

Bodily Resistance. Towards an Ethnography of Infamy

International Conference, Saint-Etienne, 3-6 November 2015

ANR SOCIORESIST – Centre Max Weber – Ecole Supérieure d'Art et Design

Summary

This conference aims to document the inextricably social and private experience of infamous accusations, which condense the effects of degrading labels. Various ways of discrediting people – such as racism, sexual discrimination, performative constructions of “abnormality”, and contempt for caste or class – often focus on the body and its constitution, its appearance, and its uses. Where the most discredited subjects are concerned, a large part of their day-to-day lives remains unknown once it is hidden behind a veil of stereotypes and prejudice. Ethnography can lift the edge of this veil by rendering accessible the lives of those who seem, at first sight, to be dominated. It is a question of describing the corridors of power that lie beneath the level of social movements and mobilizations, where those who have the least possibility for action nonetheless struggle to exist, to maintain their dignity, and sometimes even to resist, through their bodies.

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Presentation

While in Michel Foucault's work, infamy was embodied in the micro-history of the unfortunate and unworthy anonymous figures that bore its stigma, Erving Goffman's inquiries showed that notions of the "abnormal" and the "stigmatised" refer less to people than to how they are perceived by the social world that describes and discredits them. From this perspective, while "power relations permeate the interior of bodies" (Michel Foucault), these bodies cannot simply be reduced to corporeal receptacles doomed to passively endure domination. When members of subaltern groups come up against the adversity of the forces that dominate, regulate, discipline or stigmatise them, they do of course experience the impact of the full weight of the world, but some nonetheless remain aware of the impact their actions can have on that world.

The key issue at stake in our reflection will be the different confrontations with forms of power – including bypassing, refusing, and avoiding it – that emerge somewhere between enduring and acting. Just as people are often discredited on a corporal level, their responses are also often grounded in the body, a body that no longer appears to embody a denigrated Otherness but rather is the bedrock of opposition or, sometimes, of an attempt to "reverse the stigma" (Erving Goffman). What shapes does this take and what are the effects? Does resistance only exist when there is a visible movement, or are there other ways to proceed? Ultimately, how is resistance embodied and with what consequences? Do these consequences extend to the fact of investigating and revealing previously hidden ways of functioning, stratagems, tactics, and strategies of opposition?

As well as those mentioned above, a certain number of studies focusing on the lived experience of subalternity also address these issues, which question the very foundations of the link between the body and resisting adversity. Among the most recent, there is Eliane de Latour's photographic survey of the "night girls" in Abidjan – prostitutes who embody a femininity that is forever soiled in their country. By accepting to pose for the anthropologist, these young women transform the image of their body into a stage for resisting infamy. Rooted in their soiled flesh, presumed incapable of any beauty except on the market, this new way of presenting themselves allows their identity and its features to re-emerge from behind the interchangeable masks of girls available for paid sex.

This emphasis placed on the agency of the most powerless was already present, with some variations, in Veena Das's work on the India of the "untouchables", where the corporeality of the latter represents their lower status and all the disgust they inspire among members of higher castes. Understanding how gestures of resistance are nonetheless born from the greatest situations of domination was also one of the main questions addressed by James Scott when he endeavoured to describe the "infra-politics of subaltern groups". From Malay peasant resistance to memoirs of slavery, Scott cross-referenced documents and sources to show how refusal takes body and shape, and edges its way into the interstitial spaces of power.

Paul Gilroy, for his part, has traced these cracks in the edifice of domination and identified the Black Atlantic as the geocultural matrix for racism, embodied by the "Africanity" deported along the routes of the transatlantic slave trade. A Black Atlantic where it is the body that bears the stigma of containment and slavery, carried over into the literary or artistic expressions developed by those who now, in our modernity, live with the legacy of these ordeals. While they endeavour to reverse the infamy, they also draw from its depths the energy for their struggle and a powerful creativity grounded in an almost organic relationship to the memory of all those who were deprived of freedom without totally losing their subjectivity. This subjectivity remains nonetheless split by a double consciousness, both black and white. It was W.E.B. Du Bois who first taught us that this was created on the side of the "dominated", along the dividing line between bodies and colours. In this way, the daily experience of such a dividing line allowed them to draw all the relevant sociological conclusions regarding the difference of phenotypes.

From slavery to the containment of bodies, Lorna Rhodes's work questions "total confinement" – an extreme experience that combines incarceration and self-degradation in mental health units and maximum security prisons. This work finds an extremely relevant echo in Jane Evelyn Atwood's photographic research with female prisoners, Parisian prostitutes, dying AIDS patients, and children in Haïti. Here, the theme of great exclusion and its infamy remains established in both picture and prose, but from a point of view that restores the strength – and often the resistance – of the most discredited. This perspective can also be seen in some of Frederick Wiseman's film work, as well as in the portraits of punks, skinheads, travellers, and squatters by photographer and anthropologist Ralf Marsaut, who has worked for thirty years in the interstitial and marginal urban spaces of London, Paris, and Berlin.

The list of research and associated notions mentioned above is not exhaustive and can be supplemented at length. Regarding the logic bringing together these diverse inquiries linking the body, resistance, and infamy, the concept of “intersectionality” will be brought to bear on our reflection. We will consider the relationships between adversity, domination, and resistance at the intersection of gender, class, and race. In addition to these three comprehensive categories, it is also necessary to add the dividing, or disputed, line between different expressions of what is “normal” and what is “pathological”. This division seems to be a cultural structure of social division – or an elementary form of classification – that is often forgotten in this regard. Finally, a fifth dimension to our reflection will focus on analysing representations of infamy. Through body, text, and image, it will be a question of probing the act of inquiry and the mediums through which accounts of this act are provided. What does the image reveal? What is inscribed in the text? What is produced by their encounter with the lives they re-present? In this regard, work in visual anthropology will be particularly welcome.

Consequently, the conference discussions will be organised around five lines of research focusing on the following themes:

1. Dangerous castes or classes: stigmatised bodies and dealing with sullied identities
2. The dividing line of colour: facing infamous constructions of “race”
3. The dividing line of difference in the body: resisting gender assignations?
4. Ab-normal, in body and soul: pathologising, “total experience”, and emancipation
5. Representations of infamy: resisting through body, image, and text.

Proposals submitted should be positioned above all within one of these themes. However, while the aim of the latter is to give some structure to our debates, they should not be seen as setting impermeable boundaries between the different aspects of our reflection. Much work questioning “gender” has something to say about the “normal”, the “pathological” or the experience of “race”, and vice versa. Having advocated “intersectionality” as an approach, it would indeed be a contradiction in terms to then isolate the different contributing elements in the encounters that we have yet to experience and think through.

Presentations should last 20 minutes.

The working languages of the conference are French and English.

A selection of papers will be published following the conference.

Submission Procedure

The first page of proposals should provide the authors' full details: status, university and/or research laboratory, postal address, email address, and telephone number (preferably mobile).

The second page should be anonymous and no longer than **300 words max**. It should:

- provide a specific title;
- briefly describe the study on which the paper is based (priority will be given to ethnographic work);
- identify a problem that relates directly to the conference topic;
- outline a few results from the perspective of at least one of the five themes around which the conference debates will be organised.

The deadline for submissions is **5/01/2015 (January 5, 2015)**.

Proposals should be submitted online at the following address:

<http://resistcorps2015.sciencesconf.org/>

Notification of the scientific committee's decision will be given after **15/02/2015**.

The full conference paper should be sent to the organisers no later than **15/06/2015**.

Organising committee:

- Sarah ARNAL, drawer, engraver, in charge of the printing and publishing division, École supérieure d'art et design de Saint-Etienne (ESADSE)
- Jérôme BEAUCHEZ, sociologist, Centre Max Weber (UMR CNRS 5283), université Jean Monnet, Saint-Etienne
- Sandrine BINOUX, photographer, in charge of the photography division, École supérieure d'art et design de Saint-Etienne (ESADSE)
- Fabrice FERNANDEZ, sociologist, Centre Max Weber (UMR CNRS 5283), université Jean Monnet, Saint-Etienne
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- Kader MOKKADEM, professor of philosophy and aesthetics, co-director of the research laboratory Images-Récits-Documents (IRD), École supérieure d'art et design de Saint-Etienne (ESADSE)
- Jean-Claude PAILLASSON, graphic designer, film-maker, professor of art education, and co-director of the research laboratory Images-Récits-Documents (IRD), École supérieure d'art et design de Saint-Etienne (ESADSE)
- Jacques ROUX, sociologist and scenographer, Centre Max Weber (UMR CNRS 5283), université Jean Monnet, Saint-Etienne
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Scientific committee (all members of the organizing committee, and):

- Carolina KOBELINSKY, anthropologist, École des hautes études hispaniques et ibériques, Casa de Velázquez, Madrid (Spain)
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- Meryem SELLAMI, anthropologist, university of Tunis (Tunisia)
- Marielle TOULZE, anthropologist and photographer, Centre Max Weber (UMR CNRS 5283), université Jean Monnet, Saint-Etienne

Institutional partners : Agence nationale de la recherche (French National Research Agency) ; Centre Max Weber ; Université Jean Monnet ; Université de Lyon ; École supérieure d'art et de design de Saint Etienne ; Laboratoire Images – Récits – Documents ; École normale supérieure de Lyon ; Institut des sciences de l'homme ; Centre national de la recherche scientifique (National Center for Scientific Research).

Practical information:

The conference will be held at the Cité du Design (3 Rue Javelin Pagnon, 42000 Saint-Étienne, France) November 3 – 6, 2015. For further information:

<http://www.citedudesign.com/en/home/>

The following registration fees apply:

- Post-holding academics: 50 euros.
- Doctoral students, post-doctoral researchers and unemployed researchers: no fee.

Travel and accommodation expenses are to be met by participants.

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