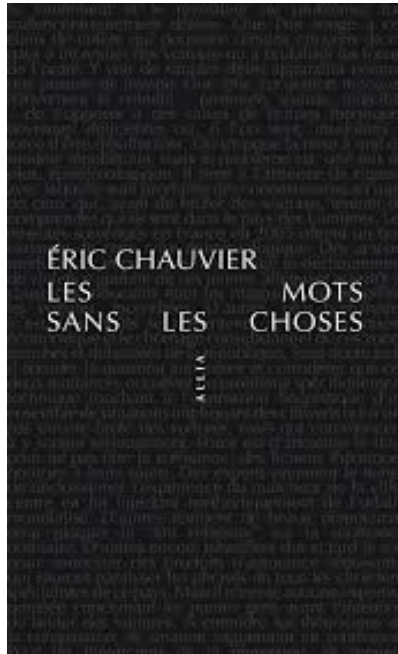


Seizing a pinhead with boxing gloves

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I have written this article on a caprice, and am fully aware that for most readers it will look incredibly childish and simplistic. I do not pretend to invent anything in these lines, and am afraid that I have failed at avoiding simplification in my reasoning. If such is the case, I do apologise for the more knowledgeable reader who, I hope, will not fail at correcting me.



Reading Eric Chauvier

I just emerged from the reading of one of these books that could completely change one's perspective on a topic. To be clearer, I just emerged from a text that manages to point to one insight you feel you were having for a long time, without being able to tell exactly what it is. Its title (it is a French text) is *Les mots sans les choses*, which could be translated either in *The disorder of things*, which would honour the pun with Michel Foucault's work, or more accurately in *Words without things*, which would honour the pun inherent to the thesis of the text. It has been written by a French anthropologist named Eric Chauvier, whose work I completely ignore. The book is short, only 120 pages, in a very small book. It took me two hours to read it with a lot of attention and it is not aiming at an academic audience. I have tried to express the feeling that leads the author to his development in one of my earlier articles, which was bluntly aiming at hurting my friends from "the left". I wrote this: "We need to stop repeating ourselves while we are doing nothing but moving wind. We need to stop thinking about domination, or 'capitalism' in terms of ideas, to start thinking about contexts and situations". I must say I was not quite as accurate as Chauvier's thesis, but goes in the same direction, although Chauvier does address a much broader audience than "the left". His point is rather straightforward, although it opens to much thought. To put it shortly, it is a text about a failing democracy and the impossibility of citizen engagement. The predicate that asserts an impossible politicisation of discourses, the blocking of public debates and the alienation of the citizens' thought is completely admitted by the text. Thus, it could be one of these many essays about democracy that complains on how the stupidity of the people leads it to believe populist fictions and how much we ("we" being the academic, experts, and professionals of politics) should be a wall against that wave of imbecility and inculture. Rather, it states exactly the contrary: the modern citizen, states Chauvier, is not lacking culture on politics and the society, but exactly the contrary. We ("we" being modern citizens) are on the contrary saturated with keywords and fictions that we are collectively using without ever being able to relate these fictions to our actual experience. We are all too busy talking about "sustainable development; politically correct; domination; exclusion; economic freedom; right to the city; global citizenship; governance; religious facts; terrorism; insecurity; racism and global cities" to actually refer to what it is we actually live and experience every day. Our alienation does therefore not come from a lack of culture, or from a lack of terminology or concepts, but rather from a saturation of culture that leads us to being absolutely unable to talk about things. And, also argues Chauvier, this over-saturation is not linked to a lack of involvement of social sciences in the public debate, but to

its use as a pool of ready-made expressions that are directly imported in the public debate and used to conceive and describe fictions.

Let me take an example based on a work I realised a couple of years ago. I will try as much as I can to avoid conceiving a heroic version of my own experience. I wanted to work on gated communities. I was literally fascinated by the thing, to the point that I started fantasising my own research: I was going to go to the heart of domination, which I considered (and still consider) as being first and foremost a spatial phenomenon. Thinking about what I got to conceive not as “gated communities” but rather as “residential enclosure” leads you naturally to a certain number of authors and, among which a duo of scholars, Mary Gail Snyder and Edward Blakely, and an author, Mike Davis. From these authors, emerge a certain number of concepts, such as security communities, residential fortresses, urban segregation, the privatisation of cities, urban fear, and so forth. Going on the field, as many students in social sciences such as I have experienced, leads to the traumatic experience of being absolutely unable to connect what I observed to these mental images of the object I had the intention to study (and I had been warned of that by a preventive supervisor). No matter how hard I looked and tried, there was no such thing as a quest for kinship or community in the condos I was working on. Paranoia was very much absent of the discourses of my informants. Actually, even the actual enclosure of the condos I was working on was very much a fiction, for I could come and go as I pleased without being actually blocked anywhere. What is extremely paradoxical was that, reading Blakely and Snyder a second time, enlightened by this experience, I could start realising that they had exactly the same problem, realising that their title (*Fortress America*) didn't fit their object (which was actually much closer to “Strainer America”). Nevertheless, the object handcuffed us all (“us all” being not only the people who have studied enclosure scientifically, but also the people who live with enclosure every day, and those who talk about it the media or in their everyday discussions) into talking about something we knew was fictitious: the iron law of the public debate forces us to exchanging about “the urban segregation” or “the destruction of the social link”, about “the privatisation of cities” or about “the militarisation of space”, while what we see is different.

Chauvier gives several examples close to that one, but in his own experience. He shows for instance how one of his informants, who comes from a popular neighbourhood in France and is included in a rehabilitation programme after having been concerned by addiction to marijuana and drug dealing as a teenager is bound to connecting his answer to the question “What do you want to do later?” to an externalised reference, by saying systematically “[sigh] event organising [sigh]”. Not “I want to organise events”, or “I want to organise concerts”: “I note as well the sighs that mark the opening and end of his sentence, bringing the proof that he is not thrilled by the perspective he offers himself. The absence of a reference to any context also keeps the attention. What is he talking about, exactly? [...] Nobody knows. Even he doesn't know when he starts talking. [...] Younes is not lying to himself: he doesn't talk to express his own difficult experience of the social world, but to satisfy the adults who evaluate him in this institution where he has been accepted *in extremis*. He could as well explain he wants to force air into a perforated pipe. [...] Thus the process of diffusion of theoretical fictions takes shape: forged in the spheres of research, they are then calibrated by specialists in marketing before ending up in the popular neighbourhoods as an anguished commentary of a fantasy life”.

The consequences for social sciences

Of course Chauvier's reflexion is absolutely not new, as he recalls himself by quoting Ludwig Wittgenstein, Pierre Bourdieu or Emile Durkheim who all have expressed, according to him, the same concerns for the ways in which the social sciences can end up being factories of empty terms to be used to describe a “fantasy world”. Herbert Blumer, one of the most insightful sociologists of the “School of Chicago” expressed exactly the same concerns than Chauvier in his article “What is wrong with social theory?”: “[Social theory's] divorcement with the empirical world is glaring. To an preponderant extent it is compartmentalized into a world of its own, inside which it feeds on itself. [...] Its lifeline is primary exegesis – a critical examination of prior theoretical schemes, the translation of old ideas into a new vocabulary, and the occasional addition of a new notion as a result of reflection on other theories”. The answer to that problem was, for Blumer, exactly the same as it is for Chauvier: in order for social sciences to be scientific, that is, in order for them to be connected to empirical experience, the work must be oriented toward the concepts we use.

Let us go back to the case of political science. It is amazing to see how many students, authors, or even worldly recognised political scientists manage to write books and articles about “governance”, “the state”, “policing” or about “structuration theory” without getting out of that paradoxical situation, which is that they are working on something that had been defined, conceptualised, thought of and developed out of any reference to its actual forms, before going “out there” to see what it actually looks like. Of course, when I say this, I do by no mean try to say that all people working on such themes are forcibly doing that mistake; neither do I say that I am not making it myself in my own work, while this is very much what I do when I intend to work on “Palestinian refugee camps”, “space”, and “social movements” while taking all these objects are perfect givens. This is not due to a lack of capacity for me or anyone else to be a good social scientist. Rather, it is linked to a collective illusion we social scientists have built over a very long period of time and that has led us to make a perfect confusion between what we talk about conceptually and the real world. Take a central object to political science

such as “power”. I can very much give a definition of power, based on Max Weber’s work, in which case I would define it as the capacity for a man to realise his will and impose it to other people’s will, even when these people resist this will. Or I could use Michel Foucault’s study of the phenomenon and point out how power is not only applied via violent means, but intertwined into relations of self-control and scientific discourses. And so forth. But in no case would I have faced the actual expression of feeling of a power. As Chauvier recalls, the concept of dog does not bark.



The risk here is pretty clear, and it is to substitute to the experiences we witness in our work a set of concepts that would empty the richness of the real. This is a thing that is told very early into the career of a student in social sciences. I can very much talk about the fact that, in the city where I live, the inhabitants have been replaced by students coming from foreign countries, that the renewal of the city makes the former inhabitants move in remote neighbourhoods or villages, and that the memory of these people is destroyed as the landmarks that remind that they someday inhabited the place are physically erased from the landscape in terms of “capitalist domination” or of “geographies of inequality”. But what would it tell of the actual life of these people? I would by the strength of things erase their experience and replace it with a formatted discourse that would literally mean nothing to them. Scientifically, I would simply have made a situation fit into a concept that would go unchanged out of it and, therefore, produced no sort of new knowledge and, hence, not done my job. Eric Chauvier has a very talkative metaphor to describe this relation to our objects: we are trying to seize a pinhead with boxing gloves.

Methodologically, we have three enemies, which we know very well. The first one is deductive thinking, which consists in deciding that we are going to work on an object, developing a theoretical model to answer our question, testing it, maintaining our pre-set object at all cost, and use the field (when we do go on the field) to prove that we already knew all about our object before going. This is a fictitious vision of science which is based, as shown by Bruno Latour in his work on the production of knowledge in the natural sciences, on the mystification natural scientists have to conceive to make their own work sensible. The second enemy is over-arching theories that “fit” everywhere: Chauvier takes the example of “care” or of Saskia Sassen’s work on “global cities”. These theories, argues the author, have the quality of being sufficiently abstract to be applicable to more or less every situation. This is very much the criticism that was made by Karl Popper in his criticism of “total” theories, or by Howard Becker when talking about theories: try to describe five minutes of your life, says the author, with a single sociological theory, such as system theory or the theory of relative deprivation. You will easily find that it does simply not fit, either because these theories would require considerable modifications of you experience for it to fit in it, or because they were not designed as ways to describe the social life in general, but as fictions to describe complex phenomena. Finally, the third enemy is hypotheses. This is more complicated to situate: we always have hypotheses, as explained by Howard Becker in his *Tricks of the trade*. We have mental images. If I think of working on a Palestinian refugee camp in Beirut, they immediately emerge: small maze-like streets, women wearing veils, men displaying keys around their necks, street vendors yelling “Shake hands!” to get passers to look at their merchandise, posters of Yasser Arafat, and so forth. As a sociologist, I also have a set of scientific mental images: state of exception, the importance of informal economies, the absence of a state authority leading to a conflictive definition of space, and so forth. These mental images correspond to crypto-hypotheses: would I not formalise my thought in terms of clear questions and hypotheses, then I would merely rely on these images and therefore be led by my own prejudices. But by formalising them, I risk falling into the trap of conceptualised prejudices, which have much more weight and authority than my previous ones. In other words, I would risk finding exactly what I was looking for. On the field, surprise and disappointment, as well as being proved wrong, are not the sign of a mistake, but of a success.

The consequences for the public debate

I need to be extremely clear here: everything I am saying is, for most social scientists I know, a perfect obviousness and has in no way any sort of originality. It has been told to them a hundred times, and will be said another thousand at least. We all agree that it is the case. Yet, we cannot refrain from not applying it. Research projects on pre-selected objects follow one another and, as Chauvier reminds it, are designed to fit pre-set frameworks that are conceived to prevent any form of inductive reasoning. When applying to a scholarship or presenting a project, a researcher in social sciences needs to have integrated that he is almost expected to know what he or she will be finding before starting to search for it. And that is when he or she does not simply apply to a project in which what they are going to find has not already been set by the instance funding the research. Research on urban governance is an exceptional example on that matter, as scholars are not expected to define what “governance” might well be (which, actually, nobody knows), but to test, in the case of a very specific city, whether the forms of power in place do or do not fit the framework of “good governance” (governance is good or it isn’t, as one of my teachers used to say). Explaining, in the case of such a project, how the term “governance” is a ready-made term used to substitute to urban government a form of power essentially based on the absence of conflict, the call of private actors to manage public services, and the de-politicisation of urban politics, and that therefore developing urban governance would be the worst thing to do in the case of the agglomeration studied, would be a complete anachronism.

In this context, yet another French intellectual, Franck Lepage, explains how social sciences end up serving as I wrote before as a pool of ready-made meaningless terms: the works of sociologists on “good governance” will lead to a “scientificisation” of power, implementing the need for associations which want to obtain funding to fit the framework of “good governance”, and to integrate the discourse on it, even though this discourse has absolutely no meaning for them and what they try to achieve, in the same way as making “[sigh] event organising [sigh]” had no meaning for the marijuana-smoking teenager in Chauvier’s example. Lepage’s mistake is to assume, as he says in his conferences, that “They [‘they’ being the dominant classes] are taking our words away, and changing them with others”, as if there was a conscious or semi-conscious plan seeking at realising this phenomenon, and as if the matter was simply to replace one discourse with the other. Such is not the case. Rather, it is our relation to discourse which is problematic. As citizens, we have taken the use of talking politics in a mock-up of the language used by the professionals of politics. We do rarely talk of our actual experience of unemployment, but quite easily of unemployment as an external category to which we attempt to make the everyday stories we have access to fit.

Therefore, the public debate is also eating itself as well, and therefore the political, as an activity but also as a part of society, loses its meaning. Henri Lefebvre had included in his political and scientific approaches the idea that the social should be observed in the everyday experience of actors. Since the creation of the USSR, he argued, did not manage to change the everyday practices of Soviet citizens, it was not a revolution. A similar phenomenon is taking place in the relation I have to the political as a citizen: the words of the political world, as a whole (that is, from the radical left to the radical right) simply do not fit what experience I have in situation. I live something that can be approached to the destruction of the lived space by capitalist hegemony, and therefore can lure myself into believing that what is experience is exactly that, but I am lying to myself. My friend is living something that does, if we make the abstraction of everything else, fit the narrative according which the situation she has faced in the street at a certain moment does resemble the idea of a structural patriarcalism, but not quite perfectly. Our problem is that we do not manage to distinguish between these convenient stories and the experiences we have. We tend on considering talking politics in pragmatic terms somewhat dirty, inconvenient, or inappropriate. We prefer the alienating language that presents us smooth, clean, and convenient story. As a feminist militant with whom I was having that discussion once said, it is clear that no such thing as patriarcalism actually exists, but it is so reassuring to be able to look at one’s situation and say “This is the fault of patriarcalism!”, would it only be to have someone to blame for a violent or traumatic experience.

Playing the game of the situations

The point here is not to attribute blames. There could be many: the professionalization of the political activity, the normalisation of the procedures of research, the domination of specialised actors in public forums that leads to the necessity of talking like a professional to take part in actual discussion, the replacement of the public debate by public participations, the fear of a conflictive society, and so forth. All these ideas and theories could be discussed, tested and developed. Doing so is not my place. I am not a political thinker, and I must face the depressing platitude of my reasoning so far (thankfully, this blog does not aim anything more developed than that). The only answer is to play fully the game of situations: rather than exchanging on “societal phenomena” or “structural changes of society”, let us talk of local issues. Let us valorise the experience of actors, instead of accumulating their stories to compare them with the narratives we already have at hand. It is an extremely consensual answer, and everyone already uses it. It is nevertheless surprising that in both academia and the case of left-wing politics, which I was concerned by when I started writing my first article, this very easy to express agenda is so hard to actually apply.