

Moral Judgements Close to Home

Abstract

In theory, anthropologists should suspend judgment of those they study – that is, on the grounds of cultural relativism. In reality, however, moral judgments undoubtedly pervade the everyday experience of fieldwork, not to mention that anthropologists sometimes take an explicitly critical stance towards the societies they study. This essay, together with others in this special issue, explores the consequences for this when the ethnographer has a biographical connection to the object of his or her research. Having briefly discussed the case of Bourdieu's project in Béarn, where he had spent his childhood, I turn to my own experience of doing a project in Oklahoma. The very 'likable' people I have met there – many of whom come from the same background as my parents – also support (on aggregate) political positions that I disagree with. As an anthropologist, I could suspend judgment of them while trying to grasp the historical circumstances that have led them to think and act in the ways that they do. However, my biographical connection complicates this process, I suggest, personalising things – and potentially heightening the emotions that drive moral judgements – just when a lack of sympathy and emotional engagement may be what is called for.

Pierre Bourdieu begins *Sketch for a self-analysis*, written not long before his death, by flatly stating: "I do not intend to indulge in the genre of autobiography, which I have often enough described as both conventional and illusory" (Bourdieu 2007:1). Still, it is hard to read the *Sketch* as anything other than an autobiographical footnote to his long career. Among other things, he reflects on connections between his early work in Algeria and the relatively less well-known project he carried out at roughly the same (early) career stage in rural Béarn, the area in deep southwest France where he had grown up. Of course, Algeria and Béarn were two radically different worlds to study, and yet there were and are connections between them, not least via the colonial history that ties Algeria to France.¹ On the autobiographical side: we learn that Bourdieu's parents, by

¹ For thought-provoking discussions of links between Bourdieu's French and Algerian research see Reed-Danahay 2004, 2009; Goodman & Silverstein 2009;

means of approaching a colonel from Béarn (through "relatives of his who lived in a nearby village"), helped get his Algerian military service posting changed – specifically to one that enabled a deeper immersion in local life. This, in turn, set the stage for his first book project (2007:39). But their involvement in his Béarn research was, unsurprisingly, more sustained and direct: they were locals.

Bourdieu writes of the "often very painful" interviews he carried out with "old bachelors of the generation of my father, who often accompanied me in my work and, through his presence and his discrete intercession, helped me to elicit trust and confidence" (2007:63).

Beyond these biographical contingencies there were other, more sociological, resonances between the two sites. The French and Algerian peasants Bourdieu studied had things in common, including a shared marginality from centres of power and a shared subjugation to historical processes beyond their knowing. The Béarnaise bachelors he describes so movingly had become "unmarriageable", he suggests, in part because they ended up with the wrong embodied dispositions, never having learned how to dance, etc. More broadly, the political-economic transformations sweeping France, including the rural-to-urban migration of marriageable women, had left them stranded. Bourdieu's sympathy for the bachelors' plight pervades his writings on them (Bourdieu 2008). But he also came to feel that his work in Béarn, sympathetic or not, had been necessary. In short, he needed to objectify the form of life he had experienced as a child in Béarn because it was the (conscious or unconscious) point of reference for his understanding of Algeria. As he came to see it, then, research on the former – on his own people, as it were – is what made possible his scientific analysis of the latter (Bourdieu 2007: pp.58ff). A key point is the near simultaneity of the two projects. This was a case of anthropology "at home" carried out early in a professional career, not as a late-stage extension of it, and before Bourdieu had found his way as a social scientist.

Poupeau 2015; as well as Bourdieu's own 2008 account of his project in Béarn and his re-analysis of his findings over time.

But this leads me to a question. I wonder if Bourdieu's experience of dual/early fieldwork might have impinged not only on his scientific analysis of what he saw on the ground but also on his *moral* analysis of it? To put things simply, even crudely, might not his (sympathetic) immersion in Béarnaise life – the emotional connection he felt to people there, not least as a matter of his biography – have complicated the work of condemning France, the colonial power in Algeria? Just to be clear: my aim in posing this question is not to second-guess Bourdieu's politics (he was a staunch supporter of Algerian independence) or his moral compass. What interests me, instead, is the more general question of what anthropologists find forgivable, or not, and why.

In theory at least, an ethnographic understanding of how people have become what they are should complicate our ability to judge them harshly. So too might a recognition of their internal diversity. The simple act of breaking "the French" down into Béarnaise, etc., makes it harder for us to essentialise them in moral terms – even if we explicitly *want* to condemn France as a whole for its actions in the world. Certainly, Bourdieu understood the specificity of this part of France via his interlinked life experiences there (his biography) and his social scientific research there (his ethnography). As one aspect of this, he knew well the intricacies of the local political landscape. Rural France is routinely associated with a form of peasant conservatism, but the reality is complex and shifting. Bourdieu's father – a farmer turned postal worker turned fieldwork assistant – was also a trade unionist whose political views helped shape those of his son. Moreover, the southwestern region of France that includes Béarn has a long tradition of supporting socialism, and thus of *not* supporting the far right. Meanwhile, some of the most crucial support for anti-immigrant parties of the right has actually come from *pieds noirs*, i.e. "Europeans" who ... left *Algeria* after independence and moved to southern France. Thus illustrating once again the anthropological truism that life is complicated – and that the bits of our complicated lives tend to connect up in significant ways.

Against the background of life's complexity, do anthropologists make moral judgments? Should they make moral judgments? Assuming they do, how are such judgments shaped by their own biographical trajectories? What happens when these are scaled up to encompass the political, i.e. when our judgements focus not only on individuals being "good" or "bad" in the flow of everyday life but also on larger historical processes – such as colonial occupations and wars of independence – that impinge on the many?

The discipline of anthropology is famously premised on a type of cultural/moral relativism. When crossing boundaries, we ought to suspend judgement – at least until we have grasped the logics that cause people to behave as they do. But I personally doubt that this theory is put into practice very consistently. For one thing, anthropology, at least in its contemporary form, is premised as much or more on the idea of cultural critique, e.g. of us deconstructing power in the communities we study and thus of *not* assuming on relativist grounds that “everything is permissible”. Even putting this important point about cultural critique aside for a moment (I will come back to it below), the reality is that doing anthropology means immersing oneself in a way of life, which means getting caught up in human relationships. It is surely impossible to do this without entangling oneself in moral judgments.² Thus it is that we start having opinions about others, in spite of ourselves, from the moment we meet them and begin observing their actions in the world. There are some people we like and approve of, others we dislike and disapprove of – at least, that was my experience when I started fieldwork in a Taiwanese fishing village about thirty years ago. Also, regardless of any attempts we make to remain above the fray, those we meet quickly drag us into the realm of making and reacting to moral judgments. At an early stage of my fieldwork in Taiwan, for example, I was living in the middle school teachers' dormitory when the majority of staff there began to round on, and condemn, one of their own for her attitude, behaviour and working practices. Their ostracism of this young woman went on for months. I

² As Carrithers nicely expresses it: “...the production of knowledge [in anthropology] depends upon the creation of relationships – which must always be shorthand for *morally charged* relationships – between anthropologists and their informants/consultants” (Carrithers 2005:434).

felt sorry for her, but also felt intense pressure to *agree* that she was bad. It was almost impossible to remain neutral as the dispute rolled on. And then, a bit later, I myself was accused – not by the teachers but by some local villagers – of having become spiritually polluted through participation in a funeral. I was entitled to agree or not with what they said about me, and in fact they disagreed amongst themselves (Stafford 2010). But what was not possible for me as an ethnographer was to simply stay out of the realm of morality. On the contrary, moral judgments, whether directed by us at others or by others at us, inevitably become a central part of our in-the-field narratives – in *all* fieldwork settings, so far as I know.

But to return to the case of Bourdieu: is there a special inflection to this (predictable) flow of judgments when one's own people, however defined, are the object of ethnographic research? In other words, when the ethnographic process is biographically inflected in a significant way, as it was for Bourdieu? This question is motivated, in part, by discussions in psychology about the role that positionality – to use the anthropological term – plays in our understandings and evaluations of behaviour (Stafford 2010, 2013, 2015). In brief, some psychologists argue that (a) when explaining our own behaviour we are more likely to focus on the *situation or context* that caused us to act in a given way; whereas (b) when explaining the behaviour of others we are more likely to focus on the *person*. In short, when it comes to others our tendency is *not* to focus so much on the surrounding situation/context, thus taking their good or bad behaviour as evidence that they – as persons – are (essentially) good or bad.³

As anthropologists would want to add at this point, however, there is clearly huge variation within the category of "judging others", most obviously between those with whom we share an in-group identity of some kind (e.g., my siblings/close friends/fellow countrymen) and those from out-groups, variously

³ There is a large psychological literature on two interlinked (but not identical) phenomena, known as the 'actor-observer asymmetry' and the 'fundamental attribution error' respectively. A detailed critical overview and meta-analysis of the data related to these phenomena is found in Malle (2006); see also Malle et al (2007).

defined (e.g., strangers/ethnic others/foreigners). Following the logic outlined above, it might be thought that we would be harsher judges (meaning “more essentialist”) towards people from out-groups, i.e. because we know so little about the situations/contexts that have caused their behaviour. As anthropologists, however, we have a professional interest in transcending this very dichotomy and pushing things in the opposite direction. That is, a central part of our job is precisely to sympathize with out-group members, to take on board the situational/contextual factors that explain what they do, and even – to the extent such a thing is possible – to *become* one of them.

But what happens to this typical anthropological move when studying in-group members? In fact, the challenge here might be not to cultivate knowledge of, and sympathy for, other persons – so as to forgive their sins by means of context, as it were –but rather to cultivate sufficient *distance*. In Bourdieu’s terms, the challenge is to objectify our own way of life, a good deal of which we may simply take for granted as insiders. Having said this, it’s not as if anthropologists are bound to be naturally sympathetic towards, or even particularly knowledgeable about, the social/cultural worlds that they themselves have come from. On the contrary, many anthropologists have been attracted to the discipline precisely because of its implicitly or explicitly *critical* take on the worlds that they themselves have come from, and from which they have long since departed. Sometimes, for anthropologists, the enemy is us.

After carrying out fieldwork for a number of years in rural Taiwan and China, I have recently started two interrelated projects – one rural, one urban – in Oklahoma. This is the state in the US “heartland” where I spent most of my childhood and youth before extracting myself from it, in part by means of a career in anthropology at a university on a different continent. Although I have always admired (indeed loved) the place and the people, I also suspected – basically knew – that I would find it hard to stay there for the long term. And yet, to borrow Bourdieu’s observation about his research in Béarn, I now find myself

entangled in "the confused dream of a reintegration into my native world" (2007:60). More specifically, I have been studying my *father's* native world – the mostly flat rural counties between Oklahoma City and the Texas panhandle where he grew up as a farm boy. In the course of this, I have been learning more about myself than I expected.

I should explain that my project is a comparative one: the larger goal is to understand the USA in relation to China. This is a big task. But luckily rural America and rural China – where my most recent project has been based in Heilongjiang – turn out to be rather similar in key respects, a bit like Bourdieu's Béarn and Algeria. At a meta level, people in both places share the experience of being marginal and of being subjugated to historical processes beyond their knowing. On these grounds alone, they might engage our sympathy as anthropologists, i.e. once we know something about them and the histories that have made them what they are. Having said this, my guess (and I will discuss this more fully below) is that Oklahoma is less intuitively likeable, from the average standard viewpoint of cosmopolitan anthropology, than either Algeria or Heilongjiang – or indeed than socialist southwest France. This is a deeply conservative American state. Depending on the statistical basis applied, it can be said to have the highest per capita execution rate, the highest rate of female incarceration, and the strongest anti-abortion legislation of any state in the union.⁴ Such things as "open carry" gun policies and statutes banning Sharia Law are quite popular among ordinary citizens there. In the 2016 election, not a single county in Oklahoma voted for Clinton (the same was true for Obama in 2012), and in the area where my rural fieldwork is based roughly 70-90% of the people in each county voted for Trump.

And yet, as Arlie Hochschild has found in her recent study of Tea Party supporters in Louisiana (Hochschild 2016), the history behind this political

⁴ On executions, see <http://www.deathpenaltyinfo.org/state-execution-rates>; on female incarceration, see <http://www.sentencingproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/Incarcerated-Women-and-Girls.pdf>; and on abortion restrictions, see <http://www.aul.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/2017-Life-List-Overview.pdf>.

conservatism – which rests significantly on a religious fundamentalism – has a number of twists. Although it may seem obvious now that right wing religious conservatives of a nationalist bent should be found in a place like Oklahoma, some of the state's most important religious traditions have been pacifist in orientation and/or have had connections to socialism in living memory. In the rural counties where I've been working there has long been a significant Mennonite presence, which means that a number of people there are committed to pacifism in some sense, and to an ethics of self-effacing community service.

More broadly, even though Oklahoma is at America's geographical centre – and one could say its symbolic centre, for this is the self-declared heartland of American values – the state's short and singular history makes it marginal in key respects. Here I will only briefly mention two aspects of this history, ones that might, I suspect, generate *contrasting* sympathies in readers. First, Oklahoma was a central part of, and later coterminous with, "Indian Territory". That is, it comprised lands where Native Americans were re-settled following their displacement (sometimes brutal, as in the Trail of Tears), from lands further east. The majority of *white* settlers, many deeply religious and quite a few hard up in various senses, arrived later, at the close of the 19th century and the first years of the 20th. This is when lands "unassigned" to Native Americans, even if sometimes claimed by them, were opened to settlement via an extraordinary series of Land Runs. Soon enough, there was no such thing as Indian Territory, just the State of Oklahoma, founded in 1907. So whereas one can find the stories of white settlers admirable, it will (I presume) be hard for most anthropological readers to neglect the bigger picture of the repeated displacement of Native Americans into which their narratives fit (e.g. see Perdue & Green 2007). But then – and this is the second aspect of the story – many settler families were themselves decimated when they had barely moved in, thanks to a combination of the Dust Bowl and the Great Depression (e.g. see Gregory 1989). Now *they* were victims of history, Okies caught up in a tragedy not of their own making, immortalised by John Steinbeck and Hollywood.

Unsurprisingly, the more the details of these stories are examined the more complex things become. Take the issue of ethnic relations in this frontier region. There has been significant intermarriage (itself not politically straightforward by any means) between Native Americans and whites in Oklahoma, something reflected in recent demographic data on inter-ethnic marriage across the USA.⁵ As a result, many Oklahomans who have settler or early post-statehood backgrounds *also* claim close or remote Native American kinship ties of some kind (this is the case in my own family). Meanwhile, in the pre-Civil War and pre-statehood era, a significant number of African American slaves moved to Indian Territory along with their Native American owners (including along the Trail of Tears), and there was intermarriage between them. Moreover, among the settlers there were significant numbers of *free* African Americans too. Indeed, at one point Oklahoma had a series of "all black" towns and there was a movement to make it an "all black" state. This is worth noting as a reminder of how different things might have been, if only they weren't.⁶

The main interlocutors for my project in rural Oklahoma started life, as did my parents, in white families in Depression-era small towns, surrounded by people from the "pioneer" generation. (In the counties where I worked, the white share of the population is between 85%-95%.) Take, for example, Jack and Arlene⁷, now in their late 80s. Her parents were farmers who, not being very well off, didn't own a farm. They rented land from Native Americans on a year-to-year basis (this way was a common practice and my father's family did the same). Jack's parents also farmed, but his father had to support a large, extended family and so he took a risk and started a feed store business. Jack served in the military in World War Two, after which he and Arlene both worked for a while in his

⁵ See: <https://www.census.gov/prod/cen2010/briefs/c2010br-14.pdf>

⁶ A useful online summary is provided by the Oklahoma Historical Society here (and at other pages on the same website): <http://www.okhistory.org/publications/enc/entry.php?entryname=AFRICAN%20AMERICANS>.

⁷ To protect privacy, names and some personal details have been changed.

father's business. But he subsequently became a mechanic for the State of Oklahoma, working many years without taking a single day off. As he approached retirement, a quiet deal was done whereby he transferred his accumulated leave to a co-worker in need, a young woman he'd never met whose child was gravely ill.

This kind act again raises the question of morality. Although Jack and Arlene never came across to me as sanctimonious, they faithfully attend the Church of Christ, which is where they met many decades ago. She's part of a small group of older women from this church who drive around the countryside to sing hymns at funerals – something she says has always been a lot of fun. Jack is meanwhile part of a (non-church-related) coffee circle of around eight older men in their 70s and 80s. Following a pattern set long ago by local farmers, they briefly congregate at 10 am on weekday mornings at a motel restaurant off the nearest highway. Everybody gets a cup of black coffee, which costs \$1, and they sit and talk and joke for around thirty minutes. At the end, they put their \$1 bills on the table and play a quick game: who can guess the last digits of the serial code on one of the bills? The "winner" is required to leave a few extra dollars on the table as a tip for the waitress and then everybody goes back out to the parking lot to climb into their cars/vans/trucks before driving away.

When reflecting on these details of everyday life – acts of kindness, small markers of community – it's hard for me not to find the rural Oklahomans I met sympathetic. As discussed by Janet Carsten and Sophie Day in their contributions to this special issue, this feeling is partly evoked for via the materialisation of their lives: the cups of coffee, the dollar bills that make up a tip, the big white truck in which an 80-year-old drives off alone, etc. The people themselves are friendly in a low-key way that matches the notably low-key landscape and low-key material culture surrounding them. They are straight talking. Many have dry senses of humour and excellent comedic timing. The stories they tell are always interesting – and often funny and/or poignant. When I recorded an interview with Jack, for example, he started right off (without any prompting from me and without much by way of further elaboration) by mentioning his earliest memory.

Back in the late 1920s, he said, his older brother was hit by a Model A car out on a country road and his first memory is of his grandfather carrying the body up to their farmhouse and placing it on the porch.

There, see, I've done it. By evoking the fatefulness of life, something none of us can avoid, I've triggered human sympathy for Jack and, perhaps, for other people like him. He is an endearing version of the prototypical old boy from small town Oklahoma. The statistical odds are thus high (see below) that he is anti-government, pro-gun, a classic religious conservative and, moreover, an apparent living manifestation of American frontier-style self-reliance and individualism. His wife Arlene once told me that her mother's greatest fear, during her last couple of years in a nursing home, was that she would run out of money and have to rely on handouts from her daughters (with whom, by the way, she appears to have had very good relationships). Jack told me that when he returned after the war his father announced to him: "If you can't make it, don't look at me." (Meaning: if you can't make it on your own in life, don't look to me for help.)

But this language of total self-reliance is misleading, I would say, or at least requires contextualisation. In truth, Jack *did* get help from his father, joining the family business for a while when his post-war return to schooling didn't work out as planned. Jack's grandfather had meanwhile moved to Texas to run a wheat farm but after one bad crop had little choice but to return to Oklahoma – where he too was given significant help by Jack's father (his son). Indeed, dotted through the stories of those I met it isn't hard at all to find evidence not only of mutual support across family networks but also of a more general cooperative ethos pervading this part of the American countryside, as seen in everything from funeral singing groups to coffee circles. Certainly, the individualistic, anti-government talk one sometimes hears – when politics comes up as an explicit topic of conversation, which isn't actually that often (see below) – sits uncomfortably with the realities of everyday life. To cite a small backward-

looking illustration: when Jack was a teenager in the late 1930s, sidewalks and curbs were put on the very street where he and Arlene now live by the Works Progress Administration. You can still see the WPA stamps there in the paving. Meanwhile, he told me his father's business had actually relocated to this small town from another one nearby because of encouragement from a local community association. And then, as I've noted, Jack himself was employed by the State for years, not to mention that his daughter now works in a nearby town for a *cooperative* (specifically, one that supplies electricity to farmers).

And then there's church. Jack and Arlene have been involved in the local Church of Christ for decades. By any definition, this is an institution framed around communal solidarity, one that, again, belies any simple rhetoric of individualism. When I last saw Jack it was just hours before he was to have triple bypass surgery and about fifteen people, men and women from his congregation, were crammed into his hospital room – about two hours' drive away from where they lived. They were there to visit, sing a few Church songs with him, and pray before his operation. The atmosphere was calm but upbeat. It was all done in a low key, slightly dry, non-self-righteous tone, and it didn't last long – kind of like the cup of coffee at the diner on weekday mornings, perhaps half an hour or so in total. (My immediate thought was that I hope someone will bother to arrange this for me if I ever end up in a hospital bed waiting for triple bypass surgery.)

But what about the politics that go along with this friendly mutual support in the countryside? I've noted above that Jack is statistically likely to hold conservative (even right wing) views, and in a county where virtually everyone voted for Trump he is likely to have done the same. The truth, however, is that I do not know for sure what he thinks about politics and in fact we didn't explicitly talk about religion either. In reflexive mode, I wonder if I actually prefer not to know his views on such things, but in any case between the two of us we managed not to talk about them (a reticence and self-censorship not unlike that found in Grit Wesser's account, in this issue, of her awkward encounter with a friend of hers from the GDR days). Further to this, one interesting point is that Jack's coffee circle is *not* church based and the men get along very well on that basis, certainly

not having sectarian fights about religion over their coffees. They also tread lightly on politics, from the evidence I saw at their meetings, even though I know from other interactions that their views do vary (at least one man told me he was keen on Hillary Clinton). There is a kind of civility to their interactions which I suspect has at least something to do with age: they grew up in an era when American politics was not as divisive and angry as it is now. Notably, one academic specialist on the Church of Christ, a relatively small but long-standing denomination in the American south, has described this church as having *become* relatively nationalistic, militaristic and pro-establishment in outlook – and, I would guess, angrier (Casey 2002). As he explains, the gradual shift to these orientations only happened over the course of the 20th century. Before that, indeed in the years immediately before Jack and Arlene were born, this church had a pacifist and *anti*-establishment reputation, with some members – including in Oklahoma – actively involved in the Socialist Party. A church-supported college not that far from where Jack and Arlene live today was under surveillance during World War 1, and was actually shut down for a couple of years. Some of its students ended up in military prison for their anti-war views. By the time Jack (eagerly) served in World War 2 all of this had changed, but then so too have many things. Oklahoma today votes overwhelmingly Republican but this is a recent phenomenon: before the last few decades, Democrats dominated political life in the state.

Stepping back, then, I am simply highlighting two very general points in relation to this material. The first is that rural Oklahomans are likeable and admirable, at least in my direct experience of them as individuals. My fondness is triggered by small details of the stories they tell as well as by evocative material traces of their lives and by the thoughtful and considerate way I've seen them interact with each other. These triggers may be especially resonant for me because of their connection to the long-ago world of my childhood and the mythical ancestral figures of my youth – including my paternal and maternal grandparents. The second point is that things I might *not* like about them,

politically and/or morally speaking, have not come from nowhere. They are products of a cumulative history – elements of which could be described as tragic – in which certain events have conspired against them, as would be true of people in other relatively marginal places around the world such as Heilongjiang, Béarn and Algeria. There's the Land Run history (in which people try to start over, but under distinctly odd circumstances that include directly/indirectly displacing others); there's the Dust Bowl and Depression history (in which people are forced to migrate, at least temporarily, in order to start again in new places – where they are treated as despised outsiders); and then there's the history of the broad 20th century shift in American populism from a relatively progressive stance to a right wing one, something driven in large part by a complex racial politics in places where whites and non-whites have been in close – sometimes tense – proximity, including within the same families.⁸

Much more could be said about these phenomena, of course. But in keeping with the focus of this special issue let me frame my discussion autobiographically. I didn't leave Oklahoma because I thought the people there were bad. What worried me at the time, to be honest, was that people there might think *I* was bad, and that I would therefore basically never fit in. And although I've sometimes found it easy to criticise from a distance, I find this harder up close, now that I'm back in Oklahoma and spending time with interesting people like Jack and Arlene. Indeed, at a personal level the most surprising thing for me in this project – while being exactly what Bourdieu would have predicted – has been to realise how much my own moral compass still derives from my childhood in Oklahoma (and in West Texas, where we also lived for some time and had friends and family) rather than it coming from the study of anthropology and/or from my subsequent work as an intellectual.

Perhaps predictably, then, I find myself bristling at the thought of cosmopolitan anthropologists looking down – morally speaking – on Okies, a sure sign that I

⁸ For a recent discussion of this issue from new and interesting angles, see Kuziemko & Washington 2015, which also cites a large number of previous studies.

identify with the latter . When mentioning my new project to colleagues I've been at the receiving end of some bemusement and sympathy, as if "we" take it for granted that I am not one of them and will find it tricky to be out there. In my reaction to this there is perhaps an element of tribalism, an element of what Faulkner reportedly said of the American South: "Well, I love it and I hate it. Some of the things there I don't like at all, but I was born there, and that's my home, and I will still defend it even if I hate it."⁹ But actually a crucial point for me is that I *don't* hate it. In this respect, I am rather more like Bourdieu, with his sympathetic take on Béarn, than I am like Didier Eribon and Edouard Louis. Both Eribon and Louis – sociological distance notwithstanding – do seem to feel a genuine anger towards the French working class communities they escaped from by means of intellectual activity, and which they eventually studied and wrote about.¹⁰ (Interestingly, they feel anger towards their fathers in particular, while simultaneously recognising the social forces that, to be sure, helped make their fathers whatever they are.)

Susan Harding famously commented that, from the point of view of her anthropological colleagues, there seemed to be something "repugnant" about the American fundamentalists she was studying (Harding 1991). As Simon Coleman puts it, the problem was that her Christians were:

...the *wrong* kind of cultural Other: supposedly anti- and not simply non-modern, powerful, in possession of their own voice; and thus to be kept away from the conceptual and political space occupied by vulnerable ethnic minorities or the colonized (Coleman 2015:276).

By implication, Harding's research subjects – with their politically objectionable views – did not merit the relativist "free pass" extended by anthropologists to many other kinds of Others. This reaction suggests there was some serious

⁹ Cited in Thomas Powers, "The big thing on his mind", *New York Review of Books*, April 27, 2017, p. 42.

¹⁰ Eribon (2013), Louis (2017).

boundary policing going on.¹¹ In short, the people she studied were too close to home to be comfortably accommodated within the normal anthropological framework. Note, however, that while Harding raises this boundary policing issue, she does not actually switch sides and defend the moral/political views of her interlocutors, any more than Hochschild (whose hometown is Berkeley, by the way, to the great amusement of the people she meets in Louisiana) does in her more recent study of Tea Party supporters. Both of them situate their work in classic ethnographic terms: as attempts to understand, from the inside, what is going on in an exotic moral universe. But in Harding's view, at least, the whole point of this is to help us "design more effective political strategies to oppose directly the specific positions and policies [the Fundamentalists] advocate" (1991:393). As Coleman rightly observes, how one can reconcile these two impulses – that is, how one can reconcile a sympathetic anthropology that wants to forgive all with a hard-hitting anthropology that wants to change all – is far from obvious (Coleman 2015:277).

During my time in Taiwan and China, I've found it relatively easy to forgive most things in classic anthropological style (Stafford 2015) – this notwithstanding the fact that I constantly make moral judgments about individuals in the flow of life, finding them to be "bad" (as well as "good") in various ways. Moreover, it would probably never occur to me that my Taiwanese and Chinese interlocutors could be *blamed* in any meaningful way for macro/political phenomena beyond the scope of the local communities in which they live.

My emotional engagement in the Oklahoma research is different, however, and in some respects more heightened and complicated, thanks to two things. First is the fact that American conservative populism has implications for people around the world. This is not the same kind of thing as French colonialism in Algeria, but it does raise a similar set of moral and political questions. What are "my people" doing? Do they even know what they are doing and what it means for others?

¹¹ See also Robbins (2007).

The second – more personal – thing is the mediation (however indirect at times) of my parents, and my father in particular, in my research there. As mentioned at the outset, Bourdieu's parents facilitated his project in Béarn, even to the extent of his father accompanying him during interviews. My father (who moved away from the countryside decades ago) has also helped me with my research in rural Oklahoma. Without him it would have been harder to arrange things, and he himself has taught me many lessons. And yet my impression is that he is ambivalent about my work and he has occasionally resisted, at least implicitly, me doing some parts of it. In particular, although he is glad that I am interested in studying Oklahoma, it is the opposite of his style to ask personal questions of others, especially where this might require them to touch on family troubles and tragedies such as the one Jack mentioned in passing, i.e. his brother's death. For my father, in short, a life history interview of that kind is bound to be "painful" (to use Bourdieu's term for the interviews he carried out with his father), and it is certainly not something he would like to sit in on. He doesn't approve of it, basically. And his resistance, almost entirely unspoken, is not without reason. Back in London, I often tell students that people I meet in the field usually seem willing, even eager, to share their stories, and if they are not I just leave them alone. But this ethical logic would not, I think, carry much weight with my father. What this means is that *his* moral sensitivities have begun to impinge on *my* fieldwork in complex ways. He has so much sympathy for my informants that I sometimes find myself pushing in the opposite direction: trying to distance myself from what they say, and to frame my understanding of them in meta/sociological terms rather than personalistic ones, and to remind myself that there are unlikeable things about these people – my people – too.

This last point brings me to an obvious question about the framing of this article, one already alluded to above. People being likeable in the flow of everyday life could be said to have nothing whatever to do with the kinds of judgements we might want to make about *broader* political realities in which they participate, directly or indirectly. There's no reason to think that coming to like individuals

or families, or even whole villages, in Béarn, finding the people there admirable and sympathizing with them as fellow humans, is inconsistent with deploring French action in Algeria over the long term. I do find it interesting, however, that when Bourdieu talks about his work in Béarn informing his analysis of Algeria what he means, in effect, is that he needed to perform an act of reflexivity/objectification with respect to his own upbringing before he could grasp Algeria properly; and also that there's a structural analogy between the two places: what happens to the (marginalised) bachelors he met in Béarn – and with whom he identifies closely – isn't wholly unlike what happens to the (marginalised) peoples he came to know in Algeria. The consequence of this second move in particular is to make both sides of his work "the same" in a deep sense – one can have sympathy for everybody – by way of contrast with a move that would instead have differentiated them, e.g. if one were to simply take the Béarnaise as French and note that people from there actually contributed to what happened in Algeria. To repeat: I'm not questioning Bourdieu's politics, simply noting that he construes the relationship between his fieldsites in terms of similar underlying structures and structural positions, which is different from asking why and how the Béarnaise might have a connection to wrong-doing.

The same holds true for me in Oklahoma. Much as I admire the people, I am obviously still deeply troubled when I find evidence of implicit or explicit racism among them, for example. This is occasionally revealed at the individual level, e.g. in verbal statements, but it is more often observable in the accepted segregation of everyday life and of local organisations, including churches. And then a more complex, in the end sociologically more interesting, question is how individuals are linked on aggregate to historical events and tendencies that one can deplore and/or simply try to understand, e.g. the rightward drift of American populism, with all the consequences this has brought and which is closely linked to the politics of race. On the one hand, I could try as hard as possible to be sympathetic, to understand where this thing that I do not like has come from without condemning anybody for it. As part of this, I would not essentialise Oklahomans, and I would differentiate them as individuals. I would see Jack and Arlene, with their acts of kindness and their contributions to community solidarity, and with

their engaging way of saying things. Moreover, I would see my own father in them, and in some ways also see myself too. On the other hand, the contrasting challenge is to *not* have too much sympathy, to hold onto moral judgements and condemn those who I think deserve it. But the impetus for handling things in this way – that is, for being critical – could, I think, come as much from my childhood in Oklahoma as from my work as an anthropologist.

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