LOST IN TRANSLATION? WHAT ETHNOGRAPHIC WORKS TELL US ABOUT POLITICAL PARTIES: A CRITICAL REVIEW OF THE FRENCH LITERATURE

LOST IN TRANSLATION? LO QUE LOS TRABAJOS ETNOGRÁFICOS NOS DICEN DE LOS PARTIDOS POLÍTICOS: UNA REVISION CRÍTICA DE LA LITERATURA FRANCESA

Carole Bachelot

Université de Lille. Centre de Recherches et d'Analyses Politiques et Sociales (CERAPS)
carole.bachelot@univ-lille.fr
ORCID ID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1940-1985

Abstract

In the extensive literature on political parties, the ethnographic method appears to be scarcely used. Since the pioneering work by Michels, which to some extent relied (albeit implicitly) on "participant observation", this approach suffered a long eclipse in the English-language literature. Nowadays, international research favors the confrontation of big datasets, whether relating to membership, leadership, organizational reforms, or programmatic contents. The recent blossoming of a "political ethnography" (Auyero, Joseph and Mahler 2007) in sociology and anthropology departments in the United States has mainly benefited analysis of social movements. Applied to parties, it is ultimately in French works that the ethnographic approach has been most used; indeed, it constitutes a strong marker of the gap between the French and English-language political science. Originally prompted by the prominent role of the French Communist Party often described as a genuine "counter-society" (Kriegel, 1970), this approach has been spreading for a few decades on the study of membership and leadership within mainstream parties. This paper, relying on a broad literature review and on results drawn from the research led by the author on the French "Parti socialiste", aims to provide an insight on this "French tradition" (whether applied to French organizations, or to parties

Resumen

En la extensa literatura sobre los partidos políticos, el méto-do etnográfico parece ser escasamente utilizado. Desde el trabajo pionero de Michels, que en cierta medida se basaba (aunque implícitamente) en la «observación participante», este enfoque sufrió un largo eclipse en la literatura anglo-sajona. Hoy en día, la investigación internacional favorece la confrontación de grandes conjuntos de datos, ya sean relativos a la afiliación, los líderes, las características de las reformas organizativas o los contenidos programáticos. El reciente florecimiento de una «etnografía política» (Auyero, Joseph y Mahler 2007) en los departamentos de sociolo-gía y antropología de Estados Unidos ha favorecido, sobre todo, el análisis de los movimientos sociales. Aplicado a los partidos, es en los trabajos franceses donde más se ha utili-zado el enfoque etnográfico; de hecho, constituye un fuerte elemento de contraste de la brecha entre la ciencia política francesa y la anglosajona. Impulsado por el destacado pa-pel del Partido Comunista francés, a menudo descrito como una genuina 'contra-sociedad' (Kriegel, 1970), este enfoque se ha extendido durante algunas décadas en el estudio de la afiliación y el liderazgo dentro de los partidos mayoritarios. Este artículo, basado en una amplia revisión bibliográfica y en los resultados obtenidos de la investigación dirigida por la autora sobre el Parti Socialiste francés, pretende ofrecer

from other countries). It addresses both of its methodological difficulties and analytical benefits.The first part reviews the empirical characteristics of parties that may complicate and, simultaneously, give easier access to fieldwork, and the second part explores the specificities of a research relationship that is necessarily "political". The third part deals with the theoretical contributions of ethnographic work to major issues such as the analysis of parties as socializing institutions and the study of factionalism.

una visión de esta «tradición francesa» (ya sea aplicada a organizaciones francesas o a partidos de otros países). El artículo aborda tanto las dificultades metodológicas como los beneficios que ofrece. La primera parte revisa como las características empíricas de los partidos pueden dificultar el trabajo de campo, mientras que la segunda explora las especificidades de una relación de investigación que es necesariamente «política». La tercera parte aborda las aportaciones teóricas del análisis etnográfico en temas clave del análisis de los partidos como su papel de instituciones de socialización y el estudio del faccionalismo.

INTRODUCTION: THE ETHNOGRAPHIC METHOD APPLIED TO POLITICAL PARTIES – A FRENCH TRADITION?

In the extensive literature on political parties, the ethnographic method appears to be little used. The journal of reference, *Party Politics*, founded in 1995, publishes virtually no qualitative work and even fewer ethnographic studies; these are also sidelined within the international working groups (ECPR, IPSA, etc.) and research projects. Yet, some pioneering works in the study of political parties were based on a method akin to ethnography, even before it was formalized and popularized. Robert Michels' "Study of the oligarchical tendencies in the life of [party] groups" (1911), for example, is based on first-hand data and genuine fieldwork done by the author in the course of his periods of activism, first in a local section of the SPD in Marburg, Prussia, from 1902 to 1907, and later, more briefly, in the Italian PSI. As his translator J.-C. Angaut points out, "If one thinks of the sociology he did on political parties from 1906, Michels' activism in these organizations can be seen as a form of participant observation" (Angaut 2015: 556), although it is not seen as such by him.

The method nonetheless suffered a long eclipse, even in works claiming direct descent from Michels (as those by Maurice Duverger). This methodological paradox is, partly at least, explained by the fast but fragmented development of research on parties, in the decades 1950-1970 (a period coinciding with the institutionalization of political science as an academic discipline). Florence Haegel (2016) has shown how this literature can be mapped in two main dimensions, that of the level of observation and that of the environment in which the object "party" is embedded. Studies of parties are split between those dealing with the micro level (works focused on the individual and/or local scale), the meso level (organizational monographs) or the macro level (party systems).

Simultaneously, they consider parties as being embedded in institutional and political environments (rules governing inter-party competition, electoral system, etc.) or rather in social environments that may themselves be variously interpreted (socio-historical cleavages, social functions of the parties, sociology of the members or leaders, etc.). Macro approaches are thus profoundly divided between those that privilege the political environment (Duverger) and those that rather privilege the major social cleavages (Rokkan). The same is true of micro approaches, which are divided between" to be replaced by "which confront rational choice models stressing the institutional constraints WITH an anthopological perspective focused on the cultures produced by social environments.

In this fragmented landscape, international research on parties, in English, has favoured meso and macro approaches with a strong modelling and typological ambition. These works are largely based, from a comparative and hypothetico-deductive perspective, on the confrontation of big datasets, whether relating to membership, leaders, the characteristics of organizational reforms, or programmatic contents (Caramani and Hug 1998). This is the case, for example, of the large international surveys («Political Party DataBase Project», «Manifesto Project») that have undoubtedly contributed most to the scientific debate on parties in recent years (Scarrow, Webb, Poguntke 2021; Gemenis 2013). The ethnographic method, which presupposes a micro scale and strong affinities with study of the social environment, is indeed marginal in this literature on parties – and deals with objects that are themselves considered marginal: the emergence of a "political ethnography" (Auyero, Joseph and Mahler 2007) in sociology and anthropology departments in the United States has mainly benefited analysis of social movements or phenomena regarded as deviant (clientelism, racism, political violence) (Blee 2012; Avanza

2018). More recently, a strong case has been made regarding the contributions of ethnography to the understanding of issues as central to political science as democratic disaffection. In this state of the art paper based on English-written literature (Boswell and al. 2018), the authors point out that the study of political 'demand' (Hay 2007), i.e. the evolution of the relationship of citizens to elites and the political system, has been much more observed than the political 'supply'. Providing an alternative to the study of the politicisation and polarisation of opinion through polling data, Hochschild (2016) has thus observed Tea Party supporters in their daily lives and through focus groups long term (2011-2016), in order to capture their feelings towards politics. But professional politicians barely appear in the analysis. Furthermore, the scarce recent ethnographic works dealing with political elites h a v e neglected parties, and rather focusing on ministerial cabinets (Rhodes 2011) or parliament (Crewe 2015).

Applied to parties, it is ultimately in French works[1] that the ethnographic approach has been most used; indeed, it constitutes a strong marker of the gap between French political science and its international counterparts. There may be many reasons for this. Some of them are undoubtedly due to diverse disciplinary traditions. In France, the institutionalisation of political science in the 1970s resulted in a move away from the Law departments and a move towards sociology, at a time when the latter was opening up to anthropological and ethnological methods (after having favoured, since 1945, the methods of 'survey research' imported from the United States). Other factors relate to the training of researchers : quantitative methods are rarely taught in political science courses in France, whereas ethnographic methods are becoming increasingly popular (as shown by the widespread use of 'field training' in social science and political science masters degrees (Weber 1987, Nicourd 2019). The duration of theses may be longer (6.3 years on average in political science[2]) than in other countries, which gives more latitude for engagement in long-term research. Furthermore, sociology and political science researchers in France are not subject to the formal ethical constraints (such as Human Ethic Committees which regulate research involving human beings, and condition funding and in some cases publications) that exist in the United States, in the UK, in Germany and in many Commonwealth countries. These ethical codes, which are based on the investigator's obligation to obtain the formal 'free and informed' consent of the respondents, do not encourage the use of this method with parties, so anxious to retain full control over information, and increasingly procedural (Laurens, Neyrat 2010). The absence of these codes in France (Fassin 2006) allows for an informalisation of relations that is more

favourable to ethnographic research - even if it raises other difficulties, as we shall see below[3]. All in all, all these factors seem to make ethnography incompatible with the performance assessment regime prevailing in British and American universities, which may explain why ethnography is rarely practised there (Taylor 2014).

Other factors regarding the characteristics of French political life should also be mentioned. The use of this method has developed during a period when the French Communist Party (PCF) was still flourishing. Its organizational characteristics, the density of its activist and societal networks, helped to shift researchers' attention from the formal model of the "mass party" (Duverger) towards the study of the "counter-society" that the Party thus constituted. It thus functioned as a stumbling block for the emerging academic debate in France on the analysis of political parties. In his pioneering critique of the works of Duverger, Georges Lavau (1952) for example uses the example of the PCF to denounce the idealism and formalism of the organizational typologies presented in Duverger's *Les Partis politiques* (1951), which led the author to classify Communist and fascist parties in the same category (that of "mass party"). The PCF thus becomes the "perfect case" for a political science which aspires to treat parties not only as organizational structures but also as groups deeply rooted in specific social environments (occupational, cultural, religious, etc.). It is therefore not so surprising that the monograph of reference on the PCF has the sub-title "An essay in political ethnography" (Kriegel 1970). Although it is in fact based on a fairly loose use of the method,[4] the study presents the Communist micro-society, with its mechanisms of selection, integration and exclusion, and its different generations of activists; and it opened the way for a strong tradition of research on the PCF, favouring local monographs and a socio-historical perspective (Pudal 1989) or even an anthropological one (Hastings 1991), occasionally involving observation (Mischi 2010).

Even in France, the growing use of this method is far from having been irresistible. Although strongly valorized from the 2000s, it remained for a long time limited to the study of radical organizations, perceived as "strong" institutions, on the extremes of the political spectrum, on the left, such as the *Ligue Communiste Révolutionnnaire* (Johsua 2015) and on the right, the *Front national* (FN) (Bizeul 2003, Boumaza 2001), the *Lega Nord* in Italy (Avanza 2007), or the *Bloc identitaire* (Bouron 2019). Ethnographic works on the dominant European parties of government have remained few in number and are marked by an over-representation of left-wing parties, whether the British Labour Party (Faucher-King 2005), or the French Socialist Party (PS), on which I have done my own research

(Bachelot 2008, see also Lefebvre 2010, Delasalle 2017). Works on the parties of Turkey (Massicard 2016) or Latin America confirm this "sinistrisme" (Goirand 2016, Combes 2009). But ethnography of right-wing parties, considered especially in France as weak institutions without great internal coherence, is almost non-existent (with a few exceptions: Bargel 2009 , Challier 2021).

My aim here is not to make a new plea for the importation of this ethnographic method into political science (see Fenno 1990), nor even to provide an exhaustive review of the works that use it in the analysis of political organisations. Rather, my purpose is to highlight the benefits and constraints of this method when applied to political parties, on the basis of French works (carried out on both French and foreign parties) which are barely known and discussed in the international literature. This reflection should also bring to light the obstacles that weigh on the difficult insertion of these ethnographic works in the international scientific debate, as well as the conditions that would allow this dialogue to be renewed. In the first section, the article will consider the characteristics of the parties that complicate fieldwork, before exploring, in the second section, the specificities of a research relationship that is necessarily "political". The third section examines the contributions of this method to analysis of the institutional density of these particular organizations.

BENEFITS AND DIFFICULTIES OF AN ETHNO-GRAPHIC APPROACH UNDER CONSTRAINTS: PARTIES AS HETEROGENEOUS AND DISCON-TINUOUS MILIEUX

From the pioneering works of the Chicago school, the advantages of this approach have been demonstrated over a wide range of objects, from the Italian-American neighbourhoods of Boston (Whyte 1943), to the medical students (Becker et al. 1961), or the *haute bourgeoisie* (Pinçon-Charlot 1997). In the same way, a developing literature shows that it may be used – with the same benefits – on political parties.

As "complex associations of partial groupings in interaction" (Lagroye, François and Sawicki 2012), parties thus provide rich fields to explore. It should also be remembered that ethnography does not rely exclusively, or even necessarily, on participant observation, but rather on a wide range of techniques (participant or non-participant observation, statistics, interviews, documentary analysis) whose dosage and use vary according to the researcher's skills and the specificities of the field. The definition widely used in French research is based on three precise criteria: a 'long-term immersion', in an environment of inter-knowledge, implementing some reflexivity (Beaud and Weber, 1997). However, even the «long-term immersion» may result in a succession of periods of intense observation, punctuated by the researcher's entries in and exits from the field ('hit-and-run fieldwork'), the accumulation of unstructured interviews, the observation of 'contact zones' (e.g. congresses or electoral campaigns) in which groups meet from time to time, etc. (Boswell et al., 2018: 59-60). This plasticity is particularly useful for grasping the worldview and daily routines of political elites that are not, *a priori,* very accessible[5].

Applied to parties, this type of fieldwork can thus provide the same benefits as on any other social, professional, political or religious group. First, the very fact of multiplying the situations of observation has the effect of "naturalizing" the research relationship: in contrast to quantitative surveys or structured interviews, the hypotheses are not imposed on the informants from outside, and the research aims to disturb the observed situation as little as possible. It may be assumed that many quantitative studies of parties, which question activists on, for example, their view of the democratization or presidentialization of the organization, impose on them questions that they themselves would not formulate in those terms. Furthermore, long-term fieldwork also gives direct access to practices: researchers can thus avoid being taken in by the official discourses or sloganizing so widespread in parties, and steer their way around some bureaucratic devices that stand between them and their objects in surveys by questionnaire or through archives. Finally, ethnography makes it possible to rehabilitate unknown or imperfectly understood practices. It seems an indispensable method for grasping what is concealed (manipulation of figures, the goings-on "behind the scenes" of elections or conferences) or capturing the ordinary life of organizations that escapes media coverage.

However, this approach, which was initiated on limited, relatively homogeneous and coherent groups, operating at a determinate level (a factory, a neighbourhood, a family, etc.), is subject to severe constraints when applied to political parties.

The variable institutionalization of political parties

The first difficulty (chronologically but also in terms of importance for data collection) concerns access to the "field", an issue which inspires the greater part of methodological reflections on fieldwork on political parties (Aït-Aoudia et al. 2010). And indeed, analysis of these conditions of access often provides the first stage in understanding how a party is structured (Grojean 2010). Some parties are undeniably more closed or centralized than others, but most research stresses the heterogeneity of these organizations, which is both an advantage and a difficulty for fieldwork. It is a difficulty, since whether it is political

(due to the multiplicity of factions or rival teams) or geographical (diversity of local presences), it complicates access to the overall functioning of the institution, continuous presence in the field, and the analysis itself, when it is a question of rising in generality from a necessarily fragmented field. But it also multiplies the entry points into the organization (even if this is initially only access to a segment of it).

The size and the institutionalization of the organization are decisive. As shown by work on the Greens (Faucher 1999), or more recently on identitarian groups (Bouron 2017), "small" organizations characterized by a small number of members, elected politicians and permanent officials are not always the least institutionalized. But they present the advantage of making it possible to rapidly identify the key spots for observation and the unavoidable gatekeepers (despite or because of a confusion of tasks induced by limited organizational resources). They offer the researcher more direct access to information, and above all fewer bureaucratic obstacles to be overcome (secretaries, assistants, various officials, distinct administrative services). My experience with the Parti socialiste leadership (Bachelot, 2008) shows, however, that even the most bureaucratized parties, often perceived as impenetrable fortresses, in fact offer significant recourses to the ethnographer. This is first because party hierarchies offer markers and grids for analysis to the disoriented external observer. They make it possible to identify (official) responsibilities and their holders, and certain lines of internal cleavage, to obtain some understanding of the logics of persistence in the organization, competition for positions and the advancement of careers, in other words on the "rewards of activism" which Daniel Gaxie (1977) has shown to be at the basis of the very existence of party apparatuses.

Studying a "big" party also means studying an organizational nebula, which often offers a multitude of possible entry points, often less exposed and "guarded" than the central bodies. Foundations, satellite associations, youth organizations, even think-tanks are precious allies in this respect at the time of entry into the field. Entry from the margin of the organization is a relatively common strategy (especially when the option of joining the party is ruled out): D. Bizeul (2003) negotiated his entry through a charitable association close to the FN leadership and C. Fauconnier (2019) conducted her observation in a think-tank providing the ideological training of young party managers of the pro-Putin United Russia party. This kind of indirect entry gives, moreover, some indications as to the degree of fragmentation of the party networks, and the possible "porosity of the party's boundaries with milieux of mutual acquaintance" (Fauconnier 2019).

Geographical discontinuity (national vs local)

The articulation between the national and local levels, which has long been seen as one of the distinctive characteristics of parties[6] (as opposed to parliamentary groups operating only at national level, or local mobilizations not linked to the central power) is another adjuvant to fieldwork, since it enables playing on loose relations between the different levels. Actually, the "observation" almost always takes place at the local level of the organization. In some cases, this choice is dictated by practical considerations – the local levels may appear more accessible for the researcher, even less intimidating (Aït-Aoudia et al. 2010). In other situations, the apparatus at local level is essential because of the structuring of the party (which may really exist only at this level). Far from necessarily indicating an "economical" use of the field, it may also be based on a comparative approach requiring a number of sites for observation. This is true for example of the thesis by Raphaël Challier (2021) on the (difficult) mobilization of the working class by political parties, and the class relations within these organizations. His research, which covers three parties (FN, PCF and the right-wing UMP), also uses three sites for observation (the UEC -Union of Communist Students branch at the University of Saint-Denis and a local branch for the UMP, both based in the poorer Paris suburbs , a local branch in the rural Vosges for the FN). The aim is to give an account of "grassroots activism" and especially the social "diversity" of party activists, which is often neglected in most research centred on Parisian activism. The main advantage of this fieldwork at local level is that it enables one to follow the informants outside the party and observe the process of politicization outside the sphere of activism (this process thus appears as rooted in the family milieu, in their religious practice, or in "politicizable" leisure activities).

Challier's thesis belongs to a tradition of "localized" research (in fact, originally deployed from a socio-historical rather than ethnographic angle[7]) that contributes considerably to a fine-grained understanding of the parties. But it should be noted that in the most recent works, ethnography is mobilized as a methodological tool specific to the "societal" analysis of parties, as opposed to a Weberian approach more centred on the pursuit of power and internal competition, which would necessarily resort to other methods. Looking back on his own research, based on observations of the centrist party UDF at local (municipal) level, federal (*département*) level and national level, Julien Fretel (2007) showed that this dividing line within studies of parties is based on an approximation which assimilates a theoretical perspective to a level of observation and a research method. This confusion ends up replaying the eternal

conflict between advocates of a national approach to parties, seen as practicing a disembodied sociology of organizations, focused on the bureaucratic rules and decision-making at national level, and the advocates of a localized approach seen as necessarily locked into an anthropological procedure (Fretel 2007: 185). It needs to be restated here: it is possible to practice ethnography at the national level of organizations (and even use it in the service of a "societal" approach, if for example observation is combined with fine analyses of trajectories, or if the party leaders are studied through their parliamentary and/or local activities, etc.). my work on the PS, like that of Julien Fretel (2007) on the French UDF, or Florence Faucher-King (2005) on the national conferences of the British parties, shows that the national level is not necessarily more "closed" or even more secret than the lower levels, and that parties' professionalization and the publicization of a certain number of their activities offer many opportunities for observation and even immersion. Above all, the close bonds cultivated by the party elites presuppose an intense sociability, and are rich in interactions which are particularly suited to fieldwork (see below).

Temporal discontinuity

This complex, discontinuous character of the political party is obvious at the spatial level but also over time. And, like spatial discontinuity, temporal discontinuity is as much a source of difficulties as a source of potential gains for the study. Party life is indeed structured by particular rhythms, and alternates exceptional short-term moments (election campaigns, meetings, conferences) with daily routines. The extra-ordinary moments, characterized by their function of legitimation and their publicization, are often moments of opening-up of the organization which facilitate its study (whereas routines, although rarely regarded as "strategic" by the parties themselves, are paradoxically much harder to investigate). Unfolding over well-defined periods, election campaigns thus allow researchers working on distant sites to anticipate and rationalize their periods of observation,[8] analyzing party sequences in their totality. They also provide units of observation that lend themselves to comparison, as shown by recent collective publications on campaigns (Baamra, Floderer and Poirier, 2016). In the analysis, the event is then considered as a lens that reveals structural characteristics. In her ethnographic study of a local campaign of the Turkish party CHP, Elise Massicard (2016) shows that the period of the campaign offers access to logics that remain euphemized or hidden at other times. In this case the observation reveals how deeply factionalism runs through the party, so much so that the usual hierarchy of political objectives is completely overthrown (losing a municipality is not too

serious if it weakens an opposing faction). The party apparatus is then revealed as having only a limited impact on its members and its elected politicians, who are caught up in factional networks also dependent on clienteles and social groups largely external to the party. But in order for observation of the campaign to reach this type of general conclusions, it has to be inserted into an analysis of longer-term dynamics that precede and follow the moment observed.

Indeed, the strength of ethnography relative to other research techniques lies precisely in its capacity to describe this party interplay over short and long temporalities. In this regard, the most successful studies take advantage of long-term immersion to analyze how "party events" are embedded in an everyday life, in organizational routines that give them meaning, at both collective and individual level, by examining, for instance, the cycles of engagement and disengagement of activists.

In view of this discontinuous character of the political party, the main risk of ethnographic inquiry for analysis of an activist group perhaps consists in the tendency to overinterpret the importance of the place and period of observation. This is the conclusion reached by Julian Mischi about his inquiry into the trade-union activism of railway workers in a small industrial-rural town, which mainly took place on the premises of the trade union, and which leads him to advocate the strategy of a multi-site ethnography. The union office (though the same is true for any local section or national party body) "does not necessarily produce sociability as such", nor "a principle of central identification for its participants" (Mischi 2012). Hence the interest – for restoring these chains of sociability and identification – of following the activists in the different social scenes that they move through (in their leisure activities, their familial and occupational life, etc.). It is moreover possible that the "movement-parties" that are now emerging[9] invite the researcher to adopt this multi-site strategy. Their ever-growing deterritorialization, their intensive use of the Internet (which is becoming the main environment for affiliation and for the expression of alliances and conflicts) lead the researcher to take account of much more extensive party configurations and chains of interdependence, which call into question the usual boundaries of institutions.

THE "POLITICS" OF RESEARCH : THE COMPLEX RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN POLITICIZED POLITICAL SCIENTISTS AND POLITICAL PARTIES

Prolonged presence in the research field of the party nonetheless brings out a particular difficulty, linked to the managing of the research relationship. As in any field, some difficulties derive from the relations of social "domination" (linked to socio-occupational status, gender, age, etc.) that may be established

between the researcher and his/her informants. This domination may work in one direction or the other, as shown by works on "working-class activists", or, more generally, on activists seeking legitimation (such as, for example, the Lega Nord activists studied by Avanza). But the professionalization of parties, the fact that the political career itself is almost structurally an occupation for middle-aged white men from comfortable backgrounds, generally leads to a relation of imposition exerted on researchers (who are often young female students[10]). The gender dimension in particular can raise specific difficulties, *a fortiori* when the party ideology puts forward a conception of women's role that is incompatible with that of a researcher: thus, when studying the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, Marie Vannetzel (2010) had to cope with some informants who saw her only as a young "foreign" woman, by definition available for relations of seduction (but certainly not for the exchange of political or scientific information).

However, the inextricable difficulty of party ethnography derives from the fact that "long-term immersion" engages the researcher's own political positioning. This is one of the reasons that may justify researchers' mistrust of this method: the 'axiological neutrality' of the investigator is constantly put to the test during fieldwork. The scientific rigour thus relies on a fairly thorough 'self-analysis' – it seems all the more necessary that, as mentioned above, researchers are not always submitted to formal ethical regulations. This auto-analysis has to make explicit the social and political characteristics (political preferences or at least militant experiences) of the interviewer, the 'role' attributed to him or her by the interviewees (sympathiser, militant, witness, future recruit, etc.), and what it entails for the research conducted. Although this stage is essential to the rigour of the argument, with albeit illustrious precedents in sociology and anthropology (see, Richard Hoggart's references to his own personal experiences in his analysis of the English working class, 1957), this personalisation of the subject remains sensitive in international publications marked by the demand for objectivity and anonymisation of data.

Furthermore, the question of the political positioning of the researcher seems virtually unavoidable, especially since it is far from being simply a question of "taking the party card". We may suppose that, if only by virtue of their occupational choice, political scientists and sociologists have in general a personal interest in politics; on the other hand, the parties themselves are by definition proselytizing organizations and expect those who approach them to at least clarify their own position, and quite often to "take sides" in their favour (Aït-Aoudia *et al*., 2010). The pressure from the organization for the researcher to reveal him/herself politically depends as much on

its own organizational and ideological characteristics as on the research strategies that are deployed – the initial choice of working on organizations that one finds politically "sympathetic" or "antipathetic", close or distant, the choice of being "incognito" or "open", of doing participant observation or not. These different choices are not mechanically interlinked. Incognito observation is sometimes necessary if only to gain access to those organizations that are most closed and/or most hostile to the academic world, but it is not always participant; conversely, "open" observation, where the researcher's identity is undisguised, can nonetheless be combined with some forms of participation, which are often interpreted by the organizations studied as a commitment to their cause. In reality, and contrary to observation of wage labour for example (where there are few other choices than either participation or externality), party activities offer such variable configurations that many intermediate positions are possible.

In some cases (and not always in the most closed or most radical organizations), a high degree of participation is required in order to gain access to practices that are the object of the study. Having revealed her identity as a "postgraduate researcher", Lucie Bargel joined the *Mouvement des Jeunes Socialistes* (MJS), worked as an activist (leafleting, meetings, summer schools) and in the course of her study agreed to take on responsibilities at the level of the *départemental* federation, so as to experience the gradual socialization of the young socialists and have access to unofficial practices (such as the faking of memberships) that are never spelled out in interviews.

But the degree of participation can also change in the course of the study, both according to the requirements of the research and to the "moral dilemmas" (and therefore the limits) that each researcher sets him/herself. To return to the examples cited above, Lucie Bargel attended a number of "political" meetings, but as a silent witness; Samuel Bouron progressively withdrew from the field when he was asked to take on organizational responsibilities. Conversely, when the researcher is "sympathetic" to the organization, participation can intensify to the point of becoming an essential part of his/her social identity and even supplant his/her role as a researcher. The convergence of the professional fields of academic sociology and political science on the one hand and political work on the other[11] is in fact favourable to a professionalization of (young) researchers in and through the party they are studying (especially when they are suffering occupational precarity, as is the case for many non-tenured ethnographers).

The case of Kevin Delasalle is particularly exemplary is this respect: in 2010 he embarked on an ethnographic study of the implantation of

the PS in the *département* of Loire-Atlantique; he successively became an activist, then a member and finally an advisor to elected politicians "when [his] university contract had run out and [he] was in period of uncertainty regarding [his] academic career". He quitted his job three years later (defeat of the PS in the regional elections), at which point he returned to the writing-up of his thesis, which he presented in 2017.

Without going as far as this kind of case, where participant observation leads the researcher to be absorbed in his object (until he extracts himself, but often on the initiative of the party rather than his own), long-term activist immersion, which sometimes precedes the fieldwork, can lead to the momentary disappearance of the researcher's identity, even in his own eyes. The sought-after inconspicuousness in the field, which can help to reduce the disturbance by one's own presence of the scenes observed, thus has a problematic personal reverse side. Rémi Lefebvre (2010) explains that he was "sometimes firstly an activist and forgot [him]self as an observer" – the return to the posture of researcher had to await the writing-up of the fieldwork diary. Above all, whether we are "sympathetic" to the organization or not, the sharing of certain activities leads to some forms of internalization, "acculturation", whose effects are not easily controlled for by the researcher. After three years' immersion in an organization close to the FN, Daniel Bizeul relates that "without realizing, [he] had become someone who would testify in favour of the FN, adopting part of the arguments of that milieu [...]. [He] had become easily irritable, quick to see bad faith in other people's critical reactions" (Bizeul 2003: 45).

The risk, often mentioned in reference to studies of political parties, of assimilation into a clique ("*enclicage*", hereafter "encliquing"[12]) is finally added to the grip of the milieu - the fruit of a long participant immersion. This risk is especially strong because parties are, by definition, spaces of internal competition. The more conflictual and segmented they are, the more the researcher is liable to be associated with a sub-group of the party. While formally joining increases the likelihood of "encliquing" (as shown by the example of Kevin Delasalle, who acknowledges that his activism in a well-defined "current" of the PS decisively closed the doors of the other currents to him), not joining has also some drawbacks. In a general way, incognito and/or very strong participant observation increases the risks of "encliquing", by obliging one to stick to the position or a role adopted at the start of the study (for fear of losing one's "cover"), whereas "open" observation enables one more easily to remain equidistant from the different party sub-groups. Finally, "encliquing" does not only occur at the internal level of the organization, but can also

develop when the research covers several parties, and is then favoured by inter-party competition. Because his research was precisely on the relations of cooperation and conflict within a coalition of parties at municipal level, Nicolas Bué (2010) was thus inevitably caught up in "overlapping and competitive fields". Having gained entry to the field through the support of the Communist mayor of the town, he was quickly regarded as a Communist sympathizer by the "associate-rival" parties, the PS and the Greens. These processes make it possible to understand why the relations of alliance between parties include strong distrust and mechanisms for mutual control.

Finally, the politicisation of the relationship can make 'secondary' fields (and therefore the comparative approach) harder to access. Participant observation (especially if it leaves digital traces: comments on social networks, photos taken during militant events) can strongly limit the possibilities of immersion in 'opposing' fields. At the very least, the presentation of the research by the researcher, who retraces his or her path from one party to another, may fuel an understandable mistrust within the last parties surveyed.

Despite the undeniable cost that the specificity of the political party as an object entails for the study, the ethnographic approach yields undeniable benefits for a better understanding of the density of parties, especially in their organizational and cultural dimensions. This will be the topic of the final part of this reflection.

THE THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTIONS OF ETHNOGRAPHY: PARTY SOCIALIZATION AND FACTIONALISM REVISITED

The difficulty of ethnographic research to fit into the international scientific dialogue on parties can also be explained by its reputation as a method that is, if not unreliable, at least not very conducive to generalisation and the establishment of causal relations. On this point, it must be acknowledged that ethnography, like all qualitative methods, cannot produce generalisations based on the statistical model, but only 'plausible hypotheses' (Boudon, Filleule 2012). It is an inductive method which raises new questions instead of testing pre-established explanatory hypotheses. This does not mean that dialogue with the major theoretical models of party evolution is impossible, but that it can only be done under certain conditions. An ethnographic case study is linked to a theoretical question ; however it can only refine or specify a part of a pre-existing model. For example, my fieldwork on the PS makes it possible to qualify the homogenisation of the party leadership (*party in central office*) asserted by the party-cartel model (Katz and Mair, 1995), which appears to be divided by numerous internal

cleavages (factionalism, local allegiances) and to be much more concerned with managing its internal conflicts than with exercising top-down authority over the lower levels ; but it does not make it possible to appreciate the inter-partisan dimension of the model. Above all, the depth and complexity of the ethnographic descriptions requires a massive investment when used in a comparative approach, even on a small number of cases (which explains why ethnographic comparison is frequently unbalanced). This does not prevent monographs from being linked to the scientific debate raised by major comparative surveys - provided that monographs are constructed as 'cases'. In other words, they must be considered as manifestations of a broader phenomenon, through a complex operation which is not always practised as it should be by ethnographers (Small, 2009) ; they may be too absorbed in the effort to gain access to the field and then describe it as fully as possible (this description being sometimes explanatory in itself, as formalised by Geertz's *thick description*, 1973). To summarize, ethnography does not divert us from the major problems of political science, but rather allows us to renew the questions we may have about them.

In examining rites or occupational routines, this approach does not provide a "skewed" vision of parties relative to the classic Weberian conception which defines them as enterprises in pursuit of power. Rather, it makes it possible to give new substance to the analysis of power, and so to contribute usefully to the scientific debate on the notions of activism, political socialization, democracy and internal pluralism. As Florence Faucher-King (2005) remarks in the introduction to her study of British party conferences (2005), power relations cannot be studied independently of their social anchors and their manifestations, including ritual and organizational displays. In the same way, the political rites are "infused" with relations of domination and authority, as the political activities that are often analyzed "ethnographically" (division of tasks, occupational socialization, etc.) – which is confirmed by the findings of both anthropology and the sociology of organizations.

Thus, I would like to stress here how fertile ethnography is in shedding light on two theoretical dimensions that are central in the academic literature on political parties: one concerns parties as socializing institutions, and the other as arenas of conflictuality and/or cooperation.

Political parties as agencies of socialization

An important strand of research in the international literature has focused on analysis of party activism, exploring more specifically the question of the role and usefulness of activists for organizations (Scarrow

2014), and also the motivations for commitment. On this last point, the work of Whiteley, Seyd and Richardson on "high-intensity" activism has shown the need to move beyond a strictly utilitarian model (cost/benefit calculation) in order to grasp these motivations, by taking into account affective relations and social norms (Whiteley, Seyd and Richardson 1994: 109). In the same vein, recent studies have stressed the importance of immersion in personal networks for the transmission of party norms and the recruitment of new activists / professional politicians (Mutz 2002, Webb, Bale and Poletti 2020).

The ethnographic approach enables us to provide empirical data supporting these hypotheses. It is probably no accident that a number of recent ethnographic works on political parties focus on the youth movements associated with them or on the young activists of the "mother" organizations. Not only are they easier to access, but these fields perhaps make it possible to confront more directly the question of political professionalization and activist "careers", in line with the interactionist models of Becker and Goffman.

The previously mentioned works of Lucie Bargel and Samuel Bouron and those of Stéphanie Dechézelles on the Italian neo-fascist parties (2016) give an important place to the study of learning processes, and the incorporation of activist habitus. Participant observation thus proves to be a particularly effective way of bringing to light implicit learning, processes of informal socialization that do not surface in interviews, still less in the official discourse of the organizations. It is even more necessary because, even in the most "mainstream" organizations, these are processes that are often stigmatized, since, as Lucie Bargel (2009) explains, "political action is considered deviant from the outset" by the external world. In the most radical organizations, observation shows a process of socialization that operates by pressing levers that have nothing specifically "political" about them. Samuel Bouron's research is thus based on the notion of habitus, which makes it possible to understand **"**how an institution can capture an individual by speaking to his body, his unconscious, a whole set of embodied things". He confirms the efficacy of a socialization among "identitarian" youth which works essentially through training in combat sports and physical violence, but also through participation in activities perceived as "cool", playful, and which facilitate amorous encounters. Ideology is brought in only at a very late stage (and secondarily) in the socialization process, whereas violence, often presented as one of the political objectives of these groups, is in fact essentially a vector of socialization.

These socialization effects are powerful agents of party discipline and help to explain how parties "hold" their activists, and "hold themselves together" (Allal

and Bué 2016). The ethnography of he ethnography of party rituals SUCH as conferences or meetings leads to similar reflection on the ways in which parties exhibit their own unity, legitimate their internal hierarchy, their organizational frontiers, by highlighting their "us" against the "them" of the external world and political adversaries. The ethnographic approach can thus lead to some counter-intuitive conclusions: the campaign meetings of the Mexican PRD observed by Hélène Combes (2009) do not serve so much to gain new voters as to remotivate members already enrolled in the party.

Political parties as conflictual and cooperative arenas

While promoting their unity, political parties are, as has been seen, spaces of struggle, both internal and external. In this sense, analysis of factionalism is essential to a knowledge of parties, inasmuch as they can be defined as "constellations of rival groups" (Sartori 2005: 64), whose relations alternate between conflict and cooperation. Many studies have thus tried to establish typologies: are these factions visible or invisible, legitimate or illegitimate, stable or variable? Are they based on ideological or material incentives (Rose 1964, Bettcher 2005)? Beyond these attempts at classification, other works have shown the need for a dynamic approach to these factions, to better understand their evolution and so expand the search for explanatory variables into the parties' social and political environments (constitutional changes, electoral and statutory reforms) (Boucek 2009).

The ethnographic method makes it possible to complement this "dynamic" approach to factions, by making the connection between these environmental variables and a neo- institutionalist approach attentive to the processes of socialization and transmission of party norms. By obliging the researcher to situate him/herself within the interactions of the group studied, it sheds a particular light on internal conflict, which may sometimes turn against the researcher him/herself (this is one characteristic of so-called "difficult" research fields). The study by Hélène Combes, who carried out two years' intensive observation of the Mexican PRD (1998-2000), shows to what extent the everyday life of the party is in fact full of internal tensions. These may be particularly strong on some occasions (in electoral conventions, rallies, training courses) which made fieldwork, as the author puts it, "tough going (*un travail musclé*)" (Combes 2011: 28). Taken for a "right-wing spy", expelled from a convention after distributing a questionnaire, exposed to the violence of the verbal exchanges and the bitter struggles among the currents, the researcher was thus in the front line for directly and personally experiencing the strong conflictuality of the party she was studying. This difficulty is doubled when the party in question is

embarked on a radical, revolutionary, explicitly violent course. The case of Olivier Grojean, who studied the Kurdish PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party) in the 2000s, also raises the question of "how to conduct research when the sources are limited, polarized and contradictory (…), when the researcher has to navigate between several competing and even hostile groups" (Grojean 2010: 64). The PKK, a clandestine, transnational party, represents the limiting case of an extremely heterogeneous organization, made up of different populations (sympathizers and members of associations close to the party, party cadres, ex-activists who have become sympathizers, or dissidents, or who have withdrawn, in Paris and Berlin) whose relations are distant or strongly adversarial, with differentiated relations to legality. Each of these terrains was moreover politically fragmented (the dissidents for example had various positions relative to the PKK's official line), which made it harder to research each of them. Finally, participant observation in the clandestine structure of the PKK ended in failure, not only because of the activists' reservations, but also because of surveillance by the French and German secret services. The radical polarization and internal fragmentation meant that the study had to be reoriented towards direct (and no longer participant) observations and biographical (rather than semi-directive) interviews.

Even without investigating these limiting cases, researchers are always confronted with the management of these conflicts, whether they correspond to social cleavages internal to the organization (Challier), to internal factionalism, or hierarchical conflicts (Faucher-King). But equally, attention to interactions also makes it possible to understand relations of comradeship, friendship, and at the very least, cooperation, without which the party institutions would not hold together. Focusing on certain ritualized scenes in the life of the party (national bodies, statute committees, meetings of factions), observed at regular intervals and over a long period, brings to light the importance of these "organizational cultures" which form the very identity of the institutions and give them a kind of coherence.

It is precisely these cultures that are the object of implicit and explicit socializations on the part of the members and provide them with grammars of behaviour and common modes of expression. The ethnographic approach is then particularly suited to analysis of this cultural dimension, for theoretical reasons (it makes it possible to import fairly easily the conceptual tools of cultural anthropology) and also practical reasons: all observers of political parties emphasize the time needed to "decode" interactions within parties and understand what is at stake in them for the participants (which makes it difficult to understand these cultures through other study techniques operating over a more limited time).

By definition, these cultures create "commonality"; and, at another level, these organizational cultures often explicitly valorize the cooperative dimension. Observation of practices and discourses at regular intervals in hundreds of political meetings in the PS, especially at national level but in different contexts (weekly meetings of the *Bureau national* (national executive), "crises", conferences, campaigns) thus led me to give an account of a "collegial" dimension in the PS based on norms that are as much explicit and statutory as implicit in the party (Bachelot 2012). This actually explains the forms taken by both agreements and conflicts within the party: a formal equality (obligatory use of the familiar *tu*, the right to vote and to veto guaranteed for every member of the body) that does not exclude a diversity of statuses and a division of tasks; a valorization of decision-making by consensus, in fact often leading to minimal agreements.

By focusing on learning processes and also on the management of interactions, the ethnographic approach makes it possible to restore their full "thickness" to party institutions, and to go further in analyzing what parties "produce". They often provide enough traces (organization charts, speeches, official histories, activists accustomed to public speaking) to be studied without having recourse to long-term immersion. But study of these official productions does not suffice to explore the diversity of the meanings, representations and practices covered by the fact of belonging to a party organization; direct observation, participant or not, continuous or not, is a good means of doing so.

CONCLUSION

The ethnographic method thus presupposes a heavy investment by the specialists in political parties who have recourse to it. This investment is costly in time, and therefore in money, since the research must be financed over a long period, without assistance from the organizations studied, which are more inclined to contribute to quantitative studies providing them with data useful for the management of their activist resources. It has low "profitability", also for the researcher him/herself in an academic environment where the pressure to publish quickly and often is ever-growing. The benefits expected in terms of insertion into international research networks are uncertain, inasmuch as this inductive approach is based on case studies not readily compatible with the large-scale comparative and hypothetico-deductive surveys favoured by the international literature on political parties. Symmetrically, as shown in the first part, the ethnographic approach, initiated on locally situated homogeneous social groups, has to be adapted for these multiform, multi-site groups with discontinuous activities. They present moreover a particular difficulty, inasmuch as studying them makes reference to the social and political characteristics of the researcher him/herself (as Becker showed, one does not have to be a medical student to study medical students; but a specialist in political parties is almost always "politicized"), which multiplies the risks of bias and "encliquing" (second part).

I have nonetheless tried to show that this approach is an indispensable tool for gaining access to practices and representations that cannot be reached through questionnaires or archives, and which are nonetheless essential to the maintenance of parties. It also provides robust empirical tests for some major theoretical hypotheses of the literature, whether they concern internal democracy or the motivations of activism (third part). In this sense, and adopting the formulations of Charles Ragin on the differences between quantitative and qualitative methods, thinking in terms of "cases" is not exclusive of thinking in terms of variables that is characteristic of quantitative studies. Despite linguistic, disciplinary and epistemological obstacles, ethnographic works on parties – such as the French ones presented here – should not remain as marginal as they are nowadays. But two conditions seem to be required: this ethnographic approach must from the outset envisage its cases within a comparative perspective; and political scientists specializing in parties must be ready to enter a sustained dialogue with other disciplines (sociology and anthropology) which have a long experience of using this approach to study political parties.

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NOTAS

[1] The French particularity is still difficult to assert. Ethnographic works on parties may exist in countries other than France, without being translated into English, and therefore suffer from the same lack of visibility as French works. This French specificity can only be understood here in relation to the literature available in English. It seems, however, that political science practised in countries other than France is more in line with the international standards adopted by the major journals in the discipline (Norris, 1997); moreover, longitudinal studies on the evolution of European journals display an increasingly marked presence of quantitative methods (Pehl, 2012, Coman and Morin, 2016).

[2] This duration may be facilitated by a specific funding system which allows students enrolled on a thesis to benefit from a two-year teaching contract following the 3-years doctoral contract.

[3] The absence of such codes in France does not mean the absence of any ethical concern, but makes clear the impossibility of submitting a research protocol previous to the field work. The ethical constraint takes other forms, such as non-written contracts, based on relations of trust between the investigator and the institutions or individuals investigated.

[4] The findings presented are only partially due to the strictly ethnographic method (which is moreover linked to Kriegel's experience as an activist in the party from 1945 to 1956), and are essentially based on quantitative survey of voters and activists and on internal documentation.

[5] My research (Bachelot, 2008), conducted for a doctoral thesis on the leading groups of the French Socialist Party (1993-2008), benefited from this plasticity. It covered the changes in their sociological composition (analysis of trajectories) and the practices linked to their positions within the national bodies of the party. It involved forty or so semi-structured interviews, prosopographical analysis of the trajectories of 150 members of the national bodies, and intensive study of the party press and the archives (minutes, correspondence, circulars) of the party leadership over the period studied. But I

chose to centre the approach mainly on direct observation of the national bodies of the PS, its factions and the activities of its national headquarters for five consecutive years (2002-2007). The ethnographic approach was thus used to explore the density of this "group", its specific interactions, and the way these characteristics influenced the exercise of power within the organization.

[6]   See the classic definition of parties by LaPalombara and Weiner (1966).

[7]   See the seminal article by J.-L. Briquet and F. Sawicki (1989), the work of F. Sawicki (2017) on the PS, and of J. Mischi (2010, 2012) on the PCF.

[8]   This may be what explains the large number of studies (more often by anthropologists than political scientists) of the campaigns of Latin American parties, especially in Mexico and Brazil (Goirand 2016).

[9]   For a relativization of the "novelty" of these movement-parties, see Sawicki (2018).

[10]   As Lefebvre (2010) points out, ethnography is mainly an approach adopted by "students" and progressively abandoned by researchers as they advance in their careers. This is no doubt partly for reasons of availability, but also on account of a capacity for adaptation, and even humility, that presumably becomes rarer among older researchers.

[11]   University courses in political science increasingly aim to be "vocational" (and encourage for example internships in the offices of elected politicians), and the "professionals of politics" (permanent officials, elected politicians and their assistants) have increasingly graduated from a university course in political science or sociology.

[12]   Olivier de Sardan (1995) coined the term *enclicage* to designate the process of becoming associated with the clique or faction through which the researcher makes his entry into the milieu.

CAROLE BACHELOT is Professor of Political Science, Faculté des Sciences Juridiques, Politiques et Sociales, Université de Lille, Centre de Recherches et d'Analyses Politiques et Sociales (CERAPS) since 2017. Between 2013 to 2017 she was Associate Professor of Political Science, Faculté de Droit, Nancy, University de Lorraine. Her research deals mainly with political parties (French Socialist Party), sociology of political elites, qualitative methods applied to the study of politics (political ethnography, semi-structured interviews).