are asked to comment. But there is a slight difference for the researcher, who is given by the media the defined status of an “ex-

¹ See http://forums.france3.fr/france3/La-mise-a-mort-du-travail/liste_sujet-1.htm.

pert". In relation to commentary, the second step of my paper will be to question this notion of "expert", which is very frequently criticized in the social science scientific community.

1. What do social scientists do when they "comment"?

Being social scientists, what do we do when we comment? Where does the researcher stand when she comments? Is she in the position of a commentator, an expert or a scientist? Can commentary be her mode of expression?

After carrying out some research and after consulting colleagues in the language sciences, it appeared that only a few texts exist in France on the nature and status of commentary². I'd like to highlight two texts that focus on this issue: an article by Fitch (1994) and the inaugural lecture of Michel Foucault³, given in 1970 at the *Collège de France*, which is about discourse and its order.

The word is not in encyclopedias and dictionaries of linguistics such as Ducrot and Todorov's 1979 *Encyclopedic Dictionary of the Sciences of Language*. Current definitions tend to contribute to the fuzziness around the action of commenting. Indeed, in dictionaries, it refers to separate actions: "explanation", "interpretation", "judgment", "analysis"... which are actions (and concepts) that can also be thought of as linked actions: can explanation be separated from interpretation? We may also refer to the debate in sociology (Singly 2002) and in philosophy (Putnam 2002) about the thin boundaries between judgments of fact and judgments of value, between descriptive functions and prescriptive functions. Each of these actions could also refer to different intervention statuses: as a lay person, as a pedagogue, as a scientist, as an expert... Finally, the dictionary mentions that "*in linguistics, it's the part of the statement which adds something new to the theme, by opposition to the topic*" (Petit Larousse 2009).

Now, if we consider the abovementioned texts directly relating to commentary, two things emerge that may be in relation with the place of the researcher when, like me, she is invited to comment: 1) the relativity of the commentary; 2) its relationship regarding revelation or the underlying truth that would be contained in the proposed object of commentary. According to Foucault (2001), we should add the function of reactivation of discourses from previous times; *reactivation* and *revelation* would be the main functions of commentaries.

Fitch, like Foucault, speaks about the infinite nature of the act of commenting. He says: "the commentary can never produce a definitive fulfillment". This is

intensified by the fact that the commentary is a "fundamental mode of going back to the text (...) which makes this return an impossibility triggering an endless process" (Fitch 1994). Somehow, it refers to any speech constructed on the basis of another speech or on the basis of a fact. Therefore, is it possible for the social scientist to do anything other than commenting?

If the activity of the sociologist is to describe, "to note how things are" and "to give voice to real" (Durkheim 1922), are we able to do anything other than commenting? Should we see the sociological or ethnographic description as an original or first discourse or as a second discourse if we consider the constructed object and the constructed scientific activity? However, the relativity of the commentary, which never produces any definitive fulfillment, meets the specific activity of the social scientist. The social scientist would differ from the expert, according to the French sociologist Fassin (1998), precisely because he "offers a temporary scientific construction and not a truth to reality".

We stressed a second dimension of the commentary: its relationship to an underlying truth that should be, somehow, revealed. Foucault (2001) writes about this paradox: commentary claims to say for the first time something already known. Moreover, he says, it would "repeat endlessly what would have never yet been told".

Could we understand the fact of repeating for the first time something already said as meeting the activity of description? Won't be the thought of revelation in the straight line of a sociological tradition from Durkheim to Bourdieu, by opposition to the thought of a limited and relative scientific proposition?

Therefore, commentary by a researcher would be a sociological practice and simultaneously a paradoxical practice. It would be a discourse enrolled in the long line of earlier speeches and future ones, and it would be an absolute discourse claiming a certain truth.

However, did we comment in the context of this invitation to intervene in the media? We were asked to comment on some video scenes. As for me, I asked to view the documentary previously to the event. I wanted to be sure I was able to comment on the selected scenes. Because of recent news referring to a wave of suicides in companies (in the public phone operator France Télécom or the French auto-industry Renault), the showing of the documentary was anticipated; I tried to negotiate more time to prepare myself, but all we got was the weekend. I just had time to see two of the three parts of the documentary. My comment was partly decontextualized from the content of the documentary and some scenes were themselves not included in the documentary but in its "bonus" on DVD version. Therefore, was I really able to comment? What did I do?

Given the media "temporalities"⁴, I think I have

² Thanks to these colleagues, especially to Eric Grillo and Marie-Dominique Popelard.

³ Some additional remarks on the commentary also appear in Foucault (2001).

⁴ When Marie-Anne Dujarier called me we discussed at length the media temporalities (the lack of time to develop ideas, in fact...)

ended up spontaneously associating what I could understand in the documentary discourse with the results issued from my own research on companies and management. It was the case when, for example, I commented a scene where worker, on strike because of the sudden closeout of their factory could not meet anyone from their management team. They were standing on a kind of a parking lot, all by themselves. What I did was to associate, after the intervention of Marie-Anne Dujarier about the contemporaneous “abstraction of power” in work relations, what I had analyzed and what I knew about the “disappearance” of workers in France both in the political discourses and the media. For me, this scene had the particularity of showing workers in the media and it was contrasting with their habitual invisibility in television productions. The nature of our commentary was inscribed in a broader perspective. The scene seemed to be, in fact, an opportunity to *enlarge the topic*. What was shown was not our research field. Our commentaries were not about a social scene directly observed by us, but about a selection of film scenes. What was commented was a construction that wasn’t made by the social scientist, as when she delimits her “research object” and “field of observation”, but a construction relating to her knowledge on the subject. The documentary discourse was itself largely based on the results of French social researches on labor and on interviews with social scientists like the psychologist Christophe Dejours, the sociologist Vincent de Gauléjac or the economist Frédéric Lordon. I had previous knowledge on the topics covered by the documentary so my commentary could be enounced in the logic of reactivation Foucault talks about... Therefore, was it the comment of an initial discourse? Or of scientific discourses of others? Or was it a discursive alternative? Which place or role have I played?

In reference to the typology of the sociologist justifications established by Lahire (2002) when questioning the utility of sociology, was my role the one of a “specific intellectual”, whose intervention is based on “specific skills acquired on a specific part of the social world”? If the commentator believes to be a “cultural producer”, she may also meet the scientific justification of fulfillment in the name of universal values. One of the sociologists that was invited to comment the documentary scenes was frequently asked about larger social, even ethical, questions: “*What world is on the making?*”, “*What collateral damages these events cause to social links?*”, and so on. Interventions were at some very different levels.

However, I notice that, while we were waiting to be interviewed, each of us (the five researchers present in the producer’s office) spoke about what he or she thought he or she would say. We submitted to each

other our proposals in what seemed to be a process of mutual verification. This was probably what Bourdieu (2001) calls “mutual control”, which this author says is specific to the scientific community (constitutive of a “mechanism of universalization”). It also allowed associations between us and the sharing of the time that was allocated to each “commentator”. It is highly possible that this “between ourselves” also created some homogeneity. Marie-Anne Dujarier told me that it could have a protection role like when she said to a colleague she had to reformulate to not be misunderstood – what was done. Marie-Anne asked us which scenes each of us wanted to comment. We answered not only to her question but each of us, including her, explained what he or she thought he or she would say about each scene. In this situation, it appeared clearly how our discourses were not exclusively individual but were there, exposing themselves to confrontation and possible refutation. This mutual adjustment may be accorded to Bourdieu’s definition of what is scientific knowledge: “all the proposals that have survived the objections”. Marie-Anne’s request for us to intervene collectively was accepted.

But, simultaneously, this social game of mutual control may refer also to the specific and paradoxical position of what Trépos (2001), names the “sociologist-expert”. The sociologist-expert would have a double body. He “would have a body that says ‘we’ when it comes to rely on its legitimacy (academic) (...) to melt its intervention into the great and immemorial body of Science (...) and a body that says ‘I’, humbly claiming the uniqueness of his position (which does not involve his peers), forgetting that he probably owed his election as an expert to his academic membership”.

Our “first body” was required by the media and it was that of a specialist somehow certified by an academic institution: an university or a national center of research.

The “second body” appeared when, for example, we chose our associations between film scenes and researches or knowledge and when we endorsed the role of a commentator. But this body, resulting from the action of commenting, as we saw previously, is not so easily divisible from the first one, the “scientific” one.

The second body could be also thought to be inherited from our choice to appear in the media if we consider the recent “Garrigou affair”, which has questioned the sociological community. A French professor of political sciences, Alain Garrigou, has recently been sued after the publication of a paper, published in the national newspaper *Libération*, relative to the French president Nicolas Sarkozy. In a public letter⁵, Alain Garrigou speaks of threats against the freedom of research and asks: “*Who will decide which territories re-*

and the problems it causes. Should we go to the program or not? Should we accept the invitation in order to bring social science knowledge to a large public or should we refuse the injunction to speak in such a short notice and in a probably very brief manner?

5 See <http://www.afsp.msh-paris.fr/activite/2010/garrigou2010.pdf>. This letter was transposed into a petition on sociological websites. See, for example, <http://sociologias-com.blogspot.com/2010/01/tu-critiques-gare-au-proces-appel-au.html>.

searchers are to be allowed access to?”. A debate followed on sociological mailing lists: should sociologists consider Alain Garrigou’s summons to court as “an attack on Research” or as a “political attack” against a “researcher who is also involved in the political struggle” (Philippe Cibois)? Of course, the debate revolved around the nature of the remarks included in the paper but a question haunts me: Is the social scientist body soluble in the media? Are there times when a social scientist is able to embody science and other times when he would be a researcher involved in any part of the social world? What kind of body has the social scientist? What kind of power has science to be able to separate the scientist from the individual? When we intervene in the media, is our body that of science or ours, if we consider, according to our previous readings about commentary, that the status of our discourses about facts may be thought as constant? And that the boundaries between judgments of fact and value judgments are maybe not so clear?

Another constraint which had been relayed by Marie-Anne Dujarier was the time: the comments should not exceed three or four minutes to be viewable on the Internet. The scenes themselves were very short, four or five minutes. It clearly questioned which provisional scientific construct we were able to offer, other than those we developed during our research activities and that we transmit during courses. That’s just our activity of researcher which can be associated with these video extracts which are not holders in themselves of an intrinsic *truth* that we should reveal. What was our comment relative to? Was it relative to the object commented or to our research and professional activity? But are object and activity separable, after reading Bourdieu?

2. Truth and expertise

To get back to the question of *truth*, it refers to two things that interest us: first, it refers to *expertise*; secondly, it refers to a certain sociological project related to the scientific disciplines, and if we refer to Foucault, to discourse and its order.

The word that was spontaneously assigned to us by the media was “expert”. “See the opinion of the expert” said the link on the television website, where one could access the commentary.

Unanimously, Marie-Anne Dujarier, another sociologist colleague and myself have refused this word, “expert”, to the point that Marie-Anne has requested that this term on the website should be changed for that of “researcher”. As for me, I decided the question the term? Why refuse it for ourselves? Was our “credit” (Latour 1996) threatened by this term? Or was it the refusal of an identity that we consider was not ours? What negative and shared notion in social sciences may this word evoke? A colleague talked to me about the overhanging position of the expert towards “social practices”. Marie-Anne told me about representations and negative practices. She added that we

rarely know, in the media, the object of the expertise: expert in what? How is the expert defined? According to Fassin (1998), the expert “proposes to link the two levels of the scientist and the political”. It meets the classical definition of the expert: technical knowledge is sought to enlighten decision. This aspect of the expert is highly criticized in the French “sociology of expertise” because it distinguishes technical knowledge and judgment and, thus, “facts and values, knowledge and action” (Théry 2005). As Chateauraynaud and Bessy (1995) say: “Perceptions would be ‘objective’ and interpretations ‘subjective’. Unless this is the opposite: perceptions would be vested in the arbitrariness of individual experiences – as this famous view of the expert – and interpretations would be based on stabilized conventions?”. What the expert builds is “a social model that imposes its truth on reality” (Fassin 1998). In this, the expert would prevent the principle of democratic deliberation. Nonetheless, it is from this principle of deliberation that social constructs emerge, and, therefore, the scientific constructs which are discussed between peers. Bourdieu (2001) said about that: “It’s the nature of social science being responsible for its objectivity. Objectivity is an intersubjective process of the scientific field (...): it is the result of intersubjective agreement in the field”.

The figure of the expert is that of a specialist. The researcher is a specialist in his field. The exclusivity given to the expert is not intrinsic but is rather the result of the consecration by the media. Ortiz (2007) reported what a journalist said to him: “You’re the expert! You’re the only one we know of who has done this kind of research”. In this sense, Ortiz said he was endorsing “the media assigned role of the expert”. In the unobvious and tense play of identity’s constitution, it is a designation more than a self-recognition. For the media, the body of the social scientist is one, merged with those of the expert. In the story of our intervention, our body was one but, in its relation to the media, manifold: that of a researcher caught up in the tension between his academic allegiance and his appearance in the media as a person.

Ortiz (2007) adds: “As a media-defined expert, I was expected not only to provide responses to the producers’, journalists’ and reporters’ questions, but to provide the ‘right’ responses to their questions”. This truth keeps coming back, from the commentary (revealing an underlying truth) to the expertise (to attain the status of one who tells the truth).

Conclusion

Foucault (1970) says that truth is one of the most efficient control orders of discourse. He notes the displacement of historical truth for Greeks. During the 6th century, the true discourse “was the speech of he who was authorized to speak and according to the required ritual”. A century later, the true discourse was conditioned “by the utterance itself”, “its meaning, its form, its object, its relation to its reference”. Here, perhaps,

we can grasp the shift from the expert to the scientist. We would have here, quite conveniently, an authority no longer credited by its place and status but by the content of his discourse and by the conditions of the construction of this discourse. This sends us back to relations between science and truth. But it also sends us back to the necessity, underlined by Latour, of the acknowledgment of the scientist as scientist. The question of status, the acknowledgment of this status, cannot be so easily evacuated. And it is this necessity that, perhaps, creates the expert identity as a specialist, someone who is needed for his “right answers”. Truth would be the condition for credibility and credibility the requirement for the scientist to be a scientist.

For Foucault the truth makes us blind – it would be the truth itself that hide the truth and its vicissitudes. The posture of truth can create blind angles in science since, Foucault (2001) says, “a proposition (...) before it can be designed true or false (...) must be ‘in truth’”.

Here we find the mechanisms of power as identified by Bourdieu: power occurs with more force when it occurs in the ignorance of what constitutes it as power. In that perspective, commenting can be considered as helpful for the social scientist. Its relativity (towards the object of the commentary, because of its constant relation to conjuncture and because of its individual endorsement) and its apparent weakness (with respect to the truth it is supposed to bring, not sustained by academics) could maintain the social scientist’s speech linked to his object, inscribed after previous speeches about this object, instead of linking the social scientist’s speech exclusively to his status (nevertheless necessary both on the media and the scientific field).

In fact, perhaps we should consider, following Bourdieu, that the social sciences must be “socially weak”. Referring to sociology, Bourdieu (2001) says its “socially weak” character makes it “probably more scientific”. Social sciences should be based on the principle that they have to be necessarily subject to controversy and debate. To intervene in the media as a social scientist should not be equivalent to being an “expert” in the media, which has to do with presenting the “good” or the “right” answer. Intervening in the media as a social scientist should be just continuing our work as researchers, through the offer of proposals or of statements which would promote, by their movement in the social field, the emergence of new proposals.

Bourdieu (2001) rejects the temptations of narcissism in reflexivity. For him, reflexive criticism is about giving social science “a higher degree of freedom against the constraints and social necessities that weigh on it as on every human activity”. Questioning the scientific discourse and the social constraints inherent to it, which was the aim of this paper, can perhaps allow us attain that higher degree of freedom.

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