

Ethnologie française

Call for papers

“Traces. Truth told by bodies”

Coordination

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Tracking mass graves to identify missing persons and reconstructing the violence they endured; backing a court decision based on the examination of body markings to establish a traumatic episode or aggression; searching for an ethnic or geographical origin in genetics to ensure the respect of minority rights; knowing who “one is” by finding “from where” and “from whom” one comes: so many practices undertaken by experts and laymen alike, who hope to decide on the present based on traces of the past allegedly contained in bodies. The body is understood here as much in its visible material dimension (injuries, skin colour, tears) as in its invisible aspects (blood group, DNA, physiological sensations). How to understand such attention to the body as place of an identifiable past? Is such attention a reflection of contemporary societies who see in flesh proof of a superior truth because it is more “scientific” than traditional sources (archives, official documents, civil status, accounts, testimonies)? What stories are woven into the materiality of bodies and what do these stories say about the societies that use them as a new system of proof?

The incarnation of what remains of an event or trajectory as marker of a more “true” past than that provided by History or stories, accounts or archives, is that which we propose to explore here using Ginzburg’s (1980, 1989, 2003) notion of “traces”. Together with the body that always seems to have more to say, what other places, what other objects are equally mobilised to *trace* the past and tell the “truth” about humans? The truth appears perhaps all the more in the opposite direction: what traces of its history do we seek to erase or cancel? What marks are in this way neglected, invisible to the eye and to thought? Concerned as much with the act of searching as that of erasure, this issue of *Ethnologie française* focuses on the conflicts and struggles of meaning that underpin a report of truth. We contend that the value of truth appears precisely in this process of retention/relegation: the “authentic” human subject appears as much in its overlooked markers as in the traces of its corporal and biological history deemed significant.

Following the popularisation of knowledge about DNA, earlier and earlier medical diagnoses have continued to reinforce the old idea according to which heredity is based on

“the premise of a ‘vital’ principle that unites lineages across generations”; a principle that seems to govern “the realisation of our individual being” (Bonniol, Gleize, 1994: 7). Yet if it is able to explain heredity, genetic knowledge is not the only means used to explain the qualities, shortcomings, or more simply resemblances that we think we’ve inherited from our ancestors (see, for example, the *Ethnologie Française* issue “*Penser l’hérité*”, published in 1994). A range of elements can be traced and used to affirm the singularity of an individual or a group.

In linking the treatment of stillbirths to that of live births, Dominique Memmi (2014) identifies a turning point, in the early 2000s, in ways of creating and considering identities, exemplified by the unprecedented efforts of health and social professionals who work to provide connections (umbilical cord preservation, holding of the dead foetus). Beyond a corporeal association, it is a return to what makes human subjects and ways of identifying them — and of singling them out — that is at work in the biologisation of the connection. If in *Le gouvernement des corps*, Didier Fassin and Dominique Memmi (2004) already showed an interest in changing modes of governmentality, ever more concerned with the physical lives of people (Rose, 2006), it is because something has truly shifted in the government of human subjects. Governance has changed from an administration of “bare lives” (Agamben, 1997), making bodies without subjects, towards a management of psychological life, making “authentic subjects”. In this context, bodies have not, however, disappeared. Their materiality resurfaces, no longer to erase subjects, but to attest to their “truth”, simultaneously historical (familial, national, ethnic) and subjective (psychological and emotional). This transformation of biopower is today collectively debated in the elaboration of the concept of ethnopolitics. Initially used by Nikolas Rose to describe “the self-techniques by which human beings should judge themselves and act upon themselves to make themselves better than they are” (2001:19), ethnopolitics allows to more specifically describe the work of reform (and of self-reform) that leads individuals to *feel* like more “true” subjects (Roux, Vozari, 2017).

It is this process of defining subjects, by individuals themselves and by different institutions (medical, legal, state) that we propose to explore here, through analysis of the ways in which traces of the past are sought, erased, noticed, forgotten, identified, collected, selected, rejected, preserved, interpreted: the vast range of actions that constitute the act of tracing. We are equally interested in the ways in which traces of the past — those that become foundational in the definition of subjects or, on the contrary, those that are excluded — are manipulated by subjects themselves or by the institutions that govern them. Contributions might, for example, focus on the treatment of the body as evidence, necessarily questioning that which seems to be a biologisation or a naturalisation of the “truth”; truth often conflated with the scientific result. We might ask to what extent the trace is part of a metonymic process, used to better identify, make and govern subjects.

In contrast to a trace-based approach that focuses on “markers” of the past, we propose here to develop an epistemology. That is, to focus on the tracing process, starting from where knowledge is produced, particularly knowledge about the self and subjects. The intention is to return to, question and develop the hypothesis of an evidential paradigm proposed by Carlo Ginzburg in the 1980s. The historian identifies a major scientific turning point in the 19th century, which saw the development of “indiciary” knowledge (history and art expertise, psychoanalysis, police sciences). Such knowledge is based on the collection of evidence that allows to trace and reconstruct the trajectories of objects and individuals so as to certify their origin and determine who the people are,

what they've done, or even discern what they could do. Ginzburg's analysis ends with the introduction of fingerprints which forms part of a long genealogy of control techniques ranging from the establishment of names and signatures to palmistry; practices that would not just make identity legible, but also the individuality of subjects (1980: 37). Far from being outmoded today, the evidential paradigm seems, in fact, reinforced in new and emerging technologies, to the point of becoming perhaps the most valuable, if not most effective way of knowing and administering proof.

In focusing on different tracing technologies, this issue of *Ethnologie française* questions the uses of the body and other material or psychological elements as "evidence" in service of declaring the "truth" of persons. These technologies can be more recent innovations (e.g. dental topography, scanners, neuro-hypnosis) or more traditional methods and knowledge (e.g. clairvoyance, interpretation of dreams). We accordingly call for studies and investigations that focus on the functioning of these technologies from an interdisciplinary perspective. Ethnographic, historical, or archaeological approaches are particularly welcome as well as those that use multiple levels of observation and analysis, from the practices of subjects (experts and non-experts) to institutions (state, legal, health, social, familial). Two main areas, without necessarily being limited to these alone, thus emerge:

1) "Revealing" oneself: traces as resources in the definition of self

A first level of analysis might focus on the ways in which individuals use different tracing techniques as a resource in the definition of self. In a range of social, cultural, and historical contexts, the body can be marked to signify change in the status of a person: a series of numbers tattooed on the forearm at once identifies and dehumanizes deportees; scarification or a tattoo inscribes on the body the memory of a ritual or signals belonging to a group; the genetic heritage of a person can contain an invisible legacy passed down by parents and preceding generations. Remembrance of a biographical event, belonging to a group, inclusion into a longer history, marking the body can also be a "technique of the self" (voluntary tattoo, bodily self-regulation, etc.) and sometimes become a platform for a claim or demand. Finally, these marks can constitute a trace that provides proof (Kilani, 2009) and that requires interpretation (Ginzburg, 2003). The search for missing relatives or parents is, for example, often a requisite quest for self-fulfilment. Another example: grief and tears are at times emotions solicited to "bring out" a secret experience, forgotten or perhaps more ancestral, such that the subject can "rebuild" their sense of self integrating their past, including when they are not the direct bearer of what is considered a trauma. "Tracing" thus proceeds from the resolution of an enigma and a journey towards a more "authentic" self that is to be revealed, felt, and expressed. What role then do forgotten, hidden, fragmentary, suppressed, and sometimes evasive, traces take on? Contributions to this regard might reflect on different technologies such as DNA tests or methods and approaches to personal development that rely not only on self-disciplines but operate on the basis of a "revelation": notably through hypnosis, by reconnecting with one's "innermost nature" or, psychoanalysis, by finding original meaning in the expression of dissimulations and the folds of secretions.

2) Management technologies and politics of doubt

A second level of analysis might focus on management practices and control exercised over people, which rely more and more on bio-technological innovations that marginalize (or contradict) other ways of administering proof. How to explain

competition between, for example, administrative traces (birth certificates, complaint reports) and those relating to the examination of bodies (biological and genetic analyses, medical examinations)? Moreover, which markers are kept as traces deemed authentic? Which ones are relegated, depreciated, neglected and, above all, by whom? How does this competition play out in policies, laws, and the sciences? One of the questions raised by the transformation of management technologies relates to the handling of suspicion and the emergence of suspicious subjects. How does the ability to trace subjects lead to a seemingly paradoxical doubt about people's identity and past? This doubt is, in fact, at the heart of a new mode of governance that we wish to explore here.

Timeline

Proposals (title and abstract of 4,000-6,000 characters, bibliographical references included) are to be submitted by **September 30, 2018**. They should describe the main arguments as well as the materials (survey and/or archives) used, and be accompanied by the author's publication record. Submissions should be sent to the coordinators: Jérôme Courduriès (jcourduries@gmail.com) and Mélanie Gourarier (melanie.gourarier@yahoo.fr). Results of the selection will be communicated to the authors by the **end of October, 2018**. Finalized texts (from 35 to 70 thousand characters max, spaces and bibliography included) should be sent before **March 31, 2019**. Publication of the issue in *Ethnologie française* is scheduled for the spring of 2020.

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