

# Debating the political potential of experimental knowledge

29 of June 2015

Centro de Estudos Sociais CES, Coimbra (Sala 1)

10 am - 17 pm

In the social sciences there has been a recent but growing interest in experimental cultures and on their affordances in re-shaping social methods and knowledge. The experimental is going “live” (Marres 2012) by being approached as a *process* rather than as a *site* (Corsín Jiménez 2013). Open-endedness, practice/material-orientedness, the incorporation of failure, the transformation of informants into counterparts, the abandonment of a representationalist paradigm, knowledge as craft, are some of the characteristics of experimental ‘ways of knowing’.

Drawing on a set of digital practices such as *hacking*, *prototyping*, *open sourcing* and on experiences of intense collaborations with different communities of expertise or practice - designers, artists, architects, bloggers - a group of scholars coming from anthropology and/or STS have been exploring new ways of producing knowledge based on experimental cultures. Among them, Alberto Corsín Jiménez’s explorations of prototyping as a cultural and epistemic form (2013; also Corsín Jiménez, Estalella & Zoohaus forthcoming), Adolfo Estalella and Tomás Sánchez-Criado’s proposal for re-functioning of traditional ethnography through an exercise of experimental collaboration (forthcoming); Wendy Gunn and colleagues’ methodological proposal for Design Anthropology, an interdisciplinary proposal for doing anthropological research through design and design through anthropology (2013); and Matt Ratto’s pedagogic and methodological experiments with “critical making”, “a mode of materially productive engagement that is intended to bridge the gap between creative physical and conceptual exploration” (2011: 252). Although heterogeneous and not necessarily related to each other, what these proposals have in common is an approach to the process of knowledge as a process of becoming, as something transformative – practiced explicitly as “a technology of question formation” (Faubion in Marcus 2013: 400).

The aim of this seminar will be to discuss what “epistemic cultures built on collaboration, provisionality, recycling, experimentation and creativity” (Corsín Jiménez 2013: 382) could bring in terms of political innovation within academia and beyond and to elaborate on the new models of scholarship that experimental cultures could foster in the social sciences. Are experimental epistemic cultures

and practices re-designing the current infrastructures of knowledge - and academia as we know it? And if so, in which ways? How does the 'experimental' articulate with the current structures of research policies and funding? How does it combine with the actual academic organizational ecosystems? The seminar aims at reflecting on what kind of 'political' do these experimental practices perform – what kind of 'political' do they bring-into-provisional-being – or, as Corsín Jiménez & Estalella (2010) put it, what kind of hope do they prototype?

To that aim, the seminar will foster a dialogue between different ways of experimenting and bringing the 'political' into being in the making of social knowledge.

### **References**

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Estalella, Adolfo & Criado, Tomás Sánchez (eds.), Forthcoming. *Ethnography as experimental collaboration*. EASA Book Series, Berghahn.

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## Programme

Morning (10 - 12.30)

### ***Introduction***

Chiara Carrozza & Andrea Gaspar

### ***Urban pedagogies in beta: emplacing Free Culture in the city***

Adolfo Estalella (UOC; CSIC)

The city of Madrid has been experiencing a moment of political commotion and urban creativity in the last years. The 15M movement, the Spanish version of the Occupy moment is the most visible example but it is not the only one. The occupation of vacant plots in the city to organize community gardens and vegetable patches, squatting buildings projects, and activist projects devoted to discuss the city; these are examples of the kind of initiatives that have proliferated in the last years. In this presentation I describe some of the urban projects I have been participating as part of a long ethnographic intensive fieldwork carried out between 2010 and 2013. These projects are characterized by material practices of intervention in the public space and the production of knowledge on how to intervene in the city. They are transverse by the practices and values of the Free Software and Free Culture: the idea that knowledge should freely circulate, that its production should be horizontally organized and that the digital objects develop should permanently remain in a beta state, open to a continuous reconfiguration.

Collin McFarlane (2011) has recently highlighted the relevance of paying attention to the learning practices through which the city is dwelt and contested. He refers to learning as “the specific processes, practices and interactions through which knowledge is created, contested and transformed” (2011: 3) and conceptualizes urban learning as heterogeneous assemblages of people, materials and space. I take this as my point of departure but I shift my attention from the situated learning process to the sociomaterial conditions that allow for these learnings happening. My argument is that learning is the instance by which the city is transformed and assembled through the production and transformation of knowledge. The projects I describe not only set the condition for learning but materially intervene in the city and recursively produce knowledge about the urban sociotechnical conditions needed to learn about the city: which kind methods, infrastructures and places are needed to learn the city anew. I refer to them with the notion of urban pedagogies. Urban pedagogies are not a method for learning but the urban condition that liberates the pedagogical capacities of the city. They are estates of the city, urban assemblages open to a continuous sociomaterial reconfiguration: an urban pedagogy in beta state. I contend that we may think in these urban pedagogies as the shape that Free Culture takes when it is emplaced in the city.

Bio

Adolfo Estalella is an anthropologist and postdoctoral researcher at the Universitat Oberta de Catalunya and the Spanish National Research Council. His two fields of research are Anthropology of Knowledge and Science and Technology Studies (STS). He is interested in digital cultures, forms of grassroots urbanism and the methodological innovations in ethnography. With Alberto Corsín Jiménez he has been involved with *Prototyping.es, how social experimentation works* [<http://www.prototyping.es>]. Together with Tomás Sánchez Criado he created *Xcol* [<http://xcol.org/>] - *Experimental collaborations: ethnography beyond participant observation*, a research project that seeks to intervene in current forms of ethnographic practice and learning.

***Response-able experimenting: response-ability and the politics of experimental knowledge***

João Arriscado Nunes

Like other “good words that have been taken” (S. Oyama), “experimental” is most often used to refer to particular assemblages or research apparatus and truth regimes, associated with one particular locus of knowledge production, the (scientific) laboratory. Drawing on recent work in feminist science studies and on ongoing work in studies in the field of health, the notion of the “experimental” is revisited and expanded through a central concern with *response-ability* (K. Barad), that is, both the ability of research subjects (be they human or non-human) to respond to the particular assemblages deployed in different forms of inquiry and how the latter are configured to maximize or constrain that ability.

Bio

João Arriscado Nunes is Professor of Sociology at the School of Economics and Senior Researcher at the Center for Social Studies, University of Coimbra, Portugal. His research interests include social studies of science and technology (namely social studies of biomedicine, health and the life sciences and public engagement with science and technology), political sociology (democracy and participation) and social theory. He was Principal Investigator of the projects "Science Engaging Society: Life Sciences, Social Sciences and Publics" (BIOSENSE) and "Evaluating the State of Public Knowledge on Health and Health Information in Portugal" (Harvard Medical School - Portugal Program).

Afternoon (14 - 17)

***What artistic methodologies do to the ethnographic method? Fieldwork roles, modes of register and the politics of fieldwork***

Ricardo Seiça Salgado

Ethnography as action refers to the method of participant observation and implies a certain kind of performative sensitivity that sets a specific role of the researcher as *\*persona\**, setting an emerging situation in the field. We argue that

this roles performed in the field must be related to the form of registration used to reflect any encounter, designing a configuration of choices. The emergence of new methodologies resulting from the contamination between ethnographic method and artistic methodologies based on performance has contributed to reinvent ethnography, namely: 1) on the roles the anthropologist can play in the fieldwork; 2) in terms of how you are able to give new life to the “fieldnotes” in order to elicit new data; 3) on the consequences that the ethnographic encounter provides to the affirmation and reinvention process of identity construction. Using examples arising from this emerging methodological junction (photo-elicitation and etnotheatre), we seek to realize the promising relationship between the role of the anthropologist in the fieldwork, the used ways of recording, and how this joint methodologies allows to make a collaborative work as performance with the research agents. Ethnography becomes a research-action and, at the same time, turns to be an object and a methodology of ethnography itself.

#### Bio

Ricardo Seïça Salgado is an anthropologist and a performer, currently post-doctoral fellows at CRIA (Centro em Rede de Investigaço em Antropologia). His main research interest lies on the relation between anthropology, theatre and politics. He is co-editor and co-curator of *baldio*, a place to rehearse an interdisciplinary, politically committed approach merging theory and practice in the arts, humanities and social sciences, which is commonly understood as Performance Studies. Right now he develops experimental research methodologies, mixing participant-observation with artistic methodologies.

#### ***Arts-based research and teaching***

Alison Neilson and Rita So Marcos

In the midst of the deafening roar for sacrifice to Euro and Bank; and meaning squeezed into corsets of high impact factor, cover your ears my darlings and feel your spirited life. Knowledge is created together: to protect and celebrate life. When we can’t speak the language of trees and rivers, we use measure and formula; when we can’t hear the story of others, we ask their help. Yet in 2015, the political potential inherent in measure and query largely has been stripped of the experience of experiment and chained tightly as if mere information. Alison and Rita will share their recent artful collaborations in remembering and trying to re-introduce the political and experimental. This video is part of the story: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=loQJssjbTUE](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=loQJssjbTUE)

#### Bio

Alison Neilson is a researcher at the Centre for Social Studies in the Science, Economy and Society (NECES) group. She conducts narrative and arts-informed research on the way sustainability is understood and manifest in education and policy. Her current research is about the ways that people who live on islands, Iceland and the Azores, learn to be part of the governance system related to life on the sea. She studies the processes of education, including informal, nonformal

and formal, to understand how people are encultured into governance structures and how the issues and structures themselves are constructed.

Rita São Marcos is a junior researcher at the Center for Social Studies, University of Coimbra, currently working on the research project "Education for active citizenship: images of participation in marine policy" coordinated by Alison Neilson. Holds a degree in Communication Design by the Faculty of Fine Arts, University of Lisbon and is a Sociology Master student at the School of Economics, University of Coimbra developing her thesis in the fields of sociology of risk, governance, public participation and involvement. Has worked on several research projects in the fields of risk perception and communication at the Azorean Biodiversity Group, Ce3C (Center of Ecology, Evolution and Environmental Changes) - PEERS (Plataform for Enhancing Ecological Research and Sustainability).

### ***Design and free culture: meaningful interactions***

Ana Isabel Carvalho and Ricardo Lafuente

Can sharing and openness shape a new, parallel kind of design? How do matters of control express themselves in the design practice? Can design tools embody a political role? And what insights can be gained from crossing over to other fields, such as software development or hardware archaeology?

Manufatura Independente is a design research studio dedicated to the intersections between free/libre culture and design, and will showcase some of their design projects that address how the "open source" mindset can fuel alternative and novel facets for the practice of the designer and artist.

#### **Bio**

Ana Isabel Carvalho and Ricardo Lafuente are design and interface specialists who focus on interactions between digital networked media, data exploration, free culture, printed matter and design research. They head the Porto office of the Journalism++ data-driven journalism agency, founded the Manufatura Independente design studio, and coordinate the activities of Transparência Hackday, Portugal's most active open data collective. Their recent endeavours include the design, implementation and operation of the parliamentary information portal Demo.cratica.org, as well as the development and maintenance of Central de Dados, an independent public data portal. They are associated with ID+, Research Institute for Design, Media e Culture at the University of Porto.

<http://manufacturaindependente.org>

<http://jplusplus.pt>

<http://transparenciahackday.org>

<http://demo.cratica.org>