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**14.30h-16.30h Chair: Enzo Colombo**

**Urban Ethnography, an interdisciplinary field of knowledge?**

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**Abstract**

Urban Ethnography is both a method and a scientific approach embedded in Urban Studies. It is often practiced by anthropologists, who tend to monopolize the ethnographic method, or to maintain it as a specific skill (Ingold 2013), but is also practiced by other social scientists trained by anthropologists to include the method in their researches.

In this presentation I wish to present the case of Portuguese Urban Ethnography. On the one hand, the history of this methodology is international, since it grew under strong relations between Portugal, Spain and Brasil, and to a less extent, with the United States and France. It is also interdisciplinary – linked mostly with Anthropology, Sociology and History, but also with Geography, Architecture and Political Science. But on the other hand, Urban Ethnography as a field is not self-assured.

To what extent is Urban Ethnography interdisciplinary? And what about its practitioners? Are they more committed with ground theory, applied research, collaborative research? The paper will contribute to answer these questions, following recent results from a qualitative research based in interviews and Curricula analysis about Portuguese Urban Ethnography.

**Keywords:** Urban Ethnography, Interdisciplinarity, History of Science, Portugal  
**PAPER**

**Urban Ethnography, an interdisciplinary field of knowledge?<sup>1</sup>**

**Introduction**

The title of this paper stands for questioning about Urban Ethnography. Is it an interdisciplinary field of knowledge? But the second part of the question, “field of knowledge” is a question per se. In social and human sciences, Ethnography is seen as a specific qualitative approach, embedded in qualitative methods. More specifically, it is seen as an *add* to other qualitative methods. For instance, one can make a qualitative

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was written to be presented at the International Conference Two decades discourse about globalizing social sciences – concepts, strategies, achievement, 26<sup>th</sup>-28<sup>th</sup> April, ISCTE-IUL, and takes into account preliminary results from a post-PhD project about Urban Ethnography in Portugal (Ref. SFRH/BPD/108265/2015, FCT/CIES-IUL). I appreciate the opportunity to share my recent work to the organizer António Pedro Dores.

approach by gathering recorded interviews and then make a content analysis to the group of interviews, and, if the topic implies a location, or an institution, the researcher can go to the field and improve his/her empirical data with ethnographic data.

In Anthropology, Ethnography is the principal method. Ethnography and Anthropology in a way may be synonyms, because Ethnography is a theoretical-methodological approach to make fieldwork. This may only be understandable for Anthropologists, and this is “our” fault. Ethnography, for anthropology, is of course a method. But because it is the method par excellence, it includes a big chance that throughout ethnography, the theoretical framework may change.

Moreover, it is the kind of scientific empirical method that after gathering empirical data, it is common that the topic of approach also changes a little bit. Anthropologists say that during the ethnographic work, one must keep an open mind towards the subject. That’s the way to add something to the discipline in the end of the day. If we go to do fieldwork with a strong model of approach and cling to that, we probably will miss all field data that does not fit into our subject. And while doing fieldwork, one sometimes experiences new data, unexpected events, classically called serendipity, that may inform about what we are trying to understand.

Because of Ethnography’s centrality to Anthropology, it sometimes gains the role of synonym with Anthropology itself. Ethnography describes a group of people in a certain present. And that description (Clifford 1990) is surrounded by theoretical discourses that are at stake in the narrative about that same group of people. So, for a certain ideal of Anthropology, the results from a work in Anthropology is an Ethnography. That is one of the reasons why some anthropologists seem to monopolize the ethnographic method. It is also important to say that Ethnography is not only a participant observation method; it also includes gathering other type of data (local and/or family archives; media data; laws; formal interviews) from an ethnographic sight.

That said, is it possible that other social scientists beyond Anthropologists make “real” Ethnographies? The question has a pitfall, “real”. There is no “real” Ethnography, since it is as dynamic as any other aspect of sciences. I guess most Anthropologists understand this well, because they don’t believe in “real” something, in the “origin” of a cultural custom, etc. So, to put it simple, can other social scientists, such as

Sociologists, who come from the first neighbour science of Anthropology, make a, at least, good Ethnography?

We must recall the Chicago School to be short in this debate. Christien Topalov recalls the foundation of the Chicago School saying that Robert Ezra Park and Ernest Burgess began a study program in 1924 considering the local communities of Chicago, and “their ambition was to make Sociology a true science that went out from the classroom and the library and would face its natural “laboratory”: the big city.” (Topalov 2015: 11).<sup>2</sup> Many researchers made important works to understand the urban context as we do today. Some did not Graduate in Sociology or Anthropology, some were journalists, but the Chicago School gained strength because of this singular interdisciplinary endeavour within the scope of the ethnographic method. So, Urban Ethnography and its interdisciplinarity has a strong root in Chicago School.

Nevertheless, the debate about Ethnographies made by other social scientists beyond anthropologists is opened, at least in Portugal, and the reason for that is because Anthropology has a difficult history in this country. After the first Graduation courses in the 1980s, it grew and was branched in area studies. But at the same time, it was internationally clashed by post-modernity and an excess of reflexivity<sup>3</sup>, which drove Anthropology into an internal debate only understandable inside the discipline. That happened in Portugal when Anthropology needed to be more acknowledgeable. Researchers in the 1990s had already an important historic of rural studies that were made in the Democratic context.<sup>4</sup>

During the 1990s, there was a certain turn to urban studies (Cordeiro & Afonso 2003), such as Cordeiro’s (1997) which is an Urban Anthropology work, and other studies that were made in the urban context but without an urban theoretical context – in this case we may include migration, housing, religion studies, most of them conducted among post-colonial populations residing in urban areas. Nowadays, Anthropology faces

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<sup>2</sup> Free translation from “Leur ambition était de faire de la sociologie une véritable science qui, sortait enfin de la salle de classe et de la bibliothèque, affronterait son «laboratoire» naturel: la grande ville.”

<sup>3</sup> Reflexivity in Anthropology is different from Reflexivity in Sociology. In Anthropology is, reflexivity, *grosso modo*, a way of making theory (s. Clifford and Marcus 1986).

<sup>4</sup> Before the 25<sup>th</sup> of April, Anthropology was developed moreover also in the rural context (Leal 2006). With Democracy, researchers felt free to criticize the former regime and to follow international anthropological approaches about rural communities (Brian O’Neill, João de Pina-Cabral, José Sobral, João Leal). Even before the Revolution, some international researchers pave the way, like José Cutileiro with a study about Alentejo (1972) firstly published in the UK.

another potential step back in the science history inscription for being out of the Frascati index of sciences. To have a panel with anthropologists, a Portuguese anthropologist needs to apply in Sociology and then the presence of an anthropologist in the evaluation panel to his or her scientific projects is not assured.<sup>5</sup>

Urban Sociology and Urban Anthropology are therefore highly in debt with urban ethnography, and the method is also spread in other scientific fields such as Geography, Psychology, Architecture.<sup>6</sup> But I will be back to the Portugal context of Urban Ethnography in more detail. The next section presents the methods applied in my recent research project about Urban Ethnography in Portugal.

## **Methodology**

The project Urban Ethnographers. Professional portraits, ethnographic archives, and revisitation is a Post-PhD project (2016-2019)<sup>7</sup>. The project marks a big turn in my research subjects; in the past my interests were driven to migration, transnationality, housing.<sup>8</sup> Initially for the project, one of the intentions was to make an ethnographic approach to the field. The field was “my” field as well, in what turned to be a sort of autoethnography (s. Ellis and Bochner 2000). The other intention, which I followed the most, was to make professional trajectories interviews to the population under study. And who is this population? People who did Ethnography in an urban context – anthropologists and other social and human scientists who elected Ethnography as an important methodologic endeavour in their works.

Beyond the interviews,<sup>9</sup> the most important empirical work has been done through the analysis of the researchers’ Curricula. The CV analysis was suggested by a colleague

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<sup>5</sup> A topic on the discussion about this may be found here: <http://www.apantropologia.org/apa/tag/manual-frascati/>.

<sup>6</sup> In the Portuguese case, the interest grew specifically in the recent years with the PhD in Urban Studies, conducted in ISCTE-IUL and in FCSH-Nova, with students from Planning, Architecture, Anthropology, Sociology, among other.

<sup>7</sup> With a Fellowship from Science and Technology Foundation (FCT), Ref. [SFRH/BPD/108265/2015](https://doi.org/10.547031/SFRH/BPD/108265/2015), a project supervised by Edward Simpson (SOAS, UK) and Pedro Abrantes (CIES-IUL).

<sup>8</sup> Previously I worked with a Hindu-Gujarati population in Lisbon’s outskirts, in Leicester (UK), Maputo (MZ) and Diu (IN). The theoretical approach derives from Urban Anthropology, but also from Post-colonial studies (Cachado 2013; 2014; 2017).

<sup>9</sup> Until now, 11 in depth interviews were made among both senior and junior researchers with a professional trajectory approach.

who was interviewed in the beginning of the project, back in March 2016. This empirical work provides me with significant elements to understand the professional network among urban ethnographers. On the one hand, titles chosen for their papers, book chapters and other publications reveal academic “ways” throughout the years. When one includes terminology such as neighbourhoods, housing, streets, a researcher is choosing keywords that leave a track. Looking at them in group, one may find strong keywords and strong themes. At the same time, on the other hand, CVs provide info about academic degrees and access to academic positions. This type of information is central to understand the professional contexts and acknowledge the different generations of urban ethnographers. Moreover, CVs also refer to team projects, which in turn substantiate the autonomy stage of Cities as a field in general and specifically about urban ethnography. Team projects also leave a track about professional networks, either national and international ones. Finally, other more “objective” data can be also found in CVs: gender, age, faculty where the academic degree is achieved, etc., this type of information will give an important overview of the chosen universe.

The approach has been made through researchers more than through their publication outputs, although they are intertwined. In the history of science, the analysis of the results, i.e. of the works published by scientists has a tradition in Portugal (Fiolhais 2013; Ágoas 2013). For the subject at stake, since the researchers are alive, no better than themselves to give their representation about the field. As said before, I did not have great experience in the field of the history of science. What I was sure was that considering Urban Ethnography in Portugal and the fact that researchers are alive, there was a chance to approach coevity.

### **Urban Ethnography in Portugal**

Who are the Urban Ethnographers in Portugal? Considering the existing literature, there is a group of people that should be acknowledged as chief influences on other urban ethnographers. In its first steps, the field is already strongly interdisciplinary, with researchers from Anthropology, Sociology, Psychology, and Geography.

In the field of Anthropology, Graça Cordeiro represents the field of Urban Ethnography itself, for she began an optative course of Urban Anthropology in 1989 in ISCTE-IUL, mostly to Anthropology and Sociology students, and had a central role setting up the

Urban Anthropology PhD International Program Lisbon/Tarragon (2004 onwards) and setting up the existing PhD in Urban Studies (ISCTE-IUL/FCSH-Nova). She made her ethnographies always in urban contexts with an urban anthropologic mindset (1989; 1997; 2015).

For her PhD she developed a Thesis about a “historical” neighbourhood in Lisbon, Bica (Cordeiro 1997). Her main contributions are, firstly, the fact that her is a first Thesis that can be considered a work on Urban Anthropology; second, the study of an urban collectivity; the insights on the concept of neighbourhood; the methodology, which included, beyond ethnographic fieldwork, an archive research similar to those made by other anthropologists in the rural contexts, but made in an urban setting, including a long-term newspaper research (1862-1989).

She also published work reflecting about the field of urban ethnography, both alone and in co-authorship (Cordeiro 2003; Cordeiro & Costa 1999; Bastista & Cordeiro 2002; Cordeiro & Vidal 2008; Castro & Cordeiro 2014), which is significant to understand her centrality in the urban ethnography field.

Other researchers from Anthropology who not only chose the urban context as ethnographic fields but also developed their theoretical frameworks considering the field of urban studies include Susana Trovão Bastos, who developed an important research on the history of urban marginalization (Bastos 1997); Filomena Silvano, who began fieldwork in a rural area, realized the centrality of the urban context. She theorized on spaces and places (Silvano 1994); and finally, Antónia Pedroso de Lima, who did a MA and part of her PhD in Urban Anthropology in Spain and then studied, for her PhD, families in the urban context (Lima 2003). It is easy to understand from this range of anthropologists that topics, and the types of urban ethnographies, are very diverse.<sup>10</sup>

From the field of Sociology, the main reference in Portugal is António Firmino da Costa, with a PhD deeply based on ethnographic fieldwork, and whose Thesis publication is a fundamental work for students of sociology (Costa 1999). The author developed a long-term fieldwork in Alfama (1978-1998), with both quantitative and qualitative analysis, where ethnography was not only a complement but a central

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<sup>10</sup> The scope of a former generation of Anthropologists who did or does urban ethnography does not end with this summary, but these are the first recognized works.

research strategy. His work has a say in many domains: it is a first approach to Lisbon's gentrification process (Costa 1999: 378-383); develops the concept of interaction frameworks (Costa 1999: 296-349); the centrality of the cultural practice of Fado for the Alfama population (Costa 1999: 122-151); the migrant strategies from a rural to an urban setting and the significance of the place of origin (Costa 1999: 245-264). This way, the author gives an important input to urban studies, at least in three domains - gentrification; urban cultural practices; rural-urban migration – which have an urban slope.

Another researcher, from the field of Psychology, Luís Fernandes who, in his PhD research, adopted ethnography to analyze drug consumption in a peripheric neighborhood in Porto (Fernandes 1998). Among other reasons, his work is important because he writes a chapter about the ways he collected primary data, through fieldnotes, and explains the empirical process and its analytical potentialities. He later clarifies the process in a chapter included in a book on qualitative methods (Fernandes 2002), which is used by anthropologists to explain the ethnographic practice; actually, a rare example of a Portuguese text about fieldnotes and its uses.

Other two researchers should be considered to present this generation of urban ethnographers. Geographer Jorge Malheiros who, in his PhD, focuses on Great Lisbon as a whole to approach “Indian” migration, where he finds the limits of the quantitative data to analyze these type of urban populations (plural in nationalities, naturalities, religions) and choses the micro lenses of specific neighborhoods to make his research (Malheiros 1996). Sociologist Luís Baptista, in his Master Thesis (Baptista 1987) includes ethnography although to a less extent, to approach the Bairro do Rego, which is a neighborhood with characteristics of an early example of metropolisation of Lisbon.

After these first works, some of these actors worked together in a way that resulted in the solidification of the field. They made seminars and projects, and MA and PhD programs, working along with two types of colleagues – international colleagues also committed with urban ethnography somehow, and junior researchers interested in the study of urban settings using ethnography.<sup>11</sup> For this later group of researchers, we can almost speak of a new generation, but this concept holds a pitfall, not easy to overcome. On the one hand, they belong to a younger “group” presently between 30 and 45 years

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<sup>11</sup> This context was analysed in another paper, a forthcoming chapter (Cachado, 2018), see references.

old, all of them were students of the former researchers in diverse contexts, attending courses (Urban Anthropology, Urban Sociology); supervised by them in their PhDs, etc. Methodologically, it is a great opportunity to study coevity – meaning the fact that they are available to be interviewed, and considering the field, one does not need to gird only on publications to understand it (although the same is true for the older ones), and actually, a part of them were already interviewed (11 formal in depth interviews for “junior” researchers and only one, until now, for the “senior”). But it is also true that the senior researchers don’t fit in the concept of “generations” because they nourished work in groups, not only through projects, but also advocating equal academic relationships. This form of work is highlighted by “junior” researchers in their interviews, and I quote a clear statement regarding this issue:

“I don’t see an interest regarding the generation issue, if it is from the academic point of view, considering the elder goals, which were precisely to deconstruct the generational issue. (...) [but] the experience was very different” (JR, interview 15/03/2017)

This researcher actually gives us a clue to avoid the generation concept pitfall: although the idea of two different generations is incorrect regarding the senior attitude, their professional experiences were rather different, facing different challenges (namely the precarious work of the junior ones, and the difficulty to progress in careers for seniors).

Considering the group of interviewees until now, it is easy to find an interdisciplinary input, although only almost among Sociology and Anthropology (with singular cases of History and Psychology). If the present post-PhD project proceeds with (even) younger researchers, we will find a wider range of disciplines, including architecture, planning, geography (considering the Graduation courses from the Urban Studies PhD Program that is taking place in ISCTE-IUL and in FCSH-Nova since 2012, coordinated by Professor Graça Cordeiro and Professor Luís Baptista).

Trying to make a (first) resume of the topics approached by these junior researchers (with PhD thesis from 2007 to 2013), we find a large range – housing (Nunes 2009; Cachado 2012); social movements (Pereira 2009); graffiti (Ferro 2016) and hip-hop culture (Raposo 2013); gentrification (Pereira 2018); education (Abrantes 2008); squares (Calvo 2011).

However, the history of Urban Ethnography in Portugal would be incomplete if we restricted the field to the national context, for academic research tends to be in its



“nature” to internationality. The international imprint of Urban Ethnography in Portugal is from the beginning made with the Brazilian Urban Anthropology context, and with the Spanish one (data from Graça Cordeiro’s interviews), and, to a less extent, with France and the United States. There are two central characters in this history, Gilberto Velho (1945-2012) from Brazil, and Joan Pujadas, from Spain who, in their countries represent the heart of Urban Anthropology. Along with them, a large group of colleagues and students compose this academic network. Recently, this Urban Ethnography Network was formally arranged (see the Open Access academic blog <https://etnourb.hypotheses.org/parceiros>).

To conclude the presentation of this group of researchers who somehow dedicated a part of their empirical work to an ethnographic approach, I make a summary of the main lines found throughout the Curricula analysis made until now. 32 CVs were collected from a group of approximately 40 researchers. The 32 Curricula are from Portuguese researchers and the remaining are Brazilian, Spanish and French, one from the USA and other from Romania. Considering the disciplines, Anthropology and Sociology are at the top, and the other found sciences are, as expected, Geography, History, Architecture, and Psychology.

Considering their present positions, nine of them are Senior researchers (3 full professors; 3 associate professors; 3 assistant professors); seven hold a PhD since the late 2000s (5 assistant professors, 2 invited teachers); other seven hold a PhD since the early 2010s (1 assistant professor; 4 invited teachers; 2 of them are no longer employed in the academia); finally, a group of 8 students (5 in the Urban Studies PhD Program and 3 from other Programs – Anthropology, Architecture). Their previous education was in a diversity of disciplines: Anthropology, Sociology, Architecture, Geography.

This summary is obviously concerned with professional trajectories from the career position point of view. The reason for this first approach<sup>12</sup> is linked with an hypothesis I developed in the research project; the fact that the half a dozen precedent years were lived under a difficult situation for the academic researchers (and for the Portuguese society as a whole), naming the research policies taken during the austerity government between 2011-2015. With precarious professional positions and the universities pressure to publish, influenced by an international phenomenon of the need to be cited

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<sup>12</sup> A further approach to the CVs is in process, which considers the topics used in papers titles.

in indexed journals (Fernandes 2017), recent years were lived in stress by most of the researchers that take part of this project. This situation is not singular to Urban Ethnography, of course, but considering the fact that the research includes recent experiences, to include this aspect is mandatory (s. Knight & Stewart 2016).

### **Final Remarks**

Considering the preliminary results from a research project about the History of Urban Ethnography in Portugal, it was highlighted the aspect of its interdisciplinarity. But to what extent is Urban Ethnography interdisciplinary? Following my interlocutors, both regarding those who are now making their PhDs, embracing urban ethnography, but graduated in areas beyond sociology and anthropology, and those who have finished their PhDs five years ago or more, interdisciplinarity is difficult, if not impossible for some of them, considering the theoretical frameworks. Although one may read and be influenced by works from a diversity of disciplines (from researchers who made urban ethnography educated in different scientific fields), in the end of the day, one has to, or feels the need to, maintain his or her theoretical backgrounds. Nevertheless, urban ethnography as a method is recognized as an empirical way of doing science, which is rooted in a group of disciplines. That said, the present hypothesis is that urban ethnography in Portugal is in fact interdisciplinary, but only regarding methods. However, one may ask an epistemological question: if the method is interdisciplinary, to what extent can we say that the results are not interdisciplinary?

Other questions remain unanswered: considering that urban ethnography involves, to a certain extent, a compromise with interlocutors, are urban ethnographers more committed with applied or collaborative research? As an urban ethnographer myself, from the “junior” generation, I witnessed other researchers developing their ethnographic works mainly by conversations, and a common concern was precisely with getting more or less involved with the urban processes they were observing. Although this is not new for ethnography in its entirety (the mutuality<sup>13</sup> processes commonly involve reciprocity processes), it deserves more ethnographic attention in the next stages of the project.

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<sup>13</sup> For mutuality in ethnographic fieldwork see Pina-Cabral 2011.

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