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Session 21 “Ethnographic Intervention”
Online abstract

*Importing concepts from one ‘national’ context to another:
critical ethnography as safeguard.*
*Discussion on the introduction of ‘gentrification’ from the American context
to the French one.*

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In this presentation, I will question the concept of gentrification. More precisely, I will discuss its introduction in the French urban studies context. In fact, “gentrification” is not only a concept but appears to be a real paradigm (as defined by Kuhn), *i.e.* implying a certain way of interpreting facts, of asking questions, of choosing research fields and methodologies. I would add the idea that this word comes with a well-structured theoretical tradition (understood as a social and historical construction), *i.e.* with its founding “fathers”, its theorists and books that must be referred to. What are the social and historical conditions of possibility that enabled the introduction of this paradigm in the French urban scientific “champ” (Bourdieu)? Once we will have understood that, we will wonder: to what extent is “gentrification” a heuristic tool to understanding better some social and urban contexts? First, I will explain how the French sociological “champ” that focuses on both space and social classes has been structured, going back to the 1970s. Why in the late 1990s “gentrification” could become a legitimate concept? How can we understand that most of the former French researches about this object – yet without this world – appear, today, to be a missing link? I will discuss the paramount importance of Marxist urban sociologists as a major hypothesis of explanation. This part will be based on an accurate literature review and on interviews with the different generations of French researchers who introduced and legitimated the use of this paradigm. This will enable me to define precisely what is the phenomenon of gentrification or, rather, what are the phenomena of gentrification, since from one author to another one it refers, on the one hand, to different social groups, different types of space and, on the other hand, to different global sociological explanations. This definition is all the more important since it is not only a scientific category but also a political and media-friendly one.

Yet, and this will be the second point, from my fieldwork, many exceptions led me to reconsider the heuristic dimension of “gentrification”. Some “canonic” dichotomies prove to be irrelevant and would lead me to distinguish groups that should not be distinguished: “new comers”/“former inhabitants”, “middle class”/“working class”. As far as the way they refer to culture, politics, their way of behaving in the city, their sociability, etc., these categories are not good descriptive and, then, explaining tools. As I will demonstrate it is important to introduce a diachronic perspective, *i.e.* to analyse their social trajectory. While doing this we will see that people from these different categories (which are also socially and historically constructed) have similar *habitus* (Bourdieu). However, my fieldwork is very specific: the Parisian suburb marked by a long-lasting equivalence between a worker social world and a communist political administration. It used to be called the ‘*banlieue rouge*’ (‘red suburbs’) from the early 1920s to the 1980s. Hence my last criticism: the gentrification models don’t take enough into account a possible location effect. Same social characteristics can have different consequences, can lead to different status depending on the place people live. This

part will be based on a long-lasting ethnographic approach (80 interviews and many participating observations). I have been studying more precisely the town of Saint-Denis in the Seine-Saint-Denis and Nanterre in the Hauts-de-Seine.

Finally I will conclude underlying the need of empirical researches and more especially ethnographic ones against artefacts that can be created by the use of concepts and paradigms without deconstructing them. A very inductive perspective enables to do so.