In and out, fieldwork in a political space: the case of the European Commission
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In and Out, Fieldwork in a Political Space: The Case of the European Commission

Auf der Grundlage von Feldforschung in der Europäischen Kommission nähert sich die Autorin der Frage nach methodischen Neuerungen in der politischen Anthropologie aus zwei Blickwinkeln. Zum einen beschäftigt sie sich mit der Identifizierung der Europäischen Kommission als Feld für anthropologische Forschung und mit der Frage, welche Veränderungen für die Anthropologie selbst die Wahl eines solchen Feldes mit sich bringt.

Zum anderen beleuchtet sie das Problem der Konstruktion eines Forschungsobjekts innerhalb einer Institution sowie der Subjektivität der/s Forschenden. Die Verschiebung des analytischen Fokus auf sowohl die internen (Herausbildung einer spezifischen „europäischen Kultur") als auch die externen Aspekte (Verhältnis zu anderen Organisationen) der europäischen Institutionen bedeutet nicht nur eine Herausforderung für die politische Anthropologie, sondern auch für die Institutionen selbst, insbesondere, wenn diese zukünftig tatsächlich eine neue Politik der „Transparenz und Offenheit" implementieren wollen.

1 Introduction

French anthropology has undergone significant evolutionary leaps that have their origin in the mid-80s. This evolution concerns the understanding of the places where anthropological research may or should be done as well as the theory of what has been called "new objects". The concept of culture as the core of anthropology and the reference to the field site as a locus and a means to collect data remain central; however, many epistemological aspects have to be considered, especially in order to understand the new dimension given to political anthropology. A special issue of the general-audience magazine on social sciences, *Sciences Humaines* (1998–1999) explicitly addressed the question of the global change with its title "Anthropology today: new field sites, new objects". It was published twelve years after the renowned journal of anthropologists *L'Homme* edited a special volume, simply called "Anthropologie: état des lieux" (1986) which intended to sum up the evolutions that were then observed in traditional anthropology. As Susan Carol Rogers (2001, 482) noted, French anthropologists started to realize that

> the ethnographic map had been extended to cover most of the world, including societies considered to be highly developed and modern … (and) … that the weakening of the 'grand partage' that had once defined anthropology in terms of the particular places or types of societies in its purview implied a reworking of relationships with the other *sciences humaines*.

Many anthropologists still focus on "exotic societies", an expression which considers geographic distance as a criterion for doing cultural anthropology, addressing however their research to facts, and to social and cultural practices embedded within modernity. But many anthropological voices have emerged that admit the development of ethnology "at home" or closer to home as the logical extension of the universalizing project of anthropology (Lenclud 1986; Abélès 1990). This claim reveals the existence of an underlying debate in the profession on clarifying what the strength of the discipline could be and how to challenge analyses which are being done in other social science

disciplines, especially sociology, socio-linguistics or political science. In her brilliant analysis of recent trends in French anthropology, Rogers observes how the "grand partage" ideology still holds firm, with very few anthropologists being able to apply an holistic approach, which would allow the understanding of a particular society beyond the specific segment or discrete dimension that has been the object of field research and related analysis. Abélès constitutes a remarkable exception to this general observation; his work on the French political institutions (related to local politics for instance in *Quiet days in Burgundy*, 1991; or national politics in his recent book on the French national assembly, 2000) always attempts to shed light on society as a whole and analyzes political practices in correspondence with the larger social and ideological environment.

It took time for traditional anthropologists dealing with kinship structures or symbolist and cultural anthropology in remote societies to accept the new developments of political anthropology in complex societies. They skeptically observed the efforts to bring anthropology home as they considered it a kind of deviation from the anthropological project as a global design. A similar reaction could be registered with regard to the birth of a postmodern reflexive anthropology as if questioning the conditions of producing knowledge was illegitimate. This may be related to the position of authority the anthropologist might develop – while "studying down" – when focusing on pre-industrial societies, autochthonous groups or people usually deprived from being considered as detaining political sovereignty (Bellier/Legros 2001). At the same time, political scientists and socio-linguists in France and Austria (to quote from my own experience), and other disciplines in social sciences (contemporary history, psychology, economy) started to welcome anthropology as a means to clarify their own objects of study, particularly those addressing the cultural dimension of politics, at times adopting some of the tools that made anthropology famous, like ethnography, or more generally using key concepts that have been promoted under specific circumstances to explain modern politics. This hap-

pened in the case of the notion of "ethnicity", a concept which traveled extensively from anthropologists to political scientists, decision makers and to the media, being completely emptied of its initial meaning to be used for categorizing cultural attitudes stamped as deviant to the western standardized model.

The concept of culture and field site remains fundamentally important to French anthropology, especially emphasized in university and research curricula. However, the development of research within institutions in general, and in political organizations in particular, contributes to reshaping the debate within the discipline. This article is written by an anthropologist who experienced different field sites and explored several sub-domains within anthropology such as cultural and political anthropology and who is therefore qualified to address the problem of adapting methods and tools not only to the changing conditions of doing research but also to the challenge of interdisciplinarity for the renewal of social sciences. Doing fieldwork in a supranational political organization like the European Commission (EC) raises several questions that will be presented briefly.

I address the question of methodological innovations in political anthropology from two angles taken from the research in the European Commission. First, I identify the European Commission as a field site for anthropological research and the changes such a field represents for the anthropological scene. Second, I expose the dialectical issue of constructing the object of research within a powerful institution and the relationship between an objectified position and the researcher subjectivity.

2 The European Commission as a field for anthropological research

2.1 Anthropology and the concept of institution

According to the *Dictionary of Ethnology and Anthropology*, the concept of institution is acknowledged to be crucial for anthropology,

> because in its most general meaning it designates everything that, in a given society, takes the form of an

organized disposal, oriented toward the functioning or the reproduction of that society. It results from an original will (the act of instituting) or from an even tacit adhesion to its supposed legitimacy (G. Augustins, in: Bonte/Izard 1991, 378; translation I.B.).

Such a definition immediately raises as an issue which type of relation can be asserted between the European Commission which results from a positive act of instituting and the European society which is in the stage of its formation.

Before going deeper into that question and proposing a response, the definition points to the problem of what we call an institution. This leads us to the admission that what we now call "anthropology of the institutions" has been structured only recently as a research area, often associated with the "anthropology of organizations" in Europe and the United States, and in France with the creation of an interdisciplinary team of full time researchers and professors affiliated to the National Center for Scientific Research (LAIOS, *Laboratoire d'Anthropologie des Institutions et des Organisations Sociales*) in 1995. Such an anthropology addresses the question of "how institutions think" – to quote Mary Douglas' seminal work (1986) – considering institutions not as organizations (as sociologists do) but as cultural formations where social practices, social facts and the production of norms which apply outside their boundaries have to be understood specifically. The human dimension of the institution is what allows us to consider it as a legitimate object for anthropology, especially for understanding the development of modern complex societies.

Historically,[1] anthropology has been associated with the exoticism of anthropologists in the first world, their assimilation to the dominant strata in the third world where most of the studies have been done and, more importantly, with a key paradigm to understand the concept of culture: that of the Other. Anthropologists were especially good at studying "others", sometimes under very difficult conditions, without fragmented social objects. Yet, they were theoretically and practically less equipped to address their own societies and scientific objects that were considered to be part of modern or post-

modern and complex societies. Distance between "us" and "them" was primordial for starting an anthropological research to regard human beings in society as a complex entity as Lévi Strauss theorized it so well. Traditionally, the capacity to "study them" has been associated with the notion of distant observation[2] and the method of participation for collecting data. Participatory observation remains the keyword for defining the means to collect qualitative data, a method which is preferred to quantitative analysis in order to make salient cultural relations as well as human and social dynamics.

Conditions for analysis have not changed nor has the opposition between "statistical models" and "mechanical models" – which had been constructed by Durkheim, Mauss and Lévi Strauss – disappeared. However, the current process of globalization induces radical changes in the location of subjects within a particular culture and society, affecting the classical divide between "us" and "them", the Other being possibly the neighbor. The awareness of this phenomenon obliges us to rethink our "object" of study. As Abélès (1991, 343) said, "anthropology is the art of taking distance within day to day life", wherever studying takes place. It is the capability to raise questions in the strangest as in the most familiar culture. It has nothing to do with the subjective dimension of one particular group. In other terms, there are no groups or societies in the world which could be considered as relevant for an anthropological approach when others would not. Distance in anthropology should not be considered as a quality of the object anymore, or a condition for applying anthropological tools. It is better understood as "a quality of the approach", meaning that the anthropologist – wherever s/he works – should maintain the right distance between "observer" and "subjects" (people who give substance to the object studied) to be able to analyze cultural practices.

The impact of Durkheim's idea that "social facts must be observed like things" has long been dominant within the field of social sciences. Only lately anthropologists started to reconsider the way social facts were objectified in their own methodology. Initially criticizing the particular

relationship between an anthropologist and the people or society s/he writes about, as well as the process leading to identify researchers as authors (such as Evans Pritchard and the Nuer, E. Leach and the Kachin, Ph. Descola and the Achuar, B. Malinowski and the Trobriandese), American anthropologists raised several questions regarding the relationship between the ethnologist and the privileged informant, the condition of producing knowledge as well as the restitution of this knowledge to those who provided the key to enter their world. This is how interpretative anthropology was born (with scholars such as James Clifford and Clifford Geertz) and how deconstructivism, a post-modernist trend heir to European ideas attributed to Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze, was propagated and re-interpreted in the U.S.. Since about twenty years, with George Marcus, Michael Fisher, and Arjun Appadurai, many ideas were developed to establish anthropology as an epistemological posture which emphasizes cultural criticism based on the de-familiarization of common sense data. Shifting between field sites, both far away as well as up close, observing prisons, local politics in France or in Uzbekistan, school training, central administrations and urban settings, courts of justice and many other "objects" which could be considered as as many discrete dimensions of a particular society in whatever country in the world, contributed to renewing the debate on the added value of anthropology.

2.2 The anthropologist, the institution and European Culture

When approaching the European Commission, the anthropologists were combining in fact the critical posture needed for understanding such an organization with the expert position provided by the institution. The anthropologist's research in the European Commission starts with a question. Why should an anthropologist focus on the Commission or any other European institution to gain a comprehensive understanding of the emergence of a "European culture"? The Commission is the principal actor of European integration and it is, in fact, the only one

staffed with and animated by people coming from all EU members and a few other countries, to serve the Community. Seen as the fish-pond of European ideas – Jean Monnet (1976, 551) once called it "the laboratory of Europe" where people "work together" – it attests to the birth of "the European spirit". Hence, the Commission is one of the best places to understand how changes take place in the context of the European Union. This answer provides the reason for studying this European institution but does not satisfy the underlying question regarding the European culture: What is this "European culture" that could be considered as the main object for anthropology?

After the low approval of the Maastricht Treaty by the population of several countries revealed a kind of popular disenchantment in 1993, Jacques Delors, then President of the Commission, called a team of anthropologists to study "the relative weight of national languages and cultures in its services and the emergence of a European culture" (Abélès et al. 1993). The scientific interest of Abélès who had studied the fabric of European politics in the European Parliament before Delors' call (1992) and that of Bellier who had just concluded her work on the French administration (1993) met the interest of the Commission for better understanding itself.

As central institution for building the Union, the Commission is also the very first place where people concretely experience Europe. Such an experience can briefly be summed up as a process lived by the agents of both dissociation from national references and incorporation of European values and behavior. Working together in multinational teams, speaking different languages and inventing a common jargon (Bellier 1999a) for taking action, the Commission, its members (the Commissioners), and its agents (the Euro civil servants) are the "face" of the European motto, the vivid expression of "unity within diversity". The Commission is also a place of power where several administrative and political cultures and multiple (national, religious, political, economic) influences merge (Bellier 2000a, 53ff.). This particularity generates conditions which typically authenticate any

European decision, as Abélès and Bellier (1996) analyzed it by making explicit the relation between "the cultural compromise" as a social practice displayed by Euro-actors in professional circumstances and "a culture of compromise" as a political attitude, contrasting with the way conflicts are arbitrated at national levels.

The Commission is an interesting field site for the anthropologist as it is mainly localized in Brussels and represents the Community in more than a hundred states. It is the "heart" of institutional Europe, as one official said; Europe as it is symbolized by the huge buildings occupied by the European Parliament, the Council of Ministers and the proliferation of satellites such as embassies, permanent representations, missions, consultant offices, and media offices. It develops several lines of communication within its own organization, with the other European institutions, with interest groups and with individuals. It is the referential point on which all attention focuses, yet it is fragmented into more than sixty buildings, twenty-five General Directorates, twenty commissioners and 18.000 civil servants. Unique and diverse in itself, it is a complex organization with the properties of a new anthropological object which needs a "multi-sited ethnography" (Marcus 1999) to reveal itself.

The particular institutional position of the Commission within the multiple networks that transform the idea of Europe into a concrete world opens a privileged access to a broad research perspective contemplating not only the cultural dimension of institutional Europe but also the re-articulation of national identities, the difficult issues of languages (Bellier 2001), the definition of European governance, the process of Europeanization (Bellier 2002a) and the relations of Europe with the rest of the world (Bellier 1999b; 2002b).

3 An anthropologist in the field of power: objectified position and subjectivity

Bellier and Wilson (2000, 6) noted that

(b)ecause of the anthropological intention to immerse the researcher within the total lives of a community,

it is very difficult to study political institutions, and the many 'communities' which give them definition and meaning, during office hours, and within the physical constraints of office blocks, committee rooms, and airport lounges. In this sense the anthropology of EU institutions and identities shares much with all anthropological studies of culture and power where ethnographers attempt to 'study up' (cf. Nader 1974; Wolf 1974) by tracing the lines of differential access to wealth and political power from local communities to the wider arenas of economics and politics in regions and states.

3.1 Accessing the institution

"How does one get in?" is not the simple question it seems to be. One cannot just reach the doors of the political institution and say to the first person met: "I want to study you." Access to powerful institutions is often mediated through the existence of former connections. They can be established directly by the researcher and a contact person working in the institution at a certain level of the decision-making system. They can be facilitated by the development of professional links between the institution-object and national and academic circles which clarify the legal aspect of the research at official levels. They do not result from a self-presentation, because anthropology supposes to establish a direct relation with people; usually people who are in powerful institutions need a proper introduction before they feel like talking in confidence. The anthropologist is either working freelance or is part of some scientific cooperative exchange such as those which are established within the Common Framework for Research and Development. It increasingly happens that institutions, even more often companies, call academics to do research about or for themselves, but this is not widely advertised, at least not in France. Applied anthropology does not have the same appeal as basic research, for one main reason often put forward, namely that powerful institutions would try to use the external expertise to create a new image. Reflexivity as well as ethical concerns about doing the enquiry are therefore raised and conflict may become salient if (or when) the expecta-

tions of the requesting institution run counter the anthropologists results.

Multinational competitive organizations which are linked to power decisions are not used to basic research. Lobbyists and other consultants who are in search of information relevant to their domain often approach the Commission's agents. Thus the few anthropologists who dare to consider the European Commission as "an object for analysis" are usually judged according to other groups of people approaching the Commission, even if the intention of the research, the interactive practice and the analytical goal differ radically from the goals of those above-mentioned groups. They are evaluated by the "agents in service" against the presence of the people who approach the Commission to extract information for any kind of reasons (such as lobbyists) and those who contribute to controlling the organization's *modus operandi*, doing the audit of the staff, for instance: two kinds of outsiders who are more or less legitimate in the Commission's world but who are considered as possibly "threatening" the interests of the service or that of the agent. In all cases one of the main challenges in this kind of fieldwork is, for the anthropologist, to build an independent position, not only for ethical reasons but also to be able to follow up the multiple lines which cross the organization without being trapped in only one area. If this is not achieved, the results of the research will run the risk of being biased, affected by the anthropologist's subjectivity, and possibly his or her political manipulation. In order to build that position, s/he has to be aware that officials have their own model of analysis.

As "powerful indigenous", as some political scientist once called them, the European civil servants develop their own criteria related to what they call "expertise". It refers to knowledge and know-how that they think belongs to external sources which the institution calls upon in order to help the bureaucrats to inform a particular file or policy. When they call for tenders and collect applications, they themselves fix the terms of references of the scope and method of the experts' activities. Such a practical position also conditions the reception of

the anthropologist's study, even if such a study does not have a direct implication for their work.

One anecdote may be enlightening: When I first joined the EC's General Directorate for Development (presently DG Dev), I was invited to present myself to a director. On the phone I had explained to an "assistant" the kind of research I was going to do and had been introduced by one of those numerous "notes" which circulate in the Commission. On arrival, I was immediately called to attend a meeting where ten Euro civil servants, all dressed alike with a white shirt, a bow tie, black trousers and suspenders, very politely asked me "the terms of reference of the study" they were supposed to collaborate with. I explained the conditions of the EC demand, the scientific interest of an anthropological approach to the Commission, the methodology I intended to follow and my complete independence, but they insisted to learn from me: "What are your terms of reference?" It cost me time to understand what they wanted to say. They perfectly knew what an anthropologist does, especially those who had worked on development projects in Africa and Pacific Islands. This is why, humorously, they dressed like their "chief" to let me feel what kind of stereotypical image has been attached to them within the Commission's identification system and how much they were aware of it.[3] Beyond the projection of this particular image, they wanted to check my understanding of their own codes and get precise details on the mandate which had been given by President Delors to the team of anthropologists, two French and one British, whose arrival had officially been announced. They performed a kind of ritual welcome, which revealed to be unique in the Commission services. It has been very helpful for me to develop the requested attitudes to be able to attend all kinds of meetings and events, as a Euro civil servant would do. Throughout the twelve months duration of the research, I always had to present myself but my presence soon became familiar and the formalities became lighter each time I had reached a particular level or group in the institution hierarchical organization. The generalization of interviews with secretaries,

clerks, senior officials, directors, advisers, general directors, and commissioners facilitated an inner comprehension of the culture of the organization.

During interviews, people sometimes speak from a local point, i.e. an office, a service, or a General Directorate, whereas on other occasions they speak for the whole as a spokesperson of the organization. The effect of the personification process, through the formation of a "we group" and the demonstration of some kind of *esprit de corps* (corporate culture), contributes to hide the multiple diversities which divide the organizational body in order to achieve the difficult process of forming "one voice", in the European meaning of the word (Bellier 2000). The task of the anthropologists is to go beyond this point, and for doing so

> they are confronted by daunting, abundant and critical apparatuses of information in the media and among other academic disciplines. Furthermore they must negotiate their way among extremely knowledgeable respondents and audiences whose own models of culture and identity create remarkable dialectics of method and theory within an anthropologist's field experience (see Rogers 1997) (Bellier/Wilson 2000, 6).

3.2 Symbolic identification

In the founding fathers' era, access to the field was mainly a problem of distance and time spent with travelling. Nowadays, and especially with regard to institutional access, it is a matter of negotiation which conditions the degree of acceptance of the anthropologist. The negotiation concerns three levels:

- The first one relates to identity. The identification of the anthropologist with an agent of the organization gives a status that simplifies the participation in the activities of the people s/he observes. It is necessary to consider the consequences of such an identification and to delineate the responsibility of the anthropologist's participation: interacting on law making and international agreements neither mobilizes the same energy nor has the same

effect as hunting or gathering in the Amazon forest. Access can be negotiated in a contractual or in a symbolic form. The symbolic identification doubtlessly simplifies the displacement within the field of research. The badge given to me in the EC, a small blue-colored plastic card featuring my picture and an expiry date, was a door-opener which cleared my status to my "observers", whom I wanted to observe, too. The little tag had the power to suppress questions and to give a freedom of circulation inside and outside the EC. Its symbolic effect was to implicitly tell: "She is like you, an agent of the Commission, and she is allowed to go where you go." It had also the power to dissolve a prior identification of national origin, which is politically sensitive in the EC. The effect of the badge is to be understood with respect to the institution's policy of internal and external controls, a policy which is itself feeding contradictory images within the institution. Some people said that the Commission is "an ivory tower", "a kind of fortress", "a cage", and other metaphors related to enclosure, opacity, secrets and protection. Others referred to it as "a glass house", "open to all", "where anyone could pick up information". Metaphors which relate to transparency, openness and free access are always presented by the agents as a particularity of that institution as compared to situations they experienced for instance in the World Bank or in national administrations.

- The second level concerns the freedom regarding the investigations one can do. One has to be aware of people's expectations – be they decision-makers or not – vis-à-vis the anthropologist as well as of their understanding of anthropology. Often, senior officials have in mind a stereotype of what an anthropologist should do; for instance dealing with issues of culture or religion corresponds more to the standardization of the anthropologist's work, whereas dealing with questions of power seems in their eyes more related to political sciences than to anthropology. Senior officials who fix the terms of reference for evaluation studies and audits have deline-

ated disciplines in their mind. Concerning social sciences, this is especially problematic in a multinational environment in which management theories and quantitative economics are more common than qualitative approaches and long term reflection. Furthermore, the epistemological issues as well as potential differences between national schools and trends in anthropology, the relations between ethnology and anthropology, the distance to the sociology of organizations and the position of anthropology within science history are not fully understood or even considered. In the best case, the organization wants the anthropologist to paint a good image of its services and ideology. In the worst case, it uses the anthropologists for its own sake and interest. In any case, the objectivity of the study is to be fully accepted by the institution to preserve the anthropologist's capacity to bring a critical view rather than a conformist one. This presupposes an internal negotiation with the "object of study" as much as negotiations with the academic surroundings. In all cases, even if the anthropologist must reduce the distance to the subject of the study, it is important that he or she remains denoted by a certain exteriority and a lower involvement in the system. Within a highly structured institution of power, which has developed inner controls, the only possibility to achieve this aim is to go everywhere one wants to go and investigate all levels and corners, not following the recommendations of the organizational representatives but the demands of a full-fledged field of observation.

- The third level of negotiation concerns the results of the research, dealing with the content as well as with the form of writing. To whom do the research results belong and how are they going to be used? First, one has to note the writing habits and patterns of communication of the people working for and in the European institutions. The Commission requires short studies, with executive summaries, no footnotes, and possibly written in a clear language. The agents who are the "face" of the Commission are overwhelmed by tex-

tual production and they are used to their own jargon but not to other ones (Bellier 1999a). The textual production of the anthropologist will be affected by learning a new form of writing in order to adapt the academic production to their audience in the Commission. One has to be aware of these different modes of writing which correlate to the larger subject of information policy. Secondly, public administrations usually try to control output and prevent their insiders (agents, officials, etc.) to publish under their name without having obtained a prior permission from their superiors. It happens that people bypass the hierarchy and assume pseudonyms to publish their own personal views but also in these cases, precautions are taken to preserve the services' and people's "privacy". In this context, negotiation deals with the independent form of the statement and analysis and the way the anthropologist returns "the knowledge to the informants". It is a critical point because information in an organization like the EC is a source of power and it can be seen as a source of disorder. Hence, the Commission has a contractual policy, which prohibits anyone working in the Commission, to communicate to the outside world what has been seen and heard inside the services for two years after leaving the Commission. After this two-years delay, information can circulate freely.

The management of information relates to specific temporalities in the EC. Secrets are to be respected in any case as social facts legitimizing social practices under observation. In the Commission, it is often a short term secrecy. But the content is not exactly what the anthropologist is interested in. It is more important for us to know about the existence of secret strategies to replace them in the context of data analysis which develops on another time schedule. What is secret for diplomats and chief negotiators takes place in a different temporality than what moves the day-to-day life of an organization. It does not have the same importance for those who are part of the organization and those who are not. Being confronted with such opposite attitudes, the anthropologist observes that ad-

ministrative order and collective practices are always at discrepancy, therefore justifying the analysis of the agents' self-perceptions.

3.3 Collecting discourses and analyzing representations

When the anthropologist starts observing the Commission, s/he disposes of an image – that we in our discipline call a representation – informed by media sources and analyses provided by a few specialists on European matters. Surprisingly, in the early 90s, studies on the Commission were not numerous, especially in France whose relationship with the EU was for a long time considered as "the prolongation of French politics by other means". Therefore – contrary to many informants who repeatedly mentioned "how the first contact with the Commission has been a cultural shock" as if they were expecting to be part of some kind of uniform well-established cultural model – the anthropologist had no prevalent model in mind and was able to face a world whose cultural dimensions had never been described. The EU was a new form of *terra incognita*. On arrival, I had the same point of view as the "street person", thinking that it is difficult to be familiar with an institutional world where no policy on the use of language has been agreed upon, and where everything seemed to be divided into structures, units, and blocks with very little space for free interaction. Above all, the Commission is a world where the overriding preoccupation is with dominant economic and structural adjustment to global competition rather than with cultural rights and social improvements of life.

Once the conditions for doing participatory observation at official levels have been agreed upon, the first task is to contact individuals within any structure they belong to and to reconstruct with their help the representation of the world in which their activities make sense. This can be "Europe" as a whole in the largest context of world identities and globalization, or the idea of "Europe" as shown in the statement of many persons that "they were happy to be part of the history that made a peaceful Europe

possible". It can also be only the Commission, as a limited world into which personal habits and thoughts dissolve. The fact is that one has to face not only one world but various representations of several worlds. In order to find a meaning among multiple sources and to see how the management of complexity is intricated with the day-to-day life of the Commission, the research operations led to a formal exploration of "the microcosm", a word that I use (Bellier 1997) for its meaning in spatial as well as in philosophical terms. The investigation developed in a continuous process wherein each person is considered as anchored in a reality whose meaning can only be understood within a set of relationships.

It is fascinating to observe how agents of an organization that they know for years are unable to give a proper representation of it: they do not know who exactly are their partners, they have no idea of what is happening in a service which does not belong to their General Directorate, they are working as they say "with no rear view mirror". Obviously they are informed according to certain patterns that the anthropologist has to understand, not only by questioning them but also by observing the meetings they attend and by listening to all kinds of peripheral discursive events which do not take place within an official information order. The method is time-consuming but quite efficient. Formal interviews within offices are combined with informal talks wherever possible (in the restaurants and surrounding bars, in the elevators and the corridors), a method which helps to follow the modalities of contact the people use to work together. Observing concrete social and cultural relations is doubtlessly much more efficient in terms of the quality of the data collected than trying to justify a pre-established model of interaction or administrative science that would have been set without knowing any of the social conditions that are part of the institution's life.

Understanding what happens at the smallest level of the constituting units of the whole structure seems to be rather counterproductive if one adheres to the Commission's order and considers that what really counts is what happens

among the superior levels of the hierarchy, the College, the Commissioners' cabinets, the General Directors and the member states' representatives. However, a decentralized approach gives much more information than one initially expects as it implies the possibility to question the established order. It creates the intellectual possibility for building a complete representation of the Commission as a whole and its position within the European Union system. The investigation continuously links the formal dimension of the institution with the personal dimension of the individuals who animate the institution and give it the face it has. The formal dimension constitutes the background highlighting the fact that the multicultural game which is observed is not similar to what can be seen in tourist settings or in multinational companies: there is a rationality attached to the institution legitimizing the activities undertaken by the agents. Now it is precisely the human dimension of the organization which makes it interesting to observe, especially in analyzing how the dynamics responsible for the public representation of the organization are set in motion. Apart from the discourses on the organization and its work which are extremely rich in terms of content and metaphors, the anthropologist collects data related to personal events, pre-existing socialization, training, motivations, expectations, and displacements within the institutional world. Sometimes, the methodology associated with the anthropology of kinship is very helpful for building genealogies and learning about the taxonomies of social relations. I learnt to use it in a small-scale society in the Amazon forest (Bellier 1991) and, with some adaptation due to the fact that institutions are microcosms but not real societies, I realized that it was a good door for entering complex worlds as well. It played a key role for working out the links that exist between French society and the National School of Administration (Bellier 1993). It was also useful in the European Commission to build an image of the ways the expatriates reconfigure, in their professional context, a domestic space they need apparently, to overcome the uncertainties due to multiculturalism.

4 Concluding remarks

An anthropology of transnational organizations develops on the basis of new fieldwork to be done for improving our theoretical outputs. We need more data to be collected to draw the right conclusions from the politics of negotiation dominating these fields and having an impact on fundamental aspects of our research. The fact that the European institutions are involved in a constant process of negotiation – internally with the member states and externally with the rest of the world – affects the space and time conditions of the research. It explains the fragmentation of analyses by sociologists, political scientists and anthropologists and the difficulty to propose a complete view of what is happening at the European level. Most of the concepts which have been used in order to study nation states must be revisited to analyze the pluralistic formation of the European Union and to be able to understand the differences between the EU, the nation state and federations existing in different parts of the world.

For a discipline like anthropology, the specificity of these institutions requires the development of a new understanding of what constitutes the "boundaries" of the field of research and of the delineation of the object of research, especially concerning the concept of culture as center of the discipline. A full understanding of the meaning of European culture leads us to revisit the formation of national cultures and identities. Very few studies have been done on transnationalism and the way it affects not only the working practices of individuals involved in such institutions but also their socialization and their ideology. Participatory observation can provide very good data for establishing a correlation between what is experienced by the European agents and what they want to implement when they propose a particular policy. Therefore, this kind of field site must be developed for understanding some of the evolutions of our complex modern societies.

The European institutions must be simultaneously considered as microcosms where specific relations take place within particular conditions in order to identify the culture of the or-

ganization, and as organizations which are related to a larger and complex environment responsible for their existence and legitimacy to which they are accountable. Changing the focus of the analysis to grasp both the internal and external aspects of the institutions, the local organizational cultures and their relations with the larger national and European cultures is not only a challenge for political anthropology. It is also a challenge for the institutions themselves, in particular if they really aim to implement a new policy on "transparency and openness". As powerful institutions are not always open to the presence of external observers like researchers and academics, new conditions must be explicitly defined for making this possible. That leads us again to the field of negotiation which impregnates the culture of these organizations.

Drawing the attention to the importance of negotiation in the European institutional context as a means to understand the production of local organizational cultures and the possibilities of reproduction of other pre-existing or dominated cultures such as the national and regional ones, assumes an analysis of the politics of representation within these settings as well. For the anthropologist this means to analytically distinguish the organization as a legal person, sometimes endowed with moral and physical features as I could observe while collecting discourses in the Commission's services, and the persons who animate it and "make it think" (Douglas 1986). In doing so, I do not consider the concept of representation as it is classically accepted when speaking about diplomacy. Many different people behave like representatives when they are negotiating in plural settings even though they are not considered representatives. It is time to change the notion we have of these practices, especially to understand the modes of participation in policy-making. Making evident the existing relations between the person and the group or organization s/he comes from, or the interest s/he is in charge of, will contribute to a better understanding of European policy-making. This requires free access for independent researchers. This will enable us to properly analyze the culture of the European institutions and the shift that pluralism introduces into national frames of culture and power.

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1 The discipline has been sub-divided in branches and schools led by renowned persons such as B. Malinowski and A. R. Radcliffe Brown, the founding fathers of functionalism, and C. Lévi Strauss, the leading structuralist. Historical evolutions marked the discipline, starting with the distinction between ethnography, identified with a descriptive method (1823), and anthropology, originally (16th century) attached to the natural sciences. Anthropology is now used to validate the key concepts for thinking cultures, the relationship between culture and society, and the elements which support their development (modes of social and political organization, religion, symbolism, techniques, and so forth). Initially unlimited in its geographical extension and internal dimension, anthropology has been in fact marked out by the delineation of "cultural areas" (such as Oceania, Africa, America, Asia, Europe etc.) inherited from the conceptualization of the relationships the western world developed with the rest of the world (to mention in brief several periods: the times of expansion, imperialism, colonialism, decolonization, and the time of cooperation to development policies). It has led to the institutionalization of specific research areas such as kinship, social organization, religion, symbols and political structures which indeed contributed to the production of highly specialized academics.
2 This expression is also the title of one of his books, *Le regard éloigné* (1983).
3 Development in post colonial societies raises the question of western attitudes toward indigenous people even though social and political conditions have changed from colonial times. The development of third world countries is more strongly related to the past of the nation states – with its train of associated images – than to the future of Europe within the Commission ideal system. The demonstration of an "esprit de corps" or identification with a dominant model can also be seen as a cultural assessment.

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