

Paul ATKINSON, *For Ethnography*, SAGE Publishing, London, 2015, ISBN-13: 978-1-8492-0608-2, 221 p.

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In analysing the dynamics of ethnographic research, Paul Atkinson's book offers an interesting insight into what such a scientific inquiry ought to be, in a manner that can prove to be useful no matter how familiar this research area might be to the reader. *For Ethnography* is not so much a practical guide about how to conduct ethnographic fieldwork, even though it offers quite a few significant references throughout its progression, but rather a method of thinking about social actors and social organization as a whole in a comparative and rewarding manner. As is stated in the *Introduction*, Atkinson's inspiration comes not only from Marcel Mauss's lectures, which are the reason behind his more traditional approach regarding research methods, but also from his strong belief that ethnography involves a sense of commitment and curiosity towards social worlds that can, in turn, enrich the investigation with a 'qualitative' dimension. The issue of qualitative research is a recurrent theme of the book, especially in regard to the problematic nature of interviews and focus groups that, according to Atkinson, cannot qualify as proper ethnographic research material. The main problem is that they lack a long-term dedication and involvement in one particular social structure – that is to say, in its chronological development and the changes it undergoes – and are thus always in danger of becoming descriptions of personal experiences rather than scientifically accurate analyses.

Having established certain coordinates of the ethnographic field, the book's next chapter provides the reader with some of the general perspectives of ethnography. Hence, the emphasis is on the need to provide an analytic framework on which to base the research, namely an array of ideas from which to envision possible outcomes. Unsurprisingly, taking into consideration the adopted

methodology is directly linked to the process of collecting data and its subsequent analysis, as Atkinson states:

Data, irrespective of their physical form, are something to think with and think through. We interact with the data. In doing so, we need to bring ideas *to* the data as well as trying to derive ideas *from* them. But since these ideas are part of the cyclical process of field research it follows that we need to bring ideas to the field. (p.11)

Furthermore, the ethnographer must exercise caution when addressing the dangers of ‘paradigms’ (most notably the postmodernist ones). He/she must resist the temptation to fit in a previously established set of interpretations that could alter his/her mindset in regard to the structures of everyday life he/she is observing. Here, Atkinson makes a strong case about the way everyday life is organized, highlighting time and time again the socially shared practices which make everyday life possible: the conventions and competences that generate regularities and patterns in which active social actors – in the context used by Atkinson: people – perform.

In order to give a sense of guidance for the ethnographer, the book outlines some initial scholarly commitments that can be summed up, using Atkinson’s own terms, as follows: everyday life is skilful, physical, symbolic, enacted locally, performed, it unfolds over time, it takes place in specific locations, it is conducted through material artefacts and it is dialectical, inasmuch as it is socially constructed. Each of these apparently commonplace considerations is then treated and further problematized independently, offering depth to the reader’s understanding of ethnographic fieldwork. Moreover, they outline the principle of orderliness that prevails in the social world, which the ethnographer should regard as one of its fundamental principles, along with the principle of reflexivity, which depicts the social reality’s co-constructed nature. Following the arguments in the book, the interaction between the ethnographer and the social world helps generate the analysed phenomena, but not in such a manner that this could affect the research itself or compromise the results. In fact, these encounters are responsible for generating a process of learning.

Paying attention to the basic principles that organize everyday life, the third chapter is devoted to the researcher’s fieldwork commitments. More specifically, the

chapter focuses on the ways in which ethnography can benefit from a multi-modal approach, since it offers the possibility of taking into consideration different modes of cultural configurations. Additionally, it emphasizes the importance of observation and participation, understood as the human ability of regarding the world through the eyes of the other, as well as the necessity for multiple skills and technologies to ensure that this vision is attainable. The following chapter, *Analytic Perspectives*, is devoted to the issue of *grounded theory*. Atkinson formulates the critique that this theory can deflect the attention from the important purposes of ethnography when these kind of ideas are no longer perceived as *heuristic*, but as *prescriptive*.

Furthermore, the book goes on to develop a more practical aspect, as the next chapters are structured on specific elements that constitute fieldwork. For example, the chapter *Interaction and the specific order* depicts not only the various social orders that exist and overlap, but also the order of interaction which is independent from them and to which the ethnographer must pay special attention. As a result, the focus is now on the way in which social actors enact different types of patterned behaviours and the researcher's ability to observe and interpret them. Atkinson points out the necessity of distinguishing between personal experiences – that is to say, individual behaviours – and collectively shaped social rituals:

In other words, the ritual and ceremonial order is one of patterned structured activity. It is not just a matter of improvised action that is created *de novo*. And it is certainly not a matter of formless personal experience. It is grounded in socially shared conventions that shape and frame action, that give form to collective identity-work. They are *situations* in every sense. (p.87)

Similarly, special attention is dedicated to the linguistic dimension of ethnographic fieldwork throughout the following chapter, which analyses the importance of narratives while researching socially constructed worlds. The principle of orderliness prevails once again, as the main point made concerns the innate structures of every story, of which the most significant is the *structure of plausibility*. Nevertheless, narratives should not be regarded as a means of access to personal experiences that belong to or are generated by *the other*. There are plenty of arguments against such an approach throughout the chapter, as the purpose of ethnographic inquiry is to “understand how experience is framed, constructed,

shared and transmitted,” (p.102). Accordingly, this translates into the fluid nature of the subjects’ personalities, which by no means should be regarded as finished structures but rather as emergent ones. The question that arises here is how exactly this process occurs. Comparatively, the previously mentioned linguistic and narrative proliferations have a correspondent in the material mundane dimension, as exemplified in the chapter *Aesthetics, artefacts and techniques*, which can appear strangely fascinating to readers who are not accustomed with the findings of ethnographic fieldwork. Paying close attention to the aesthetic dimension of human existence is equally valuable in portraying complex social networks, therefore objects or material goods should be treated with the same kind of consideration and interest as any other embodiment of social existence. Here, Atkinson proposes the concept of *knowledge-in-action*, based on Mauss’s methodological theme of *technique*, which can be defined as linking “competence, skill, practical action and embodiment” (p.121).

Orderliness, the recurring theme of the book, is exemplified yet again by listing the mechanisms ethnography must comprehend in order to grasp the inner workings of social structures, but this time in regard to spatial and temporal dimensions. The most significant idea illustrated in this section of the book is not only that of shared frameworks of time and space, but also that of the significance that can be attached to places. Yet these frameworks, Atkinson argues, do not constitute background details for serious ethnographic research. Moreover, the connection between time and place can generate another path of inquiry that follows the concept of movement as an inherent quality of the social world, which is in constant change. There is a critically conscious approach regarding the traditional ethnographic fieldwork method of addressing the concept of movement. Atkinson is the first to admit that many valuable and classical ethnographic studies failed to properly address the matter of movement regarding social actors and their communities. From this perspective, he approaches interdisciplinary problematic areas and sheds light onto the complicated relationship between ethnography and history, referring to what he calls ethno-history or ethno-archaeology.

The last three chapters of the book return to a more reflexive and conceptual discourse, addressing the conventional form of representation of social worlds. In other words, conventions cannot be completely eluded and critical reflection upon one’s work remains a necessity. However, Atkinson completely disagrees with the

contemporary writing tendencies that fall into what he calls *the Romantic fallacy*, which is defined by a *mélange* of genres and includes literary forms of expressions which often emphasize the author's emotional experience in the fieldwork. He goes as far as exposing the dangers that lie beneath the auto-ethnographic direction:

The more we celebrate autoethnography, the greater the danger that we treat ourselves as being more interesting than the social worlds around us. The ethnographic imagination should be driven by an unswerving commitment to the view that whether we study familiar settings, or seek out strange social worlds, they are in principle interesting in their own right. They are not primarily vehicles for our own emotional responses, or blank canvases onto which we project our own anxieties and preoccupations. (p.166)

If the author/researcher is perceived as a Romantic figure, then, Atkinson suggests, what is being dealt with is a form of *sentimental realism*, which can confine the analytic prospects by replacing the *all-knowing analyst* with the *all-feeling auteur*. This does not serve the principles of ethnography at all. However, it brings into consideration the ethical nature of any scientific questioning. Therefore, the chapter dedicated to the ethics of ethnography argues that the commitment required to engage in fieldwork is based upon strong moral principles that are constantly assessed. (For example, it also makes a very interesting point about the biomedical model of ethics, which is also applied in the field of social research.) The main moral concern in this chapter is that of the informed consent, a simple measure used across a range of domains, yet problematic in the ethnographic fieldwork, which mainly deals with collective structures and less with individual actors. This also implies dealing with individualistic modes of enrolment and with the possible withdrawal of the social actors from ethnographic inquiries due to the strong membership principle. The author advocates for understanding protocol as a proper conduct of research, and emphasizes the idea of *values* rather than *procedures* as a more suitable approach to the social field, keeping in mind that the final goal of the researcher is to produce knowledge.

Finally, the conclusion of Atkinson's work discusses the present state of ethnographic research in the digital era, with a focus on the improvements regarding its visibility and availability. Not only does it help the researcher organize the data in

a more efficient way, but it also offers the possibility of creating different levels of interaction with the text in order to make it suitable for a broader audience. Combining virtual resources and technological advancements with his traditional, reflexive view of ethnographic fieldwork, Atkinson offers a glimpse into the future of ethnography while remaining committed to his quest of discovering new ways to perceive social worlds.