



**HAL**  
open science

# What Can We Learn from a ‘Liar’ and a ‘Madman’? Serendipity and Double Commitment during Fieldwork: What Can We Learn from a ‘Liar’ and a ‘Madman’?

Stefan Le Courant

► **To cite this version:**

Stefan Le Courant. What Can We Learn from a ‘Liar’ and a ‘Madman’? Serendipity and Double Commitment during Fieldwork: What Can We Learn from a ‘Liar’ and a ‘Madman’?. *Social Anthropology / Anthropologie sociale*, 2013, 21 (2), pp.186–198. 10.1111/1469-8676.12015 . hal-01631993

**HAL Id: hal-01631993**

**<https://hal.parisnanterre.fr/hal-01631993>**

Submitted on 9 Sep 2024

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L’archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d’enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

STEFAN LE COURANT

## What can we learn from a ‘liar’ and a ‘madman’? Serendipity and double commitment during fieldwork

In order to do my PhD fieldwork among undocumented migrants in a detention centre, I had to become a volunteer for an NGO providing legal assistance. In this paper I examine the effect of this double commitment through the study of two figures: a ‘liar’ and a ‘madman’. I question the grounds upon which field anthropological practice is based, namely, the ideas of long-term fieldwork and serendipity. I hypothesise that anthropological knowledge is constructed in the successive oscillations between various positions and points of view on the field and not in the quest for the right distance from the subject under scrutiny.

**Key words** emotion, detention centre, fieldwork, undocumented, knowledge production

### Introduction

How to be prepared for an ‘unsought finding’ (Van Andel 1994: 631)? This could be the paradoxical question of any anthropological research and maybe, more broadly, of any discipline where inductive thinking is at the heart of the method. The role of ethnographic inquiry in this production has been seriously questioned over the last few decades. With the postmodern turn, fieldwork is no longer considered the stage of data collection, necessary for subsequent analysis, but a place of real interaction and knowledge production. Indeed, fieldwork is not a site where one verifies a prior hypothesis but the very place where knowledge is produced. It has therefore become crucial to focus on the modalities of the anthropologist’s participation in the field (Tedlock 1991).

In order to access the field of my research, I volunteered for nearly four years for an organisation that provides legal assistance for undocumented migrants in detention centres. These facilities are closed institutions where deportees await their removal from French territory. The particular site where I did my research was a *local de rétention* that differs from the *centres de rétention* by the number of migrants and the length of time they can be confined there. Undocumented migrants can only be confined for 48 hours in a *local de rétention*, after which they have to be transferred to a larger custodial centre in the district. At the time of my fieldwork, the length of the detention period could not exceed 32 days in all. Today it has risen to 45 days.<sup>1</sup> While in the *local de rétention* (which I will call here a detention facility or place), I was able to conduct an ethnographic study and at the same time help to give legal assistance. On the one

1 The length of the detention period rose from 7 days in 1981 – when this type of confinement was legally created – up to 10 days in 1993. Since then, the length has steadily increased: to 12 days in 1998, 32 days with the 2003 Immigration Law and 45 in 2011. The increase in the detention period comes together with a specialisation of this type of confinement. (Fischer 2007).

hand, I was interested in understanding the experience of containment and potential expulsion from an emic perspective, and on the other, I had to help the migrants trapped in these detention centres to escape deportation.

In the first section of this piece, I briefly examine the way I entered the field. I describe how I became a legal assistant in a detention facility, analyse the complexities of holding a dual position while in the field, and show how my emotions had a revelatory effect on me as it made me realise I had internalised the perspective of the legal practitioner. The second section moves towards the core of my fieldwork practice. I describe the encounters with – as I called them at the time they happened – a 'liar' and a 'madman'. Through these two extreme figures, I will question the pillars upon which field practice is set, namely, the idea of long-term fieldwork and serendipity (as the capacity of taking into account the events and encounters that occur during the research process). In the third section, I analyse the way in which double commitment allows us to rethink the key concept of participant observation. I argue that the researcher's position in the field should not be defined by a good balance between distance and proximity or observation and participation. Instead, I claim that anthropological knowledge is constructed in the constant and successive oscillations between various ways of conceiving the data and the field.

The vulnerability of unauthorised migrants also raises ethical and political questions within the researcher (Armbruster Laerke 2008), from fieldwork to the dissemination of the findings (Düvell *et al.* 2010). In this sense, the anthropologist should be careful not to contribute to stigmatisation. The labels 'liar' and 'madman' reproduced here are those I used when I was a legal practitioner. The main point of this article is to deconstruct these categories through the anthropological gaze. Putting aside the most ethical concerns of this research, namely whose side the anthropologist should be on, to paraphrase the famous question of Howard Becker (1967), I will rather hold up to examination the kind of anthropology that can be done when one has chosen his or her side.

## **Entering the field: learning to defend with the law**

### *First experiences*

Responding to a call for volunteers, I had participated, on behalf of an NGO, in a survey observation of hearings that evaluated the legality of the detention of undocumented migrants in the process of deportation from French territory. It was my first encounter with both the legal universe and undocumented migrants. A couple of months later, on 15 November 2005, I went for the first time to the detention centre. I was interested in studying migrants' confinement experiences as well as their capacity to act in confinement. I focused on their relationship with the law, from a 'legal consciousness' perspective (Ewick and Silbey 1998). Over time these first questions turned into a broader reflection on the state from its margins (Das and Poole 2004).

Detention centres are, by nature, out of sight. Most of these facilities are built in urban peripheries (Bernardot 2008). The detention place in which I worked was (and still is) a cramped space where twelve men and two women could be confined at one time. This particular place was built inside a police station, replacing former administration offices. The area reserved for aliens was composed of a narrow room where it was very difficult to move around the table and two benches bolted to the ground,

taking up almost all the space. It was the room in which I conducted the interviews. Sleeping bunks were arranged in three small adjoining rooms. The whole place was illuminated by neon lights; the windows were blocked so no sunlight and air could circulate. Toilets and showers were not free access. Migrants spent the first hours of confinement in that place before being transferred to another detention facility.

In this particular confinement place there was no room for a casual observer. Double commitment was then the condition of entry to the field. I was recruited by the NGO employee who worked in this particular facility. She was enthusiastic when I explained my academic interests as she herself had a social science background. I had never hidden from any member of the organisation that I was also conducting anthropological fieldwork in detention. The NGO neither asked me to present my research nor to shape it in any particular way, nor did the organisation allow me to have access to other detention places when I asked. The autonomy I had from the NGO also came with the material possibility of conducting research. My PhD was made possible by a three-year grant that gave me the opportunity, as a young scholar, to 'think', 'read' and 'fail', as the science process requires (see Rivoal and Salazar, this issue). Despite this freedom, being involved in an organisation was not without shaping the way my research was carried out, as I will demonstrate.

I have a long and detailed account of my initial experiences in my field notebook. The description of this tiny place, the details of the discussion with the NGO's employee who accompanied me and who taught me the basics of legal assistance work, the relationship with policemen, and the description of the interviews conducted by the employee with the people confined therein. In a very speedy and precise way, with few questions, the NGO worker decided, on the one hand, what could be the grounds for revocation of the removal procedure – regarding the rights of the person confined – and, on the other, whether or not to challenge this procedure of deportation – regarding the person's situation in France. As I was not familiar with legal assistance, I was surprised by this scene. I was expecting a more compassionate approach – where one would attempt to relieve another from suffering – probably nurtured by common representations of an NGO as caring and solicitous. I was shocked by the cold and rapid way the NGO employee discarded the cases once she found out that the person could not be helped by the law. From this visit, I remember clearly how uncomfortable I felt faced with the violence of the situation and the suffering it was inflicting on the undocumented migrants confined in such place and who were fearing removal.

After this first visit, I accompanied on a regular basis the NGO's employee to continue my training as a legal assistant. During this period, theory courses were also provided to train new volunteers in undocumented migrants' rights. It took me some time to understand the whole legal process and its mechanisms: the areas of expertise of the administrative tribunal and the criminal court, the principle of procedural irregularities, drafting motions to quash, etc. The mastery of these tools was necessary to carry out the mission entrusted to me by the NGO. To be an honest anthropologist studying the experiences of undocumented persons I had first to be a proficient legal assistant. There was no question in my mind that my personal research project was to the detriment of confined migrants. The fieldwork could be carried out only if I was capable of assisting them in their efforts to resist deportation.

During this training period, I also learned the political positioning of this NGO: the question was not who should be helped, which would imply differentiating honest from immoral aliens on the basis of a bureaucratic categorisation (Heyman 1995), but

who could be helped, on the basis of legal possibilities. The 'liar' and the 'madman' I will describe later are among those unauthorised migrants who defy rigid classification and the distinction between those who can and those who cannot be assisted legally.

### *Assisting and investigating*

The first period of my stay in the detention centre was that of a novice in an unknown universe. I not only had to learn about immigration laws and case law, but also how to write an appeal, contest a decision, etc. Being a trained volunteer left little room for a critical eye; I was facing the classic difficulty of acting and of watching myself acting (Bourdieu 2003: 281). To this was added the difficulty of this particular type of field: the urgency of the situation, and the need to be effective in dealing with the multiple situations that could arise. In this context of limited time, there was not much room for free speech; everything was designed according to the legal mission. Furthermore, the information of interest to the legal assistant and the researcher was far from being similar. It was difficult to bring the two registers together.

Most of the time anthropological and legal interests are different and sometimes opposite (Conley and O'Barr 1990). On the one hand, I sometimes found myself interrupting somebody who was sharing with me his or her personal experiences to focus my attention and my time on the practical aspects that could help me to find a procedural irregularity in the removal process. I was not focusing on what my interlocutors thought they were experiencing as I was looking for facts that could help make a legal case. I was then missing my anthropological main interest. On the other hand, although I introduced myself to the confined migrants both as a legal assistant and a PhD anthropology student, I had by then given up conducting interviews. I did not want to use my authority as a legal assistant to impose on my interlocutors in order to obtain information that did not specifically concern the legal procedure. The informed consent asked of my interlocutors would have been very questionable. I then focused my research interest on gaining a deep insight into how the detention system operated.

Being an actor within the procedure that one claims to be studying strongly determines the modality of the investigation and limits access to certain information (Makaremi 2008). Identified as a legal assistant and an NGO volunteer, it was very difficult for me to engage in a discussion with police officers in charge of confined migrants.<sup>2</sup> The field notebooks written at that time are symptomatic of the difficulty of juggling these two activities. The pages themselves are filled with factual information concerning the procedure, nationality, age, eventual diseases, length of stay in France, phone numbers to contact, etc., while on the margins one finds interesting information for the research: jokes exchanged between two people, discussions or remarks made aloud etc. When I returned home, I tried to put my own notes together. Faced with these confusing notes, I ended up reproducing the sequence of events during my presence in the detention facility, writing the notes in the chronological order of the interviews I had done (for legal assisting purposes). Under each name, I wrote the main information collected by adding descriptions of attitudes, as well as elements related to my perceptions. Everything that had to do with sociability and interaction was once

2 To this add the legal conditions of working with police officers who are subjected to the duty of confidentiality.

again relegated to the margins of this recollection by being placed at the end of paragraphs or as subsidiary notes following a detailed account of the interviews. What should have been central to my research questions ended up once again being marginalised. It was, therefore, not only the material conditions of the research that imposed this relationship with my data. I was reproducing the legal focus on cases (Good 2007). Advocacy brought with it the internalisation – in the sense of unconscious learning – of a particular point of view: the legal mode of thought, of record management. In other words, it implied learning a ‘bureaucratic ethos’ (Spire 2008). Maybe the specific nature of the double commitment, not so different from others that anthropologists can adopt in their research, is the meaning given to the notions of fact and truth (Kandel 1992: 3), which will be at the core of the reflection through the focus on the ‘liar’ and the ‘madman’. As someone who is part of the legitimated standards of the society to which I belong, it was quite easy to adopt the legal framing. ‘The force of law’, to quote the title of an article by Pierre Bourdieu (1986), is its ability to give a particular reading of the situation by defining both the ‘space of possibilities’ and the interpretations one can make of the situation.

### *Emotions and the revelation effect*

After several months of regular presence in the detention centre, I conducted my first meeting outside the confinement place. After his release from detention, Mr Traore<sup>3</sup> agreed to meet me in a coffee shop in central Paris. This discussion covered most of the information I had gathered in the detention facility. He spoke of his arrival in France, of his cousins here, of his family in his country asking for money, and his responsibility for feeding about 20 people in his home village. During the discussion, I was struck and touched by his situation, a complex mixture between loneliness in France and obligation to his original group. A few days earlier, I had not paid attention to the words of this man, whose situation was similar to many others I had already met. Having been in France for less than ten years, with no family, no particular disease and whose arrest record does not reveal traces of any irregularity during his arrest and confinement period, there were very few legal ways to assist him. He could, however, avoid removal because there was no room left in the detention centre he should have been transferred to after his first confinement in the detention facility where we met.

A few years later, I found myself in the position of training new volunteers. I explained then what I myself had learned some time ago. Once, at the end of a training day, turning to a new volunteer I said, ‘You’re lucky. Today it was not too hard’. As soon as I had uttered this sentence, I realised that, by focusing in my comment only on the technical aspect of law that had to be mobilised to manage records, I had completely neglected the possible violent effect on the volunteer going into a detention facility for the first time and facing the migrants’ distress. I had also forgotten my own feelings when I first went to the detention place.

The emotions I felt during the conversation with Mr Traore and the ones I had forgotten in the training session were for me two moments of revelation. As emotions depend on cultural contexts (Lutz and White 1986) and are subjected to change

3 All the names of my interlocutors have been changed in order to preserve their anonymity and the sensitive information provided.

(Hochschild 2003), these two episodes made me realise I had internalised a particular way of understanding this reality. These emotions reminded me of the routinised effects (Fassin 2001) and the indifference that come with bureaucratic procedures (Herzfeld 1992). This distancing of the affects would be both a consequence and a prerequisite for action in these emotionally engaging contexts. But detention facilities are not devoid of emotions – which might sometimes lead to legal action.<sup>4</sup> I cannot develop here the emotional dimension of legal advocacy in confinement facilities. I will just mention that these emotions depend on and are the result of the combination between this specific place and the agents' particular dispositions.

### **Field encounters: lessons from a 'liar' and a 'madman'**

In this section I will explore how in field practice the learning of a legal gaze, to paraphrase Foucault's 'clinical gaze' (1973: 109), led to a conflict of intelligibility. The two figures I will examine, even the way I called them 'liar' and 'madman', show how strong the vantage point of the law was, and how the legal gaze shaped all the field encounters. The following reflection will give us the opportunity to discuss two of the key features of anthropological inquiry, that is, length of time and serendipity.

#### *The 'liar'*

On 31 January 2008, in the detention facility, I conducted an interview with a man about 30 years old, Mr Keita, a native of Bamako who had been in France for nearly six years. Keita was arrested as he stepped off a bus. When I asked him about his family situation, he said he was a family man, married to a woman, and with two children. He worked as stock manager in a company. I wrote an appeal against the order of deportation, arguing there were reasons pertaining to 'family privacy' that could support his remaining in France. This appeal was to be considered a few days later by the administrative tribunal. He was released at the hearing before the Judge because there was no more room in the detention centre where he was to be transferred. A few days later, I learnt that the appeal was dismissed by the Administrative Court. I asked him if he would grant me an interview. He invited me to his home but I declined and insisted on meeting in a coffee shop, thinking that the presence of his wife and his children were not ideal conditions for an interview. When I arrived at the coffee shop, I explained why I had refused to go to his home. He smiled and said:

There is nobody at home . . . When I was arrested in 2006, a guy from your NGO asked me if I had family in France and when I said no, that I had no family here, he told me there was no sense in making an appeal [. . .] But this story of wife and children, it is true. Because I was dating a girl with two kids but I was not the father.

Here it is not a question of different vision of what constitutes a family, whether it covers biology or a common law marriage. From his previous arrests' experiences,

4 Once, an NGO employee hesitated to write an appeal for a man claiming to have a child in France, as there was little hope that the query would succeed. While we were still in the detention centre, he was visited by his girlfriend holding an infant in her arms. The employee then whispered to me: 'This is the kind of thing that tips the balance for an appeal'.



Mr Keita knew that before the Judge only civil weddings and official kinship were recognised as evidence of family life in France (Fassin 2010). Mr Keita's smile and the interview at the coffee shop clearly showed me that he had previously (in the detention place) consciously presented his situation in such a way that could lead me to write an appeal on his behalf. That is why I called him at the time a 'liar'.

The extract above should not suggest that legal assistants are not aware of manipulation of information in detention. On the contrary, the logic of suspicion (Kobelinsky 2012) that characterises the public discourse – which considers that the social cost of immigration is too high and emphasises the dishonesty of migrants – shapes the relationship between the administration and the foreigners that prevails here. For the legal advocate, starting an administrative procedure for someone who cannot prove his or her claim before the judge is seen as a waste of time. When I raised this question, most volunteers told me they did not engage in any procedure when they were convinced that the person in front of them was lying.

But how – and in what capacity – can we be convinced that someone is lying? The revelation of Mr Keita showed me that in many situations I had no doubts of the veracity of the narrative I was told. It made me realise that there was no point in questioning the truthfulness of a narrative I was given as a legal assistant. Here we see how the academic approach also led me to change my practices as an advocate. Manipulating information, manipulating one's identity, the lies, are all 'weapons of the weak' (Scott 1985), or 'tactics' (De Certeau 1984) in this context of confinement. This is primarily the means used by undocumented migrants to escape their identification, which is the prerequisite for any removal (Le Courant 2009).

Through this first figure we can see the clash of two regimes of truth, that is, in a Foucaultian spirit, two mechanisms that produce discourses that function as true in a particular context: that of legal aid, which will then greatly depend on the evidence provided, and that of the anthropologist, who is much more interested in studying manipulation strategies than by the search for any 'real identity'. The issue was then how to work on these identity performances, on the circulation of these skills and *savoir-faire* when one is the recipient – as an intervener in the proceedings – of these manipulations. Asking questions about the construction of such discourses would imply revealing undocumented migrants' tactics and thus labelling them. When information becomes a key issue, there is no more room for an outside observer (Favret-Saada 1990).

It was only outside the place of confinement, by shifting the methodological framework of the research, that I could question these recurring practices of manipulating information during detention. When raising the question of how long is long enough for fieldwork, this example shows that without this methodological change I could have done research in detention for a long time without having access to this key information. Initiating long-term ethnographic relationships with the people I met in detention – but who have escaped deportation – was conducive to the development of an anthropological truth free of informational issues. But even outside the detention place, conditions from the first encounter continue to define the modalities of interaction. The question of the truthfulness of the interlocutors has already been the subject of numerous reflections which showed that there is no true or false information but only information transmitted in a particular setting (Paul 1953); this is why it is important to look at the conditions of the investigation (Bizeul 1998). But what precisely is involved in these interactions is the definition of this frame caught between legal assistance and research. I remained as an NGO volunteer, a valuable resource in the proceedings of regularisation, but a person to whom it was not easy to reveal the tactics, often at the margin of legality, used in order to



guarantee a migrant's ability to stay in France. I was asked to inquire, verify a rumour or check the details of regularisation procedures. I found myself in the position of one who is questioned and not so much in the position of the questioner. In other words, I was the 'expert' who gave the key to understanding the world of law and administrative process, a paradoxical position when you want to question irregular migrants' representations of this universe. I was an expert in two ways: as French, mastering the modes of communication necessary for interaction with the bureaucracy, but also as a holder of legal knowledge. If inside detention I was not able to listen to people's experiences, once outside I was hardly able to hear people's representation of bureaucracy. The main difficulty of being an 'expert' was to hear and accept other theories concerning that social world when we are believed to have the right and legitimate point of view. The ethnographic relationship was then constructed again through the prism of legal knowledge that determined the boundaries of truth and falsehood (Coutin 1995). This expert position is far from the one described by anthropological literature on advocacy (Paine 1985; Hastrup and Elsass 1990), the 'voice of the voiceless' or the 'companheiros' (Scheper-Hughes 1995), where it is about being a sort of spokesperson for the claims of the interlocutors. It was also a different kind of expertise than the expert testimonies in courtrooms (Good 2007; Rosen 1977).

After several years of knowing each other, reluctance and resistance tended to fade. Many of my interlocutors have shared with me their identity manipulations that made it possible for them to work, to escape police controls, etc. This everyday play on identities then became a central axis of my PhD research.

### *The 'madman'*

On 20 December 2007, I met Mr Doucouré. The date of birth recorded on the accompanying documents indicated he was a little over 50 years old. He was alone in the detention centre when I arrived. I began to talk to him following a list of questions designed to detect any irregularity or a possible ground for appeal: presence in France, family, illness, fear of returning home, etc. I had great difficulty understanding what he was saying, not only because of language difficulties but also because of the lack of coherence in his answer. I called a Bambara interpreter who also had great difficulty understanding Mr Doucouré. After a while, he hung up the phone saying the interpreter did not speak his native language well enough. He then launched into a tirade: 'I not work. You sleep. You give a helping hand. I did not steal Magassa. You pray, that's it. Also in the tickets, you're not out, you're always at home! If you are not eat, you're dead. You the money you keep at home?' I tried to find out if there were papers that proved his presence in France, his illness. He told me that everything is hidden in the furniture in the communal kitchen of the shelter where he lived, the kitchen where he says he slept.

The fragmentary information he was giving me did not help to initiate any legal procedure. Before leaving the detention centre, I informed the police that Mr Doucouré wanted to see a doctor and needed an interpreter. I sent a fax to the *Préfecture* asking for an interpreter for the next day's Court hearing. I was about to leave when Mr Doucouré asked me to sit. He told me how he went from Mali to Mauritania. He spoke of Mauritania, his work there in a plantation, the wound he had had while working and he told me about a scar. He got up, dropped his trousers and before I had time to tell him that I was not a judge, that I believed his word, he showed me his penis, pointing to

a tiny cut. He sat down again and continued to tell me about his trip to Spain in a boat, his arrival in Paris where he took public transport and went to 'where all the Blacks go', ending up in a shelter where he had been living in the kitchen for more than 10 years.

This scene was not unique in the research that I conducted; it was not the only time I was confronted with what I interpreted only as an incoherent behaviour. But it was one of the rare times I actually took notes. Most of the other 'madmen' I met disappeared from my notes. The fact that this man was alone in the detention centre probably explained why I could both take the time to enter into a discussion with him and to write down notes. Caught in the middle of other interactions, that episode would probably have been reduced to its bare minimum both in the discussion and in my notes. What I called a 'madman' was someone whose narrative was inaudible to the ears of the legal assistant. How and why would someone record something that, in context, seems to have no meaning? Part of the work within the detention centre is to make the narratives collected heard, bring them within the legal framework and, more broadly, within the space of comprehension to the judges. Very often this work entails a translation of the register of their legitimacy to be in France to that of the legality of the presence. What was meaningless to the legal practitioner should have shocked the anthropologist.

Jean and John Comaroff acknowledged that they learnt their most profound lesson about consciousness in rural South Africa from a 'madman' (Comaroff and Comaroff 1987). In the same vein, what had this 'madman' said that I could not hear? In other terms, and following Michel Foucault's analysis (1967), what does this 'madman' tell us about his social world? It seems to me that this 'madness' that I attributed to Mr Doucouré can be read in at least two ways. First, it can be seen as a testimony of the conditions of migration, the precariousness of his presence in France and his solitude. In this case the words should be taken into account. Many times he repeated 'in France there's nothing, not family, no my friend, nothing, no my Portuguese friend. I am a person. There is me, one or two, this is no good'. This approach then moves 'madness' imputed to the person to an understanding of the conditions of its existence. Second, the behaviour of Mr Doucouré can also be seen as the extreme internalisation of the orders of the institution in which I participate and that I probably embody for him during our exchanges: exposing himself by the narrative of his life and by the marks on his body (Fassin and D'Halluin 2005) in order to provide evidence that could lead to some kind of mercy. While I saw only the traces of mad behaviour, Mr Doucouré was speaking with great eloquence of his social world.

The 'madman' shows how legal and anthropological modes of thought were conflicting. The legal one starts from an abstract perspective and applies it to the singular case, while the anthropological mode of thought relies on particular situations and experiences and then builds up a generalisation (Good 2007: 30). When the analytical framework is so strong and predetermined, as it is in the case of a legal practitioner, it is very difficult to give room to the unexpected or chance events. The task of the legal assistant is precisely to erase the unexpected and make it fit the legal frame. That is why I could not see Mr Doucouré's expressions as anything else than mad behaviour. If he was considered as a madman by the legal practitioner I was, Mr Doucouré would have been called 'clairvoyant' by the anthropologist.

I saw the narratives that resisted the legal framework as expressions of madness. Now I understand why it was not while being in the field but long after, through the reading of my notes, that these contingencies arose. This temporal gap makes the experience different from the one often described when it comes to serendipity. Here it is a

matter of reinterpreting the data gathered. Again, changing the perspective revealed the blind spots of the research.

### **What we can learn on serendipity**

The term serendipity labels a notion that appears very often in anthropological practice – the unexpected, the unplanned discovery, the chance encounter – even if the word does not appear frequently in our writings. It seems useful, regarding the field experience I described, to distinguish two types of use of this term. First, it seems that the word serendipity makes references to events, unexpected meetings that have guided the field research (Pieke 2000). One of the most famous examples is probably that of Clifford Geertz, who had no initial interest in cockfights (Geertz 1973). The term is then closely related to its field of study, as a science that studies society, closely subject to the breakdowns and the contingencies that constitute it. It is also closely related to the inductive methodology of anthropology. Using the notion of serendipity then appears more as a rhetorical strategy to justify a choice of object than as a real tool for knowledge (Fine and Deegan 1996). It is then more about the opportunism<sup>5</sup> of the researcher. A second meaning of serendipity seems to be a way of designating the interpretive gap between what the anthropologist had expected to find in the field and what he or she actually found, what he or she has observed and what the theoretical background has led him or her to consider. In this sense, it seems to me that it is more useful to look at the construction of the anthropologist's gaze – and this is what I have tried to do in this paper – rather than to concentrate on the gap between the expected and the found, which is what serendipity generally names.

As the figure of the 'madman' illustrates, the notion of serendipity also involves time and the idea of integrating the multiple temporalities of our investigations (Fine and Deegan 1996). Only long-term research allows the possibility of experiencing uncertainty, 'ethnographic uneasiness' (Fassin and Bensa 2008) induced by the distancing of the point of views in context and pre-existing discourses. Such discourses are all the stronger when the anthropologist is at home as the adoption of the legal gaze illustrates. The long-term research is no longer the resource allowing access to private life, to the complexity of the social world. It becomes the necessary condition to the distancing of these first assignments. In this case the long-term frame does not coincide with the risk of 'going native' (Gold 1958; Hammersley and Atkinson 1983); on the contrary, it becomes necessary to step back from the mode of thought of our own society. Only a change of frame, both methodological (as when I had to get rid of an informational issue concerning the 'liar') and epistemological (as when I had to reconsider what seemed to be an insignificant encounter with a 'madman' in the field context), allows one to see the object of analysis in a different, new light.

Looking at this singular experience of a double commitment in the field, I argue that it is useless to seek the 'right distance' (Bensa 1995) or 'the atopy of the ethnographer' (Naepels 1998: 193) to its object or to attempt to set a fine balance between observation and participation, detachment and involvement. It is not a matter of finding the point of equilibrium where this distance would appear, rather, it seems to me that the particularity of the anthropological approach appears in the constant oscillation

5 In his discussion (this issue), Daniel Miller points out that instead of talking about serendipity we should call it opportunism and seriously consider it as one of the main virtues of anthropology.

between these opposites. It is precisely in the movement back and forth between different positions in the field and different ways of conceiving the data that anthropological knowledge was produced in this investigation. My research was built through moments of blindness and objective distance. It is maybe in the gap between these two poles that the anthropological project could find its specificity. This is one of the lessons I learned from the 'liar' and a 'madman'.

In this tension between involvement and detachment (Elias 1993) reappeared the ethical and political issues I noted at the beginning of this paper. Through the methodological and epistemological reflection it was also a question of interrogating the common representations of undocumented migrants. In so doing, what was at stake was a critical analysis of the way in which the legal mode of thought and the bureaucratic categorisation construct these representations, shaping the contemporary politics of migration.

## Acknowledgements

The author wants to thank Isabelle Rivoal, Noel Salazar and Daniel Miller for their helpful comments during the preparation of the manuscript. I am also grateful to the anonymous reviewers for their constructive and valuable remarks.

*Stefan Le Courant*

UMR 7186 – LESC

*Maison de l'archéologie et de l'ethnologie René-Ginouvès*

21, allée de l'université, Nanterre, 92023 Cedex France

*stefan.le-courant@mae.u-paris10.fr*

## References

- Armbruster, H. and A. Laerke (eds.) 2008. *Taking sides. Ethics, politics and fieldwork in anthropology*. Oxford: Berghahn Books.
- Becker, H. 1967. 'Whose side are we on?', *Social Problems* 14(3): 239–47.
- Bensa, A. 1995. 'De la relation ethnographique. A la recherche de la juste distance', *Enquête, anthropologie, histoire, sociologie* 1: 131–40.
- Bernardot, M. 2008. *Camps d'étrangers*. Bellecques-en-Bauge: Editions du Croquant.
- Bizeul, D. 1998. 'Le récit des conditions d'enquête: exploiter l'information en connaissance de cause', *Revue Française de Sociologie* 39: 751–87.
- Bourdieu, P. 1986. 'La force du droit', *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales* 64(1): 3–19.
- Bourdieu, P. 2003. 'Participant objectivation', *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 9(2): 281–94.
- Comaroff, J. L. and J. Comaroff 1987. 'The madman and the migrant: work and labor in the historical consciousness of a South African people', *American Ethnologist* 24: 191–209.
- Conley, J. M. and W. M. O'Barr 1990. *Rules versus relationships: the ethnography of legal discourse*. Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press.
- Coutin, S. B. 1995. 'Smugglers or Samaritans in Tucson, Arizona: producing and contesting legal truth', *American Ethnologist* 22: 549–71.
- Das, V. and D. Poole 2004. *Anthropology at the margins of the state*. Santa Fe, NM: School of American Research Press.
- De Certeau, M. 1984. *The practice of everyday life*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Düvell, F., A. Triandafyllidou and B. A. Vollmer 2010. 'Ethical issues in irregular migration research in Europe', *Population Space and Place* 16(3): 227–39.
- Elias, N. 1993. *Engagement et distanciation: contribution à la sociologie de la connaissance*. Paris: Fayard.

- Ewick, P. and S. S. Silbey 1998. *The common place of law: stories from everyday life*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Fassin, D. 2001. 'Charité bien ordonnée. Principes de justice et pratiques de jugement dans l'attribution des aides d'urgences', *Revue française de sociologie* 42(3): 437–75.
- Fassin, D. and A. Bensa 2008. *Les politiques de l'enquête: épreuves ethnographiques*. Paris: La Découverte.
- Fassin, D. and E. D'Halluin 2005. 'The truth from the body: medical certificates as ultimate evidence for asylum seekers', *American Anthropologist* 107(4): 597–608.
- Fassin, E. 2010. 'National identities and transnational intimacies: sexual democracy and the politics of immigration in Europe', *Public Culture* 22(3): 507–29.
- Favret-Saada, J. 1990. 'Etre affecté', *Gradhiva* 8: 3–10.
- Fine, G. A. and J. G. Deegan 1996. 'Three principles of Serendip: insight, chance, and discovery in qualitative research', *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 9: 434–47.
- Fischer, N. 2007. 'La rétention administrative dans l'Etat de droit. Genèse et pratique du contrôle de l'enfermement des étrangers en instance d'éloignement du territoire dans la France contemporaine', *CEVIPOV*. Paris: Institut d'Etude Politique.
- Foucault, M. 1967. *Madness and civilization: a history of insanity in the age of reason*. London: Tavistock.
- Foucault, M. 1973. *The birth of the clinic: an archeology of medical perception*. London: Tavistock.
- Geertz, C. 1973. *The interpretation of cultures*. New York: Basis Books.
- Gold, R. B. 1958. 'Roles in sociological field observations', *Social Forces* 36(3): 217–23.
- Good, A. 2007. *Anthropology and expertise in the asylum courts*. Abingdon/New York: Routledge-Cavendish.
- Hammersley, M. and P. Atkinson 1983. *Ethnography: principles in practice*. London: Routledge.
- Hastrup, K. and P. Elsass 1990. 'Anthropological advocacy: a contradiction in terms?', *Current Anthropology* 31: 301–11.
- Herzfeld, M. 1992. *The social production of indifference. Exploring the symbolic roots of Western bureaucracy*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Heyman, J. M. 1995. 'Putting power in the anthropology of bureaucracy: the immigration and naturalization service at the Mexico–United States border', *Current Anthropology* 36(2): 261–87.
- Hochschild, A. R. 2003. 'Travail émotionnel, règles de sentiments et structure sociale', *Travailler* 9(1): 19–49.
- Kandel, R. F. 1992. Six differences in assumptions and outlook between anthropologists and attorneys, in R. F. Kandel (ed.), *Double vision: anthropologists at law* (NAPA Bulletin, No. 11), 1–4. Washington, DC: American Anthropological Association.
- Kobelinsky, C. 2012. 'Sont-ils de vrais réfugiés?' Les tensions morales dans la gestion quotidienne de l'asile, in D. Fassin and J.-S. Eideliman (eds.), *Economies morales contemporaines*, 155–73. Paris: La Découverte.
- Le Courant, S. 2009. Remettre son passeport à la police? Coopérer, s'opposer à la procédure juridique d'expulsion du territoire français, in C. Kobelinsky and C. Makaremi (eds.), *Enfermés dehors, enquête sur le confinement des étrangers*, 183–201. Bellecombe-en-Bauges: Éditions du Croquant, coll. TERRA.
- Lutz, C. and White, G. M. 1986. 'The anthropology of emotions', *Annual Review of Anthropology* 15: 405–36.
- Makaremi, C. 2008. Participer en observant. Etudier et assister les étrangers aux frontières, in D. Fassin and A. Bensa (eds.), *Les politiques de l'enquête. Epreuves ethnographiques*, 165–83. Paris: La Découverte.
- Naepels, M. 1998. 'Une étrange étrangeté. Remarques sur la situation ethnographique', *L'Homme* 38: 185–99.
- Paine, R. 1985. *Advocacy and anthropology: first encounters*. St John's, Newfoundland Institute of Social and Economic Research.
- Paul, B. D. 1953. Interview techniques and field relationships, in A. L. Kroeber (ed.), *Anthropology today, an encyclopedic inventory*, 430–51. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Pieke, F. N. 2000. Serendipity: reflections on fieldwork in China, in P. Dresch, W. James and D. Parkin (eds.), *Anthropologists in a wider world. Essays on field research*, 129–50. Oxford: Bergahn Books.
- Rosen, L. 1977. 'The anthropologist as expert witness', *American Anthropologist* 79(3): 555–78.
- Scheper-Hughes, N. 1995. 'The primacy of the ethical: propositions for a militant anthropology', *Current Anthropology* 36: 409–40.
- Scott, J. C. 1985. *Weapons of the weak. Everyday forms of peasant resistance*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

- Spire, A. 2008. Histoire et ethnographie d'un sens pratique: le travail bureaucratique des agents du contrôle de l'immigration, in P. Fournier (ed.), *Observer le travail*, 61–76. Paris: La Découverte.
- Tedlock, B. 1991. 'From participant observation to the observation of participation: the emergence of narrative ethnography', *Journal of Anthropological Research* 47(1): 69–94.
- Van Andel, P. 1994. 'Anatomy of unsought finding: serendipity: origin, history, domains, traditions, appearances, patterns and programmability', *The British Journal for the Philosophy of Science* 45(2): 631–48.