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Making Sense of Change: Methodological Approaches to Societies in Transformation—An Introduction

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and Dorothea Lüddeckens

For centuries, social scientists, historians, and philosophers have tried to describe, account for, and predict change. Despite these efforts, questions about how changes in society come about, the trajectories and forms that they take, and the consequences they have remain unresolved (Vago

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1999). It may be obvious that, to make sense of change, it is necessary to go beyond a chronology of events or sweeping laws of evolution. We need to critically assess the ways in which we analyze change as researchers, relying on theory and/or our personal expectations, and pay attention to how people live through, experience, desire, create, and challenge change. But how can we, at the same time, gain a *longue durée* perspective on societal transformation and give a truthful account of the ways our different interlocutors describe, name, perceive, and understand the changes they are living through and the kinds of futures they expect (Pels 2015; Stephan and Flaherty 2019)? This question is all the more central since the study of societal transformation necessarily entails taking into account broader structuring dynamics which are hard to understand through immersion in the field alone (Burawoy 2009).

Qualitative researchers, who usually do not engage in longitudinal and statistical analyses of change, have to make sense of fragments of people's perceptions and representations of change at a particular moment in time. To assess change in the making as part of larger trends in society would ideally involve remaining within the same research site for decades, at least. Unfortunately, social science researchers studying social and political transformations are rarely able to conduct such long-term studies. Due to time constraints, material limitations, and academic obligations, fieldwork is often limited to a relatively short space of time—and even a year or two is too short to assess social transformation on the spot. Qualitative researchers studying change are therefore bound by the space, time, and duration of their inquiry.

Focusing on methodological questions, with contributions from a selection of authors, this volume invites us to think more closely about how we face these challenges as social scientists reliant on qualitative methods of inquiry. The chapters collected here aim to provide scholars who are studying societies in transformation with diverse methodological tools and analytical frameworks. While combining diverse methods of investigation, the contributors show—in close detail—how an ethnographic approach to their object of inquiry enables them to provide particular, in-depth descriptions of the processes and understandings of change as it is lived and experienced by people (Ingold 2017). By privileging ethnography, the authors tackle various key methodological

questions. How do objects, spaces, memories, networks, rituals, and discourses about the present and the past inform us about change? What are the limits of these units of analysis and what challenges do the researchers using them face? How can we deal with these limits and challenges? Moreover, how do we deal with our interlocutors' understandings of change, and how do we connect these to the various theories of change at our disposal?

Each chapter of this book is therefore based on concrete case studies from various parts of the world which involve a diversity of fields, analytical approaches, and types of data. By paying attention to both the complexities of their respective fieldwork sites and to the dominant meta-narratives generally used to account for change, the contributors to this volume explore the intricacies of combining etic and emic perspectives on change, a question on which each offers their own methodological response.

Ethnography and Change: A Key Social Science Issue

Since at least the nineteenth century most disciplines in the social sciences have oscillated between what we could qualify as historicist trends, trying to explain contemporary situations through the influence of past events, and nomologic trends seeking regularities that transcend geographical and historical differences to establish universal scientific laws. Auguste Comte and Saint-Simon were founders of the nomological trend in the social sciences, notably through their influence on Émile Durkheim in sociology and Alfred R. Radcliffe-Brown in anthropology (Durkheim 1925; Heilbron 1990; Rafie 1972). Historicism, on the other hand, rejects the idea of universal laws and insists on the uniqueness of each historical development along the lines of Friedrich Schlegel's initial coinage of the term (on the different uses of the notion of historicism see Chakrabarty 2000, 22–23; Iggers 1995).

These two approaches represent the two poles of a continuum rather than absolute opposites. Most researchers combine historicist and nomologic schemes of explanation in their work. Emphasis on the weight of

the past most often has as a correlate the formulation of universal laws of evolution, and a focus on permanent rules of social life does not necessarily mean ruling out history as an explanation for the present state of societies. In early sociology, Herbert Spencer's attempts to establish the rules of the rise and decline of civilizations and Émile Durkheim's efforts to discover the permanent sociological conditions behind the cohesion of societies are examples of the fluctuation between diachronic and synchronic schemes of explanation in the burgeoning social sciences of their time.

In anthropology, however, the debate took a specific shape linked to the rise of ethnographic fieldwork as the core method of the discipline in the beginning of the twentieth century. When anthropology emerged as an academic discipline in the nineteenth century, evolutionists set "the agenda for the study of humanity moving through time" (Ervin 2015, 2). They sought to explain change in terms of universal laws of human development, looking for the survival of ancient stages of evolution in non-European societies to support their theories. Diffusionist ethnologists, on the other hand, focused on the spread of cultural items such as artifacts, institutions, and myths as a way of discovering ancient migration and communication routes and distinguishing between different "cultural areas" or *Kulturkreise*. These two competing perspectives on how human societies change shared the common understanding that explanations for contemporary practices can be found in the past by reconstituting historical processes and establishing the regularities underlying such developments (Stocking 1984, 136).

The diachronic approaches advocated by evolutionists and diffusionists were strongly criticized by those putting forward the need for research based on empirical foundations and moving away from establishing universal laws of change toward examining how institutions contribute to maintaining society's overall stability. These critics, who were particularly vocal in Britain, gained momentum from the 1920s onward. Alfred R. Radcliffe-Brown, for example, strongly opposed "conjectural history" as practiced by evolutionist and diffusionist anthropologists (1923, 125; Smith 1962, 75–76), and Bronislaw Malinowski advocated intensive fieldwork by professional ethnographers as the main anthropological method of inquiry (Thomas 1996, 19–24). This method favors

a synchronic appraisal of societies that is limited to the period of the researcher's stay in the field.

While the debate about the necessity of including historical methods in anthropology continued (see for instance Evans-Pritchard 1951, 57–62), a general sense prevailed for around half a century that stable features of societies should remain the discipline's principal concern.¹ A fundamental aspect of all of these debates about the use of history, however, was less a denial of history in general than a refusal to take the effects and after-effects of colonization fully into account. Denying the population under study contemporaneity with Europe and North America, what Johannes Fabian (2014, 31) called the “denial of coevalness,” is mirrored in the quest for models of society surviving at the fringes of Western influence. Many anthropologists who deplored the fast disappearance of such societies under the influence of colonialism and modernization not only rejected the conjectural history of the past evolution of societies but also ignored important transformations in the making which they could possibly have observed themselves. Therefore, the “change reluctance” of early anthropologists assessed by Francesca Merlan (2015, 229) would be better qualified as a reluctance to study colonial transformation.

There were exceptions, however, mostly in Africa. In the 1930s, researchers at the Rhodes-Livingstone Institute, including its longtime director Max Gluckman, studied the ways in which “tribal” ways of life that used to be based on kinship were transformed in the urban, industrial context of the Copperbelt region (Schumaker 2001). Gluckman was particularly interested in events that manifested social tensions and had the potential to create new institutional and customary orders, which he analyzed on the basis of detailed descriptions of conflict situations. Thus he set the basis for an ethnographic method for the

¹The global influence of French structuralism reinforced this tendency. For Claude Lévi-Strauss, its founding father and main theorist, the task of anthropology was to establish the categorical oppositions structuring the human unconscious in all place and time. Even if he traced parallels between ethnographers and historians, he deemed historical contingencies irrelevant to anthropological theory (Lévi-Strauss 1974, 9–39).

study of change in the making (Gluckman 1940; Kapferer 2010, 3).² Studies from the Rhodes-Livingston Institute were soon emulated, notably by French anthropologists, with the independence of the colonies approaching and criticism of colonization becoming more vocal. From the 1950s on, Georges Balandier insisted on the importance of studying the dynamics of change in Africa. Focusing on French Congo and Gabon, he documented at length the impact of colonization, the role of Christian missions, the urbanization of Brazzaville, and the effects of the monetarization of the economy (Balandier 1951, 1955).

These teleological accounts of early ethnographic studies of change influenced by narratives of modernization were later criticized by anthropologists such as James Ferguson, who found instances of decline and what he called “non- and counterlinearities” in the Zambian Copperbelt of the late 1980s (Ferguson 1999, 20). His research formed part of a general defiance toward grand narratives (Lyotard 1979) in anthropology which correlated with a critique of ethnographic authority (Clifford 1983), Eurocentric visions of history, and the promotion of fragmented and often conflictual narratives of change (Chakrabarty 2000, 3–23). The postmodern dismissal of any unified concept of objective truth led to calls for a more explicitly political role for anthropology that would lend a voice to the wretched of the earth.

Consequently, public anthropology and collaborative research became important features of the discipline, accompanied by recurring calls to quit the academic ivory tower. Being more explicitly political also often involves trying to find immediate responses to the issues of the day. In this regard, trends promoting the explicit politicization of anthropology paradoxically rejoined the funding agencies’ demands for a reshaping of research agendas to better address issues of impact and policy relevance (Hanafi 2010; Knowles and Burrows 2014), focusing for instance on development, democratization, and the empowerment of local communities. As a result, ethnographers had to adapt their methods to the study of broad transformation processes, although at first sight ethnography might appear an unsuitable tool for such a task.

²His method of carefully describing events and social situations has been developed further by Clyde Mitchell (1956, 1983), and more recently by Alban Bensa and Eric Fassin (2002), Michael Burawoy (1998, 2009), and Bruce Kapferer (2010).

The Assets of Ethnography for Studying Change

In his book *Social Change and History*, Robert Nisbet (1969) criticizes common approaches to change that are based on a metaphor of growth in which, analogous to the life cycles of organisms, change is seen as natural, immanent, and cumulative, as if unfolding an internal potentiality. Yet as he contends, while we can observe birth, growth, degeneration, and death in the life cycles of plants and organisms, no one has “ever seen—actually, empirically seen—growth and development” in societies and cultures (ibid., 3). What we can see instead are “mingled facts of persistence and change” (ibid.). What does this mean for the study of change? How can we empirically observe change? Robert Nisbet (1969, 266) argues that “observation of differences is the beginning of the study of change.” To be able to observe these differences, it is first necessary to specify what is changing in order to be able to analyze the level, engines, components, rates, magnitudes, and consequences of change (Vago 1999; Weinstein 2010).

The more classical sociological and development approaches to change rely in particular on macrolevel and statistical data to analyze shifts in, for example, economic output, the proportion of people living in urban areas or moving abroad, the composition of families, the transformation of political regimes, the use of energy and technologies, and attitudes toward gender and political issues. Such data lead many authors to conclude that changes have accelerated and become global in character (Eriksen 2016a; Weinstein 2010; Nederveen Pieterse 2010). Jay Weinstein (2010, 3) even speaks of a “great sociocultural revolution” sweeping our world. While these macrolevel assessments are important to identify general trends, they cannot account for the fact that people often experience change differently (Schaeffer 2003, 15).

This is why ethnographic research holds great potential for the study of change (Eriksen 2016a; Tsing 2004, 2015). While ethnography is considered anthropology’s core scientific method, other disciplines have also sought to incorporate the ethnographic method in their research practice, from Robert Park, Louis Wirth, and William Foote Whyte, the sociologists of the Chicago School studying urban social life in the

early twentieth century, to the more recent ethnographic turn in political science that seeks to understand political thought and behavior not through disassembled categories but as embedded in real-life settings (Brodkin 2017; Hannerz 1980). While political change is still predominantly studied via “surveys, secondary data [...], formal modelling, and statistical approaches,” a burgeoning yet rapidly growing body of literature is working on deciphering “the nitty-gritty details of politics” (Auyero and Joseph 2007). These emerging trends have contributed to shedding new light on dominant theories about political change, including studies on institutional transformations (Cantini, Chapter 3 of this volume), social movements (Wolford 2007), and political transitions (Ghodsee 2011). In contrast, ethnography has long been established in social science approaches to the study of religion, in research on contemporary religious communities and other forms of religiosity, now also including multi-sited ethnography for the study of the “digital and multi-sited dimensions of contemporary religious practices” (Murchison and Coats 2015, 989). The study of religious change or “religion *in process*” with its “fleeting, ephemeral, and impermanent” aspects including digital data especially calls for adapted ethnographic methods (Murchison and Coats 2015, 1001).

While many anthropologists are skeptical about other disciplines’ claims that they employ ethnography (Howell 2017), there is a common understanding that the method aims “to describe life as it is lived and experienced, by a people, somewhere, sometime” (Ingold 2017, 21). This includes the ways in which people live and experience change. Ethnographic study is a crucial instrument for understanding processes of change and uncovering and analyzing the complex and often contradictory interplay of new and old, continuity and change. Observing the repercussions of change at close range allows us to grasp them as lived experiences, with all their possible inconsistency and polyvalence. It also enables us to challenge hierarchies between scales of change setting the general over the particular, as illustrated by the interconnection of bodies, matter, urban place, and space in Maria F. Malmström’s ethnography of lived experiences during the 2013 military intervention in Egypt (Chapter 10) and Irene Bono’s critical exploration of the hegemonic narrative of the formation of the Moroccan nation-state through

the personal archives of a single actor, illustrating the tensions between hegemonic memory and personal experience (Chapter 6).

The connection of different scales of change is central to Thomas Hylland Eriksen's *Anthropology of Accelerated Change* (2016a) which analyzes the "overheating" effects of the (uneven) spread of modernity and their implications for the environment, mobility, and collective identities (Eriksen 2016b, 470). While these problems are global in scope, they are nonetheless perceived and responded to locally. Eriksen therefore insists on "the primacy of the local" in order to reveal the contradictions between the standardizing forces of global capitalism and the socially embedded nature of people and local practices (ibid., 2016a). Further, as he puts it, clashes of scales can occur, and broad processes at the global level can remain completely unnoticed or be deemed irrelevant at the local level, or can be subject to interpretation using completely different systems of meaning (ibid.; see also Tsing 2004, 2015). And yet as Tania Murray Li (2014) shows, even when change is gradual and largely unnoticed locally, the consequences may be dramatic. It is therefore crucial to examine not just the scales and directions but also the pace and magnitude of change, and how these impact the daily lives of the people we study.

The main concern of authors such as Erikson, Anna L. Tsing, and Li, who advocate for the use of ethnography to study change, is the understanding, description, and explanation of transformation processes. They do not, however, discuss or reflect on practical methods to explore this change, and this is the main gap that this volume aims to fill by bringing together case studies from different regions, places, and times. As most researchers do not have the opportunity to conduct research in a particular place or group over a span of twenty or more years, Alfred R. Radcliffe-Brown and Bronislaw Malinowski's question remains relevant: can social scientists use ethnography to write about historical and social change considering the limited amount of time they spend in the field? To answer this question requires setting aside, at least temporarily, the "pathos" accompanying narratives of dramatic change (Passeron 1991, 279–91): we need instead to focus on the descriptive, analytical, and methodological tools at our disposal for assessing change, critically reflecting on their limitations and assets.

Periodization and the Naming of Change

When looking at the ways in which the social sciences approach the issue of change, periodization is the first issue to consider. Too often, assessments of change are based on extrapolation from observations made at two different points in time, sometimes without questioning the validity of the diagnosis used as a premise. Fredrick Barth (1967, 664) discusses the importance of our own assumptions and perspectives on change and continuity using the example of an aquarium: when we see a crab in the place where we observed a fish a moment earlier, we may wonder how the fish now has claws instead of fins, assuming that the rest of the body has remained the same; or we may ask how the crab came to replace the fish, focusing instead on the continuity of the setting. Hence whether we observe change or continuity depends on our perspective. This is also illustrated in Eliza Isabaeva's contribution (Chapter 7) about a squatter settlement in Bishkek, where the replacement of a clay hut with a stone house is a clear material manifestation of the changes in migrants' lives although the illegality and precarity of their settlement remains the same.

Available studies tend to represent change as either an ongoing process or the result of a powerful and disruptive event or moment in history (Bensa and Fassin 2002). The fall of the Berlin Wall is such an example: Bruno Latour (1993, 10) speaks of the "miraculous year 1989" after which a series of events changed the way we look at the natural and social world, while Thomas Hylland Eriksen (2016b, 473) speaks of an "acceleration of history since 1991." The idea that certain events generate critical turning points that induce, trigger or make change possible is nourished by the way they are covered by the media. The events of September 11, 2001 are probably among the most telling examples in this regard, with a long list of papers on the U.S.'s relationship with Islamic countries presenting it as the start of a new era (Witkowski and Zagratzki 2014). The Arab Spring is also a good example of the sudden reinterpretation of the history of a whole region in light of a series of uprisings. Funding organizations also contribute to this tendency, with a clear trend since 2011—at least at the level of Middle Eastern Studies—toward research projects centered on "change." This trend is all the more interesting because the current close attention to social movements and

radical change in the Middle East comes after decades when the bulk of such research was dedicated to the influence of Islam on society, with a tendency to highlight continuities and the sociocultural resistance to change.

A whole range of neologisms prefixed by “post” emphasizes the decisive role of such moments in history as the starting points of fundamental change. This applies for instance to the labeling of countries as “post-socialist” and “post-conflict,” and more specifically “post-apartheid” South Africa, “post-9/11” United States, “post-Brexit” UK, for instance. While the prefix “post” suggests a clear break between before and after, its analytic value lies rather in critical reflection on the complex past and the results of such moments of change, as well as on the ongoing presence of former institutions, hierarchies and dependencies in the contemporary social reality, as insights from studies of “post-colonial” and “post-socialist” societies show (Chari and Verdery 2009, 11). Concomitantly, conceptions of change are intimately linked to a whole range of other neologisms with the suffix “ation” that highlight the processual character of change such as modernization, secularization, individualization, democratization, and, of course, globalization.

Thus the terminology used to name transformations is another important issue to consider when looking at the ways in which the social sciences approach the question of change. For instance, how do we distinguish here between emic and etic categories, and terminologies used to describe and name change? Should we echo the terminologies used by the actors to name and describe the transformations they are experiencing, at risk of simply “parroting” them rather than analyzing our data, implicitly prioritizing a particular perspective in the field (see Lüddeckens and Schrimpf 2018, 17–21), or should we rather use our own categories and terminologies, risking using words and meanings that are foreign to the actors in the field (Ginzburg 2012) and that contrast with the way they actually live and perceive change?

There is always the looming danger of uncritically taking over preexisting notions of change when specific events are described *a priori* by researchers as setting the stage for a whole epoch. As Harri Englund and James Leach (2000) remind us in their discussion of modernization theories, such metanarratives of change tend to foreclose a genuine analysis of

what is going on and how people perceive the changes in their lives. They therefore argue for “truly reflexive” ethnographic research that does not assume prior knowledge of the context of what is going on in the lives of their interlocutors and gives them a “measure of authority in producing an understanding of their life-worlds” (ibid., 226). Moreover, it is important to trace back the reasons why certain modes of periodization, and ways that change has been labeled, have gained prominence. Therefore, studying change raises the question of how scholars name and interpret the transformations they are observing or are interested in. More than anything, the terms used to label change are often normatively and ideologically laden, referring to the direction in which the named process is expected to move.

A prerequisite for a critical assessment of modes of periodization and labeling is taking into account the power struggles at stake in the naming of a change, leading to the question of who defines how ongoing processes are interpreted. For instance, Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc Wacquant (1998) denounce, when people describe globalization as the main feature of current times, the conjuring trick of hiding the political lobbying leading to the contemporary interconnection of markets and thereby naturalizing the resulting process. As researchers we should not take change and its counterparts, continuity and stability, for granted; it is important to question the power hierarchies and representations that shape the ways change is apprehended, assessed, and used as a discursive tool of legitimation.

This also means paying attention to the different experts on change, including the local, national, and transnational development agencies and organizations that assess and set the norms of what constitutes “good” and “bad” change. Among them are also anthropologists, geographers, sociologists, and other social scientists who both denounce the cultural encroachments endangering the diversity of practices in different cultures and call for social transformations to advocate for subaltern populations. Processes such as population growth, urbanization, individualization, secularization, and migration, and categories such as youth, women, and new leaders are often interpreted as “carriers of change”

without questioning the reasons behind such associations or considering how such processes or categories may also contribute to reproducing norms. These concerns are illustrated in Chapter 5, in Christoph Schwarz's contribution about a young activist in Morocco, a type of actor commonly referred to as an "agent of change." However, through analyzing processes of intergenerational transmission, the author shows how his interviewee perceives social change primarily as a "trajectory of suffering" contributing to the production of an urban precariat.

Even if notions such as progress and modernization, which dominated the twentieth century, are less prevalent today in academia, "their categories and assumptions of improvement are still with us everywhere. We imagine their objects on a daily basis: democracy, growth, science, hope" (Tsing 2015, 20–21). Notions such as development, transition, evolution, rupture, and revolution have a strong normative dimension, as they often convey teleological presuppositions embedded in grand narratives linked, for instance, to ideas of improvement, liberalism, socialism, and developmentalism (Eriksen 2016b; Koselleck 1997; Li 2007; Watts 2009). Interest in change is therefore often laden with expectations about the course it must follow and also, increasingly, with the negative consequences of "accelerated change" (Eriksen 2016b).

Narratives about both change and stability are thus linked to instruments of rule that can have different significations depending on the historical and regional context (see also Martin and Soucaille 2014). In Morocco, for instance, while the new young king symbolized the beginning of a new era in 1999 via a rupture with the past (represented by his father), the monarchy as an institution was nevertheless still presented as the immutable guarantor of stability that must therefore remain unchanged (Berriane 2005). This kind of compromise between a consensus on the urgent need for institutional change and a deep concern with stability, political unity, and social order can be found in different times and places. Likewise, although market-oriented reforms and the introduction of neoliberal logics and practices have undeniably brought about major changes for the people of countries such as China, Vietnam, and Cuba, they did not necessarily require a break with the socialist past but rather a reconfiguration and remaking of socialist relations, practices,

and forms of governmentality (Schwenkel and Leshkovich 2012; see also Trémon, Chapter 2, and Gold, Chapter 4 in this volume).

The Indeterminacies of Lived Change

These issues related to periodizing and naming change raise important questions about what people make of change and continuity, and the implications of these processes on their lives (Merlan 2015, 228). In people's daily lives, change is never uniform or totalizing but is experienced through the articulation of past and present conditions and future expectations, an idea that is highlighted in several chapters of this volume, such as Marina Gold's contribution on the way life is perceived in a state of perpetual revolution, illustrated by the case of Cuba (Chapter 4), and Anna Dessertine's exploration of practices, imaginaries, and perceptions of change at a mining site in Upper Guinea (Chapter 9).

Due to the limitations of macro-sociological theories, Mansoor Moaddel and Michele Gelfand (2017) argue in favor of taking into account the varying perceptions, outcomes, and configurations of change. This is important because normative discourses on change influence both researchers and their interlocutors. Researchers need to be aware of the pitfalls of selective interpretation when privileging the narratives of change of certain interlocutors over those of others, as it may cause them to overlook other processes of change. For example, due to the focus on artists whose work would be labeled "underground art" in the West and on liberal activists who sometimes even quoted Gilles Deleuze and Michel Foucault as their inspiration during the 2011 uprising in Egypt (see for instance El-Mahdi 2011; Rizk 2014; Eickhof 2016 for a critique of such perception biases), many observers failed to notice the more authoritarian trends shaping the country's future. Uncritically relying on our interlocutors' discourses on change is as unsatisfactory as trusting theory to provide ready-made explanations for the processes in question.

This means that research should be directed toward identifying and highlighting the complexities of change, showing its apparent contradictions and the combination or interaction of new and old elements, universals, and particulars (Tsing 2004), as well as emic and etic perspectives on change, in order to remain open to the unexpected and the overlooked. This is also what Tsing (2015) proposes in her book on the “possibility of life in capitalist ruins.” Highlighting precarity as the condition of our times, she argues in favor of research that considers change through the lens of indeterminacy and unpredictability, an approach that should enable us to “look for what has been ignored because it never fit the time line of progress” (Tsing 2015, 21), and to grasp multiple temporalities and assemblages of change (see also Bono, Chapter 6 of this volume). Thus there are more pragmatic and micro-sociological approaches that look at what is often called the “grey zone” in which change and continuity go hand in hand and different temporal patterns coexist. In this context, terms such as hybridization, reconfiguration, assemblage (Collier and Ong 2005), and even polyphonic assemblage (Tsing 2015) have gained momentum.

These approaches are all the more important because as Li (2014, 9) shows in her study of agrarian transformation and the entrenchment of the market in the highlands of Sulawesi, change is not necessarily a result of conflict, dramatic events, or destructive outside forces. Change may come about gradually, causing a piecemeal erosion of social relations, land, and labor in unexpected and unplanned ways. To gain insight into these gradual processes of change and their intended and unintended consequences, Li, relying on ethnographic data collected during multiple visits over two decades, was able to analyze processes in a particular place as they took shape over time. In their edited volume Jonathan Rigg and Peter Vandergeest (2012) bring together contributions from researchers who similarly return to the sites of their earlier research in Southeast Asia to examine how economic, political, and social change is affecting the places, spaces, and people over periods some of which span as many as four decades. Researchers’ long-term experience in a particular place allows them to analyze changes that neither they nor their interlocutors may have expected, and, as in the case of Yoshihiro Tsubouchi’s (2001)

analysis of change in a Malay village through the juxtaposition of two “snapshots” taken twenty years apart, that the locals have overlooked.

However, as stated above, not all researchers can afford to go back and forth to their field sites over many decades and conduct what Signe Howell and Aud Talle (2012, 3) call “multitemporal” fieldwork in order to “follow social processes at close range,” thus potentially gaining profound insights into continuity and change. Even when such a long-term relationship is possible, fieldwork results have to be published regularly. To provisionally return to a “presentism” (Elias 1987; Hartog 2015) that denies any past or future to social phenomena is no solution. Researchers need methods that they can use to elaborate sound hypotheses about change in the making, even if these have to be revised later.

Studying Snapshots of Change: An Analytical Framework

In this book, we specifically examine the methodologies and kinds of data that we, as social scientists, can rely on to develop hypothetical scenarios of change when our fieldwork period is relatively short. We argue for a combination of multiple methods of investigation that borrow from both ethnography and other methods of data collection and analysis. A classic example is the combination of ethnographic and archival research to study social change over time, such as in the cases of a Northern Vietnamese village described by John Kleinen (1999) and the political activism in Morocco described by Irene Bono (Chapter 6). Yet there are many other ways to study change, such as through the biographies of everyday objects (Derks 2015); collecting actors’ oral histories and life stories (Berriane 2015); systematic analysis of changes to religious rituals and healing practices (Lüddeckens 2018a, b); and retracing the circulation of concepts (Kreil 2016) and discourses.

In this book, we present concrete examples of methodological approaches and analytical frameworks for researchers who are studying issues involving social change. The case studies presented depart from the same questions: what kind of data enables us to assess social change

when conducting qualitative research? How should we approach the ways in which the actors we are studying conceptualize change? And how do we position our research in relation to different temporalities and scales of change? Each contribution thus articulates and questions, in different ways, these three key issues as it addresses the question of change: the unit of analysis, the empirical data, and the metanarratives of change that are used to make sense of the observed phenomenon.

The first key issue is the choice of a defined unit of analysis, which could be, for instance, a body, an individual's life story, a space, a house, a generation of actors, an institution, and a ritual. Such units of analysis are often set *a priori* for inquiries into social transformation as the objects which make it possible to observe change, as they are perceived as having some degree of internal consistency over time. Yet the relevance of these units of analysis to understand change cannot remain unquestioned. Pierre Bourdieu (1986) illustrates the issue well with his reflections on the "biographical illusion" inherent in life stories, for example, which rests on the false axiom that individual trajectories consist of various stages that are necessarily coherent. Consequently, addressing the question of change also allows us to reflect on the subjects of change; i.e., the units of reference or analysis deemed permanent by the researcher and/or their interlocutors.

Secondly, we address the empirical data used to study these units of analysis. Based on data gathered from the observation of specific actions, situations, practices and emotions, interviews and life histories, network analysis, archival material, and online sources, the chapters in this book critically reflect on what kinds of empirical data can be linked to the chosen unit of analysis. How can the empirical data provide us with conclusive insights into change at the level of the chosen unit of analysis? And how can we avoid the pitfall of circular knowledge, in which we read what we already know from other sources into our material?

Thirdly, we address the metanarratives and theories that underlie the interpretation of change. As mentioned, there are many metanarratives (theories, ideologies, and dominant schemes of interpretation) that offer a certain understanding of change: the interrelation between capitalism and processes of individualization; processes of individualization and secularization and the decline of traditional religion; democratization as

a linear process of transition that occurs in different phases; and revolutions as transformative events during which people are the main actors of change leading to freedom and democracy. What, for instance, does the chosen unit of analysis enable us to say about broader schemes of change? What is the role of metanarratives of change? Do they frame the general setting, the context within which the studied processes take place, or do they blind us from seeing what is actually going on?

In his extended case study model, Michael Burawoy (2009) reminds us of the importance of theory. According to him, researchers need to rely on theory to step beyond the limitations of the field, as this is the only way to account for the broad structural constraints shaping the situations they are interested in. While theories play a central role in our attempts to go beyond the observed case, they are themselves embedded in mundane struggles and not only abstract efforts to provide a general understanding of the world (Castoriadis 1975, 8). In the social sciences, the non-reproducibility of historical situations further increases the difficulty of considering theory as the ultimate framework of knowledge, as there are no means for creating the same setting twice as in a laboratory. Therefore, comparisons necessarily exclude dimensions of reality that could be of great importance for understanding current evolutions (Passeron 1991). Should we then abandon any attempt to gain an understanding of change which would go beyond what is immediately graspable from our fieldwork or formulated by our interlocutors?

To address this general question we suggest shifting the focus away from (purportedly) abstract understandings of theory to concentrate more on two interrelated dimensions of theory-building, which are the emic and the etic dimensions: the categories through which we are observing or studying change and our interlocutor's categories as actors living change. Carlo Ginzburg insists on the importance of both distinguishing between the two and taking their interconnectedness into account: "one starts from etic questions aiming to get emic answers [...] that generate etic questions and vice versa" (2012, 108–16). Thus "the emic perspective can be grasped only through the mediation of an etic perspective" (*ibid.*, 108), while our etic categories are themselves the product of our interaction with the emic dimension. Furthermore, our etic analytical concepts allow us to conduct comparative research and

develop theories while they themselves are “determined by particular contextual conditions differently from emic perspectives” (Lüddeckens and Schrimpf 2018, 19).

Applying this perspective to our analytical framework, we contend that metanarratives offer certain understandings of change that inevitably influence our choice of units of analysis and the related empirical data. At the same time, they can and should be contested, improved, and refined through the material collected via these same units of analysis. Thus, instead of taking such metanarratives as explanatory schemes for the phenomena that we are observing, we should use them as incentives to ask certain questions without assuming their answers. As an outcome, our research should enable us to question the teleological interpretations implicit in these metanarratives.

Book Outline

The chapters that constitute this book address these methodological questions on the basis of concrete empirical cases and diverse approaches and types of data from various contexts in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East. The questions tackled by the contributors are diverse, but they all revolve around change and focus on the methodological challenges encountered and the tools used to study social transformation. The book’s structure is based on three main challenges pertaining to the study of change.

The first part of the book brings together chapters concerned with the challenge of connecting different scales of change. Change is never simply an isolated event: changes in the lives of individuals are often intimately related to broader societal change and global processes, even though perceptions of the impact of such changes may differ. To understand change it is therefore necessary to go beyond individual life stories or case studies of particular communities and link these to the different scales on which change takes place. The question, however, is how one connects these different scales.

Anne-Christine Trémon (Chapter 2) shows how the inhabitants of a village community in China understand larger socio-economic change, how they refer to this in terms of a revalorization of locality, and how this process alters their relationship with their diaspora. Through this case, she shows how contradictions encountered during our research can inform us about accelerated change, ensuing conflicts of scale, and people's attempts to reconceptualize the valence of local and global scales. With the case study of universities in Egypt, Daniele Cantini (Chapter 3) offers methodological and theoretical reflections on the possibilities offered by the ethnographic study of institutions for addressing the question of social change. In particular, he deals with the discrepant temporalities at stake which sometimes collide in institutions during major political events, as illustrated by the 2011 uprising and its aftermath. Marina Gold's study (Chapter 4) focuses on Cuba, where references to change and continuity are a powerful discursive mechanism for redefining and reinvigorating the revolutionary project. She explores how different kinds of large-scale transcendental events and small private ones shape people's everyday experiences and understanding of the perpetual revolution in Cuba.

The second part of the book consists of chapters that address the challenge of studying change through biography. While this has become a popular way of tracing the lives of people, objects, or institutions in relation to changes in wider society, the biographic approach has been criticized for creating an illusion of coherence and linearity, and for reducing complexity. Consequently the central questions include: How can we make biography useful for the study of change? How do biographies evolve over time? And what does this tell us about changes in society and the roles of individuals in these changes?

Christoph Schwarz (Chapter 5) combines narrative biographical interviews with generational analysis to study transformations. Using the life story of a young Moroccan activist, he shows how research can identify particular constellations of intergenerational relationships as characteristic of generational disparities. Irene Bono (Chapter 6) explores the formation of the Moroccan nation-state by adopting the biography of a single actor as her fieldwork, using personal archives and mnemonic techniques in interviews. With this case study she shows

the tension between the collective memory surrounding political change and personal experiences of it, highlighting the ways in which individuals can participate in a hegemonic paradigm that does not necessarily match their own experience of change. Eliza Isabaeva (Chapter 7) looks at societal change through the lens of house biographies. By describing the gradual transformation of houses in an illegal squatter settlement in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, she shows that the transformation of such micro-spaces for living can inform us about wider developments in Kyrgyz society, shedding new light on the two dominant and opposing meta-narratives that interpret the 2005 Tulip Revolution either as a moment of change or a moment of continuity. Using the example of Sayyid Qutb, an Egyptian writer who later became a prominent Islamist thinker, Giedre Sabaseviciute (Chapter 8) shows how intellectuals of the middle of the twentieth century alternately put forward mentorship and generational divides when speaking about more established authors as a way to claim authority and discredit competitors, even when the groups making the generational claims were quite diverse in terms of age. She stresses the importance of considering which solidarity networks writers primarily rely on for understanding the shifts in their ideas, an issue that is still relevant in the analysis of today's literary scenes.

In the book's final section, the focus is on the challenges of studying change in the making. Change is often studied *a posteriori* when it has become clear what has changed and to what extent, in which direction, for how long, and at what level(s). As researchers we are often confronted with situations or places in which change is obviously happening before our eyes, sometimes at a very rapid pace. How can we make sense of what is going on? And how can we judge the temporality of these accounts of change in the making?

Anna Dessertine addresses these questions by looking at the transformative role of space in the case of gold mining in a Malinké village in Upper Guinea (Chapter 9). Through Dessertine's example of what she describes as a liminal and ephemeral space, she analyzes everyday situations to explore how people perceive and perform change differently depending on their expectations and interpretations of the behavior and actions that characterize artisanal gold mining in Guinea. In her

chapter on the 2013 military coup in Egypt (Chapter 10), Maria Malmström discusses the difficulties of exploring change in the making. Based upon her own lived experience during moments of intense and violent change, she suggests the use of a method anchored in affect and the body, showing how this enables her to study tangible emotions that resonate with and transform everyday engagements in a transitional country. In the last chapter, Urs Weber (Chapter 11) shows how the study of national newspaper articles can inform us about the changing normative expectations about funeral practices in Taiwan. Using discourse analysis, he analyzes the trend toward a secular understanding of funerals and more generally discusses theories of secularization, one of the dominant metanarratives of change.

Conclusion

Henri Bergson famously argued that a sound understanding of change requires apprehending its movement in its totality. In a conference at Oxford University in 1911, he compared change to a melody: if someone interrupts it, it is no longer the same melody. Bergson uses this analogy to argue against fracturing change into short analytical intervals. For a proper understanding, the whole process of the change needs to be comprehended (2011, 26–27). Gaston Bachelard contests Bergson's approach: he characterizes the experience of time by its disruptions and voids, to which human consciousness grants a temporary coherency. According to Bachelard, a melody only exists through the repetition of its framework and by the rhythm organizing it, without which it would not be recognizable as a melody (Bachelard 1950, 112–28; see also Corbier 2012).

This book aims to show that as social scientists we can neither reach for the Bergsonian ideal of a complete appraisal of change processes, nor abandon continuity as Bachelard suggests. Thus we need to rely on what is at hand: snapshots of change, sketching a movement whose end will always remain unknowable. This book is a reflexive exercise with practical goals. It tries to find the best ways to combine a *longue durée* perspective with the experiences and interpretations of our interlocutors. We

prefer to avoid bombastic claims that this book will revolutionize the ways people do field research, but we nevertheless hope that it is a fruitful attempt to make the best of the fundamental epistemic conditions of our knowledge about change.

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