

Dangerous as a villager who learned to be a townsman. Lowering the sociological gaze in urbanizing Yemen

I am currently dropping a PhD project in anthropology that I began in 2005, dedicated to an interactionist approach to masculine sociability in relation to social history in Taiz. My methodology was based on the practice of reflexive ethnography, and my investigations were grounded in Hawdh al-Ashraf, a district which gathers migrants from all origins, rural and urban populations. I have spent 24 months there from 2003 to 2010, and I have taken the best sociological lesson that the city of Taiz had to teach. However I did not publish this material on masculine interactions. In recent years, while endlessly trying to create through theoretical argumentation the academic conditions to write my PhD, I re-elaborated this ethnographic experience in the terms of Islamic “government of self” (*siyâsat al-nafs*) and Muslim critical thought. I am now reconverting to social work in the French Muslim community. Still I would love to take part in this workshop, so as to reconsider this academic stalemate in light of the Yemeni Spring.

Taizis have taught me to *lower my sociological gaze* - if I may propose my own reading of a famous qur'anic prescription (*sûrat al-nûr*, 30-31). They made me aware of the act of sociological perception, and of its gravity. Few foreign observers in Yemen have the chance to go through this learning process : Yemeni cities of the 2000's just didn't allow us to be ashamed. The most significant feature of the Yemeni Spring was not so much internal dialog as the redefinition it implied in the relationship with foreigners, who were kindly asked to keep aside. By now however, old interactional patterns are back in place, and with them the “reality” of Yemen's inescapable crises.

First I need to explain the particular situation that allowed me to go through this learning process.

Ten years ago, after my first fieldwork in Taiz, I had to write for the first time an academic memoir for my master's degree in anthropology. My situation back then strangely resembled the current post-revolutionary political situation in Yemen : *sociological categories were loaded with shame*. I had to use them in order to set up a context for my observations, but I knew they were false. The story I had to tell was a fake one, designed to cover my confusion, to give a meaning to shameful experiences. The (fake) story was : how unemployed urban youth filled their time with pointless adventures and hollow political intrigues, while the true reasons for their behavior were sociological.

When I had first set out to do anthropology in Yemen, I was confident in my ability to tell a different story. I knew that Yemenis had certain preconceptions about foreigners, but I felt I would manage to overcome these through my sincerity, in order to reach “true interactions”. My love for the Arabic language and culture was strong, my intentions were pure, I felt I was brave enough. Three months later, these certitudes had gone, leaving me in a state of confused passion. In deed, local society had been startled by my sincerity : the “social antagonisms” I had observed were actually alternative postures as to the question how to handle my presence. I had managed to harness a revolutionary enthusiasm that lay dormant, and then people realized the polemics were going nowhere and suddenly turned away. This aborted story in itself may be of little interest, but the result of it was a collective shame : my inability to assume the responsibility for my own engagement was intricate with their own collective failure to present a coherent face to their host.

Strangely enough, the MA-thesis I wrote turned out to be a good one, full of lively details : one year after this first experience in Taiz, I had passed to the next academic degree so I had the legitimacy to go back. But on the ground, I was a “burnt” ethnographer already. In the neighborhood where I had stayed, my research was known already as a failed political project, and of course I was incapable to engage in a similar experience somewhere else. Finally I took a hotel room on the Square of Hawdh al-Ashraf, next to that small neighborhood where I had stayed. There at least, the shame was a collective one.

The shopkeepers on the square were not at the center of my first research, but their gossiping had fueled my sociological fantasy. Furthermore, the square permanently hosted new stocks of rural migrants, coming from all over Yemen to look for work. There were also townspeople disguised as rural migrants, looking for new opportunities. I stayed on this square too, constructing sophisticated theoretical arguments about interaction and social history. But what really mattered for me was the shame I suffered from, which drastically limited the range of my investigations. In the PhD project I started in 2005, I focused on a specifically Taizi culture of vulgarity : I studied the practice of sexual jokes and ambiguous gestures - as well as the proper use of the phrase “*Anîk 'ârak!*” (literally “I screw your shame”)... Instead of addressing Yemenis with positive sociological questions, I learned how to use my shame (*'âr*) as a tool to interact with them. I could do this because the shopkeepers invited me to it, officially “so that I learn how to defend myself”. And I could see that the rural migrants did the same thing : in their learning process of the city, they too needed to turn their timidity into an asset.

I see a parallel between the condition of the ethnographer and that of a “wheelbarrow” street-vendor (*sâhib 'arabiyya*). Officially, the wheelbarrows are banned in the public space. In practice however, wheelbarrows and tax raisers from the municipality often reach an agreement based on mutual interest. This arrangement may be perceived as crude exploitation, but actually the rule of supply and demand still applies in the realm of personal protection : since there is a surplus of municipality officers, the language used for the negotiation is an idiom of hospitality, seduction and favor. Of course, this is quite intimidating for newcomers. When the rural migrant first arrives, the town is filled with frightening rumors about urban “sodomites” (*lûti*) chasing young naïve boys. Then he learns how to find his own interest in the urban space. The tax-raiser is a partner in this learning process, not just a “class enemy”. Finally, the villager makes peace with the city, and according to the urban common sense, nothing can make him more “dangerously” shrewd : *mâ akhtar min qarawî law tamaddan*.

The condition of an ethnographer is somehow similar. In order to learn, I need to have a local master, someone who says “No” to me, thus accepting to be called an “extremist” by other Yemenis. Someone who uses me as a “cash cow” but still manages to make me feel in love with him. Then, as I learn to fully assume my part in the interaction, my perception changes. I end up thanking Allah for the lesson, with special gratitude and affection for the particular people who led me to that truth. But in this case, strangely enough, making peace appeared contradictory with my academic project.

Another example : Mohammed Bouazizi, the Tunisian street-vendor who burnt himself, supposedly out of desperation for his economic situation, and ignited the Arab Spring. We often forget that he was also a man of tribal background, humiliated by the *female* police officer who slapped him : the oppression became visible and blatant only with the intrusion of a woman in this informal “eroticized” negotiation. As commentators make revolutionary acts readable sociologically, they focus on abstract ideals of social justice, and forget the basic forms of *love* that are invested in all social relations in times of peace. Such cleaved perceptions of social experience have long been at work in Taiz.¹ The current rise of insecurity and distrust is the spectacular consequence of long-term epistemic delusions.

Social sciences are conceived in such a way that the villager never becomes a townsman. How did the sociological gaze ever come into existence? Social scientists themselves are never to be initiated to the secret. As for Yemenis who reach out for those sciences in search for answers, their shame may well remain unresolved, like an open-ended question. What if Yemen primarily suffers from an addiction to social sciences and to foreign expertise? Drawing on the Batesonian critique, I argue that the social sciences should be considered as part of Yemen's problem, if we ever hope to make them part of the solution. Also, the crisis in Yemen should not be abstracted from the global crisis in the “ecology of mind” that strikes human knowledge in general, and social sciences in particular.

1 Vincent Panel, « Le réveil des piémonts : Taz et la révolution yéménite », in *Le Yémen, tournant révolutionnaire*, éd. par Laurent Bonnefoy, Franck Mermier, et Marine Poirier (CEFAS / Karthala, 2012), 125-141.