



A case for critical ethnography. Rethinking the early years of the AIDS epidemic in South Africa



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Available online 5 June 2013

Keywords:

South Africa
HIV/AIDS
Ethnography
Critique: controversy

ABSTRACT

The epidemic of AIDS in South Africa has been characterized not only by its rapid progression but also its impassioned controversies. Retrospectively examining a long-term anthropological project and discussing some reactions it elicited, the paper proposes a defense and illustration of a critical ethnography at three moments of the research. Ethnography is first discussed as fieldworks, proposing an alternative to the horizontal multi-sited approach via a vertical multi-layered method using various scales and locations, and thus connecting the disease endured by patients in townships and former homelands with the heated debates in scientific and political forums: this procedure substitutes a political economy of the disease for its cultural and behavioral interpretations. Ethnography is then discussed as writing, suggesting acknowledgment of the social intelligence of the agents as well as the need for a scientific distance: this principle allows the articulation of the objective historical condition of the individuals and their subjective experience of history, both revealed in the development of the epidemic. Ultimately ethnography is considered from the perspective of its afterlife, that is, the continuous process of its translation by readers and commentators, on the one hand, by the author trying to reach beyond the boundaries of the academic realm, on the other, the work of anthropology appearing as a living object open to public conversation and consequently a resource for knowledge and action.

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Looking into dragons, not domesticating or abominating them, nor drowning them in vats of theory, is what anthropology has been all about... It has been the office of others to reassure; ours to unsettle.

Clifford Geertz, *Available Light*, 2000

Introduction

In July 2000, *The New York Review of Books* published a long article entitled 'The Mystery of AIDS in South Africa'. The author, Helen Epstein, is a renowned journalist, trained in molecular biology and public health, who at the time had extensively written on medical topics and was increasingly focusing on HIV in the developing world. The paper started with the enumeration of the social plagues affecting South Africa, providing numerous vivid details about insecurity, crime, rapes, burglaries, and suggesting that this situation had generated a 'sense of suspicion and paranoia' which 'informed the country's policies, including its response

to the greatest health threat in its history'. She was obviously referring to the HIV epidemic whose prevalence, based on antenatal screening, was estimated around 20% of the adult population, thus making South Africa the nation most severely struck worldwide, with more than four million people infected. The author proceeded to explain what had been the country's response to this tragic challenge.

As is widely known today, the South African government, and more specifically the president, Thabo Mbeki, who succeeded Nelson Mandela in 1999, and his two consecutive health ministers, Nkosazana Zuma and Manto Tshabalala-Msimang, adopted an heterodox approach to AIDS under the influence of dissident scientists, mostly from the United States, who had their heyday in the late 1980s when their contestation of the emerging medical consensus over the role of HIV in the production and dissemination of the disease received the support of gay organizations (Fassin, 2007a). A decade later, the disarray of the South African political authorities facing an unprecedented progression of the epidemic therefore made them vulnerable to ideas that seemed then definitively discredited and abandoned, but benefitted via these new believers a second public life, facilitated by the fact that their promoters had adapted their interpretive model, substituting recreational drugs, undoubtedly more relevant in the Californian

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environment than in the African context, with malnutrition and poverty, a much more attractive explanation for certain politicians who had spent their life combating apartheid.

According to these theories, the role of the virus was anecdotal, if not inexistent, and the antiretroviral drugs were strictly ineffective at best, highly toxic at worst. As a consequence, the global pharmaceutical industry was seen as cynically taking advantage of the African countries and their populations, while the international scientific community appeared as complicit in this criminal plot. The practical repercussions of this conspiratorial view were that the government held back the implementation of drugs to treat patients or prevent the mother-to-child transmission of the virus, which were in an experimental phase in several Third World sites where clinical trials were conducted, and brought its support to alternative investigations, including traditional remedies like beetroot and new drugs such as Virodene, which was soon discovered to be a quack medication. South Africa was certainly not the first country on the continent where this sort of ideas and policies developed, but the intensity of the polemic and the severity of the epidemic made it a unique case (Fassin, 2007b). It almost immediately received international attention since the first international conference on AIDS to be held outside of the Western world took place in Durban in July 2000 at the climax of the global controversy. This is when Helen Epstein published her paper.

Presenting the results of her pugnacious inquiry into the most obscure recesses of South African medicine, and in particular of her obstinate quest of the findings of a troubling clinical trial conducted by a local private pharmaceutical company, she progressively cloaked the whole health system and political realm with an atmosphere of strangeness: when the director of the Medical Research Council arrived one hour late to an appointment and refused to give her the details of the programs carried out at his institution, she felt she had “come to a land of fairy tale”, and as she listened to the President on television dodging questions about his beliefs, she compared the science and politics of AIDS to “some mystical Hebrew text” susceptible to diverse interpretations. Ironically, she noted, having come to South Africa to explore the conspiracy theories of its political leaders, she became herself entangled in the presumed arcane world of HIV medicine, suspecting a plot that would involve the highest authorities of the country, as if everybody seemed to be “hiding something”. Her poignant narrative ended with the tragic vision of “a nation haunted by death and ruined lives”, of which she admitted having only visited, during the three weeks she spent there, the offices of politicians and scientists and the home of a couple living with AIDS in a township.

Interestingly, at the end of her paper, Helen Epstein mentions the comment made by the man sitting next to her in the airplane that returned her to the United States after this short and frustrating visit to South Africa. A salesman working for a CT scanning machines company, he cryptically stated, as she was evoking her setbacks and misfortunes: “It’s political. Everything is political in South Africa”. However, the journalist perhaps fails to grasp the meaning of these enigmatic sentences, for lack of something many in her profession complained not to have in spite of it being decisive for the comprehension of social phenomena: time. “*Il faut laisser du temps au temps*” (one must leave time to time) was the famous leitmotiv of former French president François Mitterrand. The lesson should be remembered. Time: the word can be apprehended in its dual dimension of duration and temporality. There is the time of the inquiry. It is perhaps what defines best the ethnographic work: the long duration of the presence not only for the practical reasons of the time needed to carry out interviews and observation but also for epistemological ones having to do with the time necessary to gather sufficient knowledge of the situation, the trust of one’s interlocutors, the understanding of the larger picture and

specific stakes. And there is the time of society. It is the time of history and memory, of social structures and social change: it involves a multiple layering of various time frames, the incorporation of the past into the present, not immediately perceptible but deeply embedded.

The argument I want to defend here is that, being more attentive to this dual temporal dimension, ethnography can contribute to the comprehension of what may have seemed at first sight a “mystery”, that is, the play of irrational social forces. More specifically, I will consider ethnography from three complementary perspectives, which follow one another in the process of the research: fieldwork corresponds to the initial moment, that of being present in the field, interacting with people, and collecting data; writing comes next, with the work of interpretation and communication it supposes; the afterlife of ethnography resides in its translation, appropriation and transformation in the public sphere. My investigation on AIDS in South Africa was conducted between 2000 and 2007. My book *When Bodies Remember* and most of my papers on the subject have been published between 2002 and 2009. So the present reflection is largely retrospective – looking backward into an anthropological moment. Taking advantage of the time elapsed and of the reactions elicited by my work, I hope to draw more general lessons about ethnography and its political significance. But two caveats might be necessary here. Firstly, in order to make my demonstration clearer, I will start each section with the critical comment of a reviewer of the book and will try to address the more general point that is made through it. My responses are not meant to dismiss these statements but on the contrary to take them seriously and attempt to dispel the misunderstanding they reveal. Secondly, the decision to build my defense of a critical ethnography on my own work does not proceed from an egocentric self-indulgence. Rather, I believe that one can present better the sort of argument I propose on the basis of one’s own experience of the research and its reception.

Ethnography as critical fieldworks

Following a paradigm historically invented by Bronislaw Malinowski (1922) and poetically reframed by Claude Lévi-Strauss (1992), the power and charm of ethnography resides in the participant observation of a given society or group or even individuals, in their local environment, which can be a village, neighborhood or laboratory. According to this model, there is, as in the classical theater, a unity of time and place, which is supposed to guarantee the intimacy of the relationship with the natives, whether peasants, proletarians, or biologists, and the depth of the apprehension of their culture, respectively rural, urban, or scientific. This practice of fieldwork remains dominant, and it has indeed its coherence and strength. But ethnography has diversified its method in recent years, frequently distancing itself from such a unitary approach. In particular, multi-sited ethnography has been proposed by George Marcus (1995) to examine problems and processes with a global extension, therefore necessitating transnational observation in various locations susceptible to revealing networks and circulation of people, goods and ideas, such as in Nancy Scheper-Hughes’s study of international organ trafficking (2004). This multi-sited research can be described as horizontal, in the sense that it has a geographical extension. A distinct way of considering the multiplicity of sites of observation is vertical, meaning that in a given society one studies several levels or places. Whereas the horizontal approach displays a variety of locations, the vertical one reveals a diversity of perspectives. I conceived my research on AIDS in South Africa in accordance with the latter design, alternating observations in townships of the Johannesburg area and former homelands of the Limpopo province with fieldwork in political events and scientific meetings.

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