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► **To cite this version:**

J. Barette. A qualitative approach can be rigorous. *Current Anthropology*, 2010, 51 (1), pp.150-151.
10.1086/649635 . ird-00472575

HAL Id: ird-00472575

<https://ird.hal.science/ird-00472575>

Submitted on 12 Apr 2010

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A Qualitative Approach Can Be Rigorous

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*La rigueur du qualitatif: les contraintes empiriques de
l'interprétation socio-anthropologique.* By Jean-Pierre Olivier
de Sardan. Louvain-la-Neuve: Academia Bruylant, 2008.

It is a great and rare pleasure that a long-time professional in anthropology, with forty years of fieldwork in West Africa, notably in Niger, has dared to confront, through a deep epistemological reflection, the central, thorny question, How scientific is anthropology? In other words, can anthropology be classified as one of the “experimental sciences,” in the manner of Karl Popper’s “refutability” and “falsifiability,” or even as one of Thomas Kuhn’s succession of “paradigms”? Conversely, can it be assigned to a kind of subjective rhetoric on things human, as the latest works of Geertz and “postmodernism” seemed to imply?

Olivier de Sardan suspects that the “labeling policy” in fashion in the United States, which he describes as “a popular sport,” would probably define him as a “post-positivist” (p. 265) for offering the following: social sciences (and hence anthropology) “are fundamentally interpretative (a correlate: scientist positivism and naturalism cannot be sustained); social sciences are empirical sciences (a correlate: epistemological anarchism and postmodernism are not sustainable either)” (p. 265, my translation). In a nutshell, his position is that anthropology is not a science in the sense defined by Claude Bernard or Karl Popper because it does not include experimentation, consubstantial to experimental sciences, as they define it. Fieldwork, which is the only experimental approach that we share and is thoroughly discussed here, obviously cannot be correlated in a one-to-one fashion with scientific experimentation, insofar as one cannot change the protocol and say “What would happen now?” Neither can it be primarily a romantic or “subjective” hobby, if only because anthropologists working in the same area often recount surprisingly similar observations, despite differences in the training of the people involved and the scope of the studies. In short, anthropology is more of a way of knowing than a science, and what is wrong with that, after all?

From his vast and thorough bibliographic review, Olivier de Sardan concludes that an Anglo-Saxon excessive scientism has made his question more salient in recent American anthropology than in European. Still, his position cannot be assigned to a supposedly “French” or “anti-American” school, and he is right in saying that a systematic use of the “emblematic figure” of Claude Lévi-Strauss to represent French

anthropology considerably biases the debate on a would-be French anthropology (p. 17); not to mention the fact that Lévi-Strauss’s positions about anthropology’s scientificity varied considerably during his long and rich career. When the American Lawrence Kuznar (1997), although not quoted in this book, “reclaim[ed] a scientific anthropology” a few years ago, he only hinted at a controlled empiricism. He also alluded to the various and naive driftings of postmodernism in America, to self-contradictory dealings with such notions as “subjectivity,” and finally to the very notion of a “subject” (Baré 1999) and whether it should encompass the anthropologists themselves and the persons they interview or include other notions, such as “reflexivity” (see Olivier de Sardan’s chapter 5 on the “methodological I”). In that sense, he shared many positions with Olivier de Sardan, and I am sure that he is not alone.

The topic of objectivity is, of course, part of a very old philosophical debate. One of this book’s interests when dealing with basically philosophical debates is to keep them inscribed into the very practice of a profession. One cannot better sum up the general argument than by the opening quotations: first from Max Weber, “empirical disciplines elaborate the qualitative aspect of reality . . . including history”; next from Sherlock Holmes (possibly a humorous allusion), “it’s a capital mistake to theorize before one has data”; and above all from the sociologist and former Bourdieu collaborator Jean-Claude Passeron, “sociological theory which does not present itself to inspection as empirical stays as a metaphysical theory.” This book indeed follows Passeron’s general positions on the epistemological unity of anthropology, sociology, and history and on the notion of “plausibility” of data, as opposed to Popper’s refutability or “falsifiability,” as argued in his remarkable book *Le raisonnement sociologique* (1991).

All these fundamental questions are discussed with equal interest in chapters primarily collected from previously published articles, but the whole progression unfolds from a basic idea, “the approximative rigor of anthropology” (p. 7), an apparent self-contradiction commented on throughout the introduction. The reasoned critique of “culturalism,” toward a “moral epistemology” of fieldwork, developed in chapter 2 (“The Politics of Fieldwork”) should stand as a reference on fieldwork. Chapter 3 is a thorough discussion of the notion of “emics” (or the actor’s point of view), and chapter 4 is an outstanding commentary on “observation” and “description,” vital concepts in a discipline that is basically descriptive, whatever the abstraction involved (see p. 133). Chapter 5, on “the methodological I” and the anthropologist’s implication in fieldwork, is mentioned above; chapter 6 is a critical reflection on “populism” in anthropology. Chapter 7 is about “over-interpretation or violence inflicted on data” and, being of equal quality, may be the most questionable argument because of the problem of defining overinterpretation in a discipline literally built on interpretation. The conclusion discusses the

q2

q1

q3

reciprocal relationships between “common sense and clerical sense,” and a very interesting postscript specifically addresses the reciprocal relationships between the researcher and the “citizen,” reminding us of Weber’s distinction between “le savant et le politique.”

It is all the more interesting that Olivier de Sardan, after a lifetime of various personal involvements, concludes that “la sociologie n’est pas un sport de combat” and should not be one, making an ironical allusion to a 2001 TV movie devoted to the late Pierre Bourdieu under the exact opposite title, “La sociologie est un sport de combat.” Finally, let us make note of an excellent bibliography, somewhat arbitrary, as is any bibliography, but showing in itself the work’s consistency and intelligence. This is a rare and important book.

References Cited

- Baré, Jean-François. 1999. “Déconstruire” le “postmodernisme.” *L’Homme* 39:267–276.
- Kuznar, Laurence A. 1997. *Reclaiming a scientific anthropology*. 2nd edition. Lanham, MD: AltaMira.
- Passeron, Jean-Claude. 1991. *Le raisonnement sociologique: un espace non-poppérien de l’argumentation*. Paris: Nathan.

QUERIES TO THE AUTHOR

1 (a) In the first sentence of the paragraph, the introduction of the translated passage has been revised. Does the revised sentence express your intended meaning accurately? (b) In the translated passage, should “scientist positivism” be “scientific positivism”?

2 Is the observation about the variability of Lévi-Strauss’s position on this matter your own aside, or is it a point that Olivier de Sardan makes in his book?

3 The sentence about chapter 7 is somewhat hard to follow, particularly the passage “being of . . . argument.” Does the following express your intended meaning accurately? “Chapter 7 is about ‘overinterpretation or violence inflicted on data’; although of the same high quality as the rest of the book, it may present the most questionable argument because of the problem of defining overinterpretation in a discipline literally built on interpretation.”