

# Urban Ethnology à la Française

## Contemporary Research in Paris and Its Characteristics<sup>1</sup>

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Compared to the research done in urban ethnology in other European countries, the French studies in this field come up with some interesting features. In order to formulate a critical evaluation of urban ethnology in France, the following article sketches its development, capturing trends and main topics and trying to identify structural patterns. It turns out that ethnological approaches to urban culture have turned up since the 1970s and that this field of research has been practiced mainly in Paris. There is no particular discipline dealing with urban ethnology, investigations are carried out by specialists from various disciplines, working individually or in teams. In view of the heterogeneous approaches the scientific positions of French urban ethnology can hardly be defined precisely. Nevertheless, a particular interest for ‘the other’ within the own society can be seen to emerge. The various but often highly specialized projects of contemporary research form a colorful mosaic, reflecting an ‘ethnology in the city’ (*ethnologie dans la ville*) whereas a more general ‘ethnology of the city’ (*ethnologie de la ville*) is still lacking.

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French cities – and Paris in particular – are not an easy field to study and both French ethnologists and outside observers are faced with the same problems. Any attempt to summarize the research done in urban ethnology over the past twenty years meets with various difficulties. The first one is immediately apparent: as there are practically no handbooks,<sup>2</sup> no specific bibliographies and no synoptic reviews, one has to spend much time looking for data in texts on general social anthropology (*anthropologie sociale, ethnologie générale*), on the ethnography of France and finally on the more specific aspects of urban ethnology (*anthropologie* or *ethnologie urbaine*). Information on research is scattered all over the libraries and includes many “unofficial” books, so that quite a lot of time and energy is required to get hold of it. A first step will be to find out which institutions, researchers and teams have studied the city. Many individual researchers don’t publish a

list of their own work and the publications or reports written by various teams are seldom to be found in one place – this adds to the problem. Yet, despite the difficulties of systematic work, due to the informality of the whole context and to its typically French lack of organization, the results are well worth the effort and quite instructive.

In the following I attempt to describe the field of urban ethnology in France, as I would describe a landscape: the various themes and their evolution, on the background of more global structural characteristics of this discipline, as it has been practiced mainly in Paris after about 1980. The time dimension is given by the history of the research, while the focus on the Paris agglomeration results from institutional but also from practical considerations. Let me add however that even though the bulk of the research was done in the metropolis, studies of cities have been carried out in other

contexts, e.g., studies of urbanization processes, of the relationship between rural and urban areas, of phenomena specific to suburbia and agglomerations (La Banlieue 1982; Banlieues 1992) and case studies of various provincial cities (Bozon 1982).

At first sight it seems that many French ethnologists seem to be interested in urban research. The last edition of the *Répertoire de l'Ethnologie de la France* (1990) lists no less than 97 specialists of this field, with their name, institution, address and area of interest. However this figure may be considered to be only approximate, since some of the people mentioned only wrote brief comments on the city, but also because specialists in other disciplines with an interest in urban life are not mentioned; also a number of institutions are listed that no longer exist.

The fact that some fields overlap while the “borders” between various disciplines are open is due to a characteristic of the French academic tradition: there is no clear distinction between ethnology and sociology, designing both together with the term “*sciences sociales*”. This doesn’t necessarily mean that the researchers themselves don’t make any distinction, but it does mean that they don’t use explicit labels. What is more, quite a number of urban ethnologists will publish their work in reviews or journals or with editors focused on other – albeit close – fields. This also means that work based on an ethnological approach may often be found under a different header. Apparently the French researchers do not find it so important to decide whether their work should be considered to belong to one field or another (urban ethnology / sociology / history / or geography, or even architecture of the city or the study of urbanism). This is what makes it much more difficult to examine it systematically.

Moreover the French developed an interest for the cities of their own country at a rather late date. Even though there may have been a few indications of a developing interest in the 1970s, and again in the 1980s (Terrolle 1983), it took time for a more focused approach to be established. In fact, it is not possible to discern specific orientations and structures until the second half of the 1980s that is, if the category

‘urban ethnology’ is to include institutions, groups of researchers, projects and specific areas of interest.

The “late birth” of urban ethnology in France can be explained: in this country, the interest in the study of the national culture developed quite late (Chiva 1983; 1987) whereas in German speaking countries ‘*Volkskunde*’ – in the sense of ‘European ethnology’ (as contrasted with the study of [tribal] groups on the other continents) – has a long history. In France, a whole series of terms is used to designate this field: “*ethnologie de la France*” (Cuisenier et Segalen 1993), “*ethnologie régionale*”, “*ethnologie chez soi*” and “*ethnologie du proche*”. Furthermore, within the institutions it is not considered different, it remains part of classical ethnology (“*ethnologie exotique*”, “*ethnologie de l’ailleurs*”).

It doesn’t take long to summarize what was done in the field of urban ethnology before 1980 – what does exist simply looks like an attempt at including new geographic areas. It must be considered symptomatic that years passed between the publication of Georges Balandier’s book on Brazzaville (1955) and that of the work of Suzanne Bernus (1968) and Claude Meillasoux (1968) on problems found in African cities. French ethnologists didn’t traditionally study the cities and there were thus very few impulses towards the establishment of a specialized discipline, focused on the cities of France.<sup>3</sup> During this initial phase, i.e., until around 1980 only some individual ethnologists did research. Three of them had studied classical anthropology and developed an active interest for the city: Colette Pétonnet and Jacques Gutwirth on the one hand – both had been influenced by the *Centre de formation à la recherche ethnologique* (C.F.R.E., directed by Roger Bastide and André Leroi-Gourhan) – and Gérard Althabe, whose teacher was Georges Balandier, on the other.

Colette Pétonnet accomplished pioneering work with her books *Ces gens-là* (1968) and *On est tous dans le brouillard* (1979), but also with numerous smaller urban studies (1982; 1985; 1987). She drew attention to the problems and conflicts between the French and the foreign population in large cities: she studied everyday life and inter ethnic cohabitation in the “*bidon-*

villes" (the slum areas), "pavillons" and temporary dwellings used by foreign immigrants in the suburbs of Paris, applying qualitative methods and reporting her results in an excellent and very engaged book (*Espaces habités* 1982).

Jacques Gutwirth came to urban ethnology following a different path: having written his doctoral thesis on the Hassidim Jewish community of Anvers, in Belgium (1970), he later studied similar communities in Montreal, New York, Boston and Los Angeles (1991). While he was doing this fieldwork, he came into contact with American urban anthropology. This inspired him to analyze American research in this area – state of the art and evolution – and to present the results to French specialists. His "*Lenquête en ethnologie urbaine*" (1978) and "*Jalons pour l'anthropologie urbaine*" (1982) clearly show the extent of his reflection on this special field, but also on methodological problems.

Finally, Gérard Althabe helped promote urban ethnology in France. After returning from Mozambique, he became a professor and director of research at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales (EHESS). In this function, he progressively developed a greater interest in urban ethnology: whereas his first lectures were on what he called an *anthropologie de la quotidienneté* (an anthropology of everyday life, 1975/76), he quickly focused more specifically on urban anthropology (*anthropologie urbaine*). At an 1978 interdisciplinary colloquium (in Montpellier) he was still the only researcher with a specific interest in urban ethnology (cf. "*Vie quotidienne en milieu urbain*" 1980). However, in the same year he put together a team of researchers, called "*Equipe de recherche en anthropologie urbaine et industrielle*" (ERAUI). Althabe may pride himself not only on having initiated numerous studies and fieldwork in the suburbs (Althabe, Légié & Sélim 1984) but also on having regularly contributed to and advanced the theoretico-methodological debate concerning urban ethnology (Althabe 1983; 1984; 1986; 1990).

The fact that the ethnology of France had largely neglected to study some fundamental areas also became more clear once its evolution was analyzed within a broader, national con-

text. The analysis showed that there was a need to make up ground. Consequently, a report concerning the *ethnologie de la France* (1979/80) defined new research objectives; these were transmitted to the Ministry of Culture (i.e., to the *Mission du Patrimoine*), asking that research projects relative to the ethnology of the cities be approved. Concerning the specific dimensions that had to be studied in priority, the following were mentioned: "artisanats urbains, milieux ouvriers, activités industrielles et, en général, formes sociales et cultures urbaines" (i.e., urban activities and practices but also, more generally, the society and culture that are typical of the cities; *L'ethnologie de la France* 1980: 33).

Thus an opening towards new research programs had been introduced, and these were applied in numerous ways during the 1980s. For instance, the French association of anthropologists (AFA) included this theme to its 1981 Congress (it took place in Sèvres and the proceedings were published in *Etudes d'anthropologie urbaine* 1982). In the same year, the *Société d'Ethnologie française* (SEF) organized a symposium on the anthropology of the urban context (*Anthropologie culturelle dans le champ urbain* 1982). Then various steps were quickly taken: in 1983 another colloquium took place in Royaumont (*Sociétés industrielles et urbaines* 1985); in 1984 Colette Pétonnet and Jacques Gutwirth created the *Laboratoire d'Anthropologie Urbaine* (L.A.U.); two journals, *Terrain* and *Le Monde alpin et rhodanien*, brought out special thematic issues (*Ethnologie urbaine* in *Terrain* 1984 and *Vivre la ville* in *Le Monde alpin et rhodanien* 1984). There followed numerous individual studies, exhibitions and research reports, all of which were attempting to describe the homo urbis (Azemar and La Pradelle 1986). A year later another national congress was organized in Lyon, under the heading "*Les ethnologues dans la ville*" (1988). From then on, ethnological studies of urban areas were also regrouped in anthologies.

The second half of the 1980s may be called a consolidation phase: the groups of researchers mentioned carried on with their work, and an increasing number of individual specialists de-

voted themselves to the study of the cities in their present context, albeit from different angles. It was during this period that the main structural characteristics that were to remain typical of French urban ethnology until the middle of the 1990s became apparent: expansion of the field of research, extremely heterogeneous approaches, together with typical themes and the use of specific methods.

Concerning the themes, first: the objects chosen for research form a very large spectrum. There are many research projects, but at first sight it is difficult to categorize them. Yet, having looked at about 350 single titles<sup>1</sup> – mostly articles published in journals – we have seen that they can be classified in four broad categories. Before presenting these, let me add that this kind of classification may be problematic. This attempt should be seen as provisory and not very differentiated, my aim being to show the main areas of interest, together with general trends.

A first category could be called ‘traditional European ethnological’ research (cf. the German *Volkskunde*). We use the term ‘traditional’ with two meanings in mind: on one hand, this work is connected to fields that have been studied for a long time; on the other side, it reflects a certain nostalgia, a will to describe a process of apparent loss of tradition and culture – these studies are often historical and their authors seem to want to preserve the old ways. Typical themes would be: social interaction and everyday life in neighborhoods, the yearly cycle, the cycle of feasts and celebrations, old handicrafts, groups of people who came to Paris from various French regions and whose characteristics and traditions have long interested ethnologists.

The second category is that of the research carried out in Paris and focused on the ‘ethnological present’. It is there that the highest number of articles is to be found. Even though the publications may seem quite heterogeneous, it is possible to identify the most frequent themes and methods. They are rarely devoted to everyday life in a whole urban neighborhood but rather, focus on clearly delineated segments: the ethnography of specific public places or underground (métro) stations (Augé 1986), of

public parks (Guerard-Gaulin 1987; Sansot 1993) or of streets (Brody 1986). There are few monographs of single neighborhoods and where they exist, they are about old districts (e.g., Saint-Denis) endowed with a clear collective identity, based on a shared past.

This aspect manifests in all sorts of traditional stories, original people and urban legends. But it also translates in the continuing presence of traditional professional groups, small traders and craftsmen, including workshops (cabinet-making, furniture, arts and crafts, textiles, leather, furs, jewelry) but also grocery stores, street vendors, family firms offering repair services and markets (Kerleroux 1981; Lindensfeld 1982). The many people who migrated from rural areas to find jobs in the capital add a touch of color to its everyday life and to its working environment; they often form ‘colonies’, living in the same neighborhood and maintaining extensive contacts (Barbichon 1980). Many studies have been devoted to the lifestyle, networks and so-called ‘amicales’ (associations) linking migrants from Corsica, Brittany, Savoy or Aveyron. It even seems that researchers were more interested in them than in the average Parisian. The lifestyle and everyday culture of Paris-born people have not been studied often by ethnologists, yet when they were it was in the context of an approach that shows typical characteristics. The main part of the work concerns the middle-class (Chalvon-Demersay 1984) or the bourgeoisie living in fancy neighborhoods (Pinçon and Pinçon 1989). Ethnological methods and theories are applied to analyze the social prestige and glitter surrounding this elitist class culture (Le Wita 1988). Pierre Bourdieu’s theory has clearly influenced the focus put on the analysis of all types of ‘subtle differences’ in modes of living (dwellings, raising up children, dress, eating or leisure).

However, ethnic minorities and multicultural relationships are doubtless the central interest of contemporary research – we could say that they exert a strong fascination on urban ethnologists (Approches des communautés étrangères 1986; Barou 1988). Large numbers of Muslims from Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia, but also of people from Asia (Raulin 1986, Guil-

lon and Taboada-Leonetti 1986) live in Paris and became an object of study. There are informative publications concerning for instance, the ethnic characteristics and everyday life of various groups, and more specifically their modes of adaptation and their religious practice in the metropolis (Choron-Baix 1986, Hassenoun 1992) or specialized professions (Kuczynski 1988). Other minorities (e.g., people from Portugal, Spain, Armenia [Iovanessian 1992] and Slavic countries), including the Creoles have been studied less frequently.

A third category contains studies of marginal groups and of the youths in the city. Put in general terms, this work is motivated by an interest not for exotic aspects – of the urban culture – but for social problems and conflicts. Clochards, Punks, Teddies, Rockers and Zouls, with their expressive lifestyles are described and analyzed, together with their numerous forms of street protest and what may be called their protest culture. After the mid-1980s another group became more prominent in the context of research: the gypsies (Williams 1984; 1993).

The last, fourth category is that of studies focused on what has been called *péri-urban* phenomena, i.e., an ethnology of the *'banlieue'*. Suburbs have their own social life, especially the “new cities” and the “new villages” situated in the Paris agglomeration (Siran 1989). From an ethnological viewpoint the main interest is in forms of coping found in lower-class environments, in working class settlements (Segalen 1980; 1990) and in council dwellings. But other aspects have been studied: the working life in industrial zones, the cohabitation of different ethnic groups, the culture of poverty, indigent youths and social unrest, as an important potential for conflicts that repeatedly breaks out.

We have described four categories of research in the field of urban ethnology, without going into the detail of their contents. However, conclusions may be drawn from our survey and evaluation of the various publications to derive characteristics typical of the French approach to urban ethnology. Ten points are mentioned below, aiming at a global comparison that will show both its achievements and its deficits:

- 1) In France, many disciplines contribute to the study of the cities and of their social life, among which urban ethnology. This approach was developed based on classical (=general) ethnology and relative to an anthropology of France that didn't have its own tradition of study in the urban context.
- 2) In the 1980s, a few small groups and an increasing number of individual researchers developed an interest for urban ethnology. From around 1984 their work contributed to increasing the focus on the cities, at least at a specialized level and with the support of a few congresses. Yet, after that there was a lack of continuity in the development of the research, with the exception of small symposia devoted for instance to the phenomenon of urban anonymity (Gyr 1993) and of a few collections of articles published in the 1990s (*Ferveurs contemporaines* 1993).
- 3) It is not possible to speak of 'schools of urban ethnology' or of specific lines of research in this field. The work is a product of approaches instigated by small teams, i.e., mainly by the group directed by Gérard Althabe and Colette Pétonnet, and by that working under Jacques Gutwirth. Groups of members of the *Société d'Ethnologie Française* and teams mandated by the *Mission du Patrimoine* (a government agency that has supported and financed a number of studies) also did research. Urban ethnology as an independent sub-discipline is not taught in the universities.
- 4) On the whole the research appears heterogeneous and the impulses come from individual specialists: long-term projects and institutionalized work are the exception. Specialized exchange takes place – if ever – within groups of specialists sharing the same (idiosyncratic) interests.
- 5) Given that the bulk of the research is done by individuals, it is difficult to define precise scientific positions. This deficit is also shown by the lack of synopsis, introductions, handbooks or surveys. What is more, French urban ethnology (with a few exceptions) is being increasingly practiced by specialists.<sup>5</sup>
- 6) Contemporary research on urban ethnology focuses on 'the other' within the French

society, “*l’autre chez soi*” (other people, other characteristics) in all variations. For those influenced by traditional ethnology, i.e., by its interest in rural phenomena and the preservation of culture, the main focus on migrants from the provinces (together with selected segments of the population in urban neighborhoods), whereas more recent contemporary research prefers studying ethnic minorities, groups of immigrants, marginal people and the lower classes.

- 7) From the point of view of their contents, the numerous publications form a colorful mosaic. A more detailed analysis shows that they reflect more an ‘ethnology in the city’ (*ethnologie dans la ville*) than an ‘ethnology of the city’ (*ethnologie de la ville*). In saying this I am not playing with words, but characterizing more precisely the state of the research.
- 8) In my opinion, the strongest contribution of French urban ethnology is to be found in empirical case studies; their authors are often highly specialized and the research is of a high qualitative standard and very learned (*Chemins de la ville* 1987). However, whereas it is true that numerous studies present an innovative and original view of urban micro worlds (*Ethnologues dans la ville* 1988), to be quite exact most of them should be termed ‘urban ethnography’ rather than ‘urban ethnology’.
- 9) This also indicates where the weakness of the French approach lies: it lacks a general (global) approach in the sense of an independent subdiscipline with its own (integrated) theoretical perspective, or its own method and methodological debate.<sup>6</sup> Impulses in this direction are rare and are generally not properly acknowledged.
- 10) The question of whether the approach is more descriptive or more theoretical does not imply a value judgment, but it does show other aspects. It is also typical of the urban ethnology practiced in France that it is exclusively focused (at all levels) on France.<sup>7</sup> There is little interest in what is happening abroad, research or theories published by neighboring disciplines are rarely acknowledged and there is little participation in the

international debate, even where publications have been translated into French.<sup>8</sup>

To conclude let me add that an evaluation of the global situation cannot but be critical, due to the fact that after a promising beginning French urban ethnology has tended to move towards isolation: internationally, by not being open enough to impulses from abroad and nationally, as a result of research carried out by individuals or by very small groups that seem not even to acknowledge the work accomplished by other groups studying the same metropolis.

The urban ethnology practiced in France is quite special and this may contribute to the problems. As a final hypothesis, I would say that the situation that I have described is also a product of a political evolution in the context of French ethnological research. For a long time the Claude Lévi-Strauss school was quite dominant, together with the idea that cities are inadequate research objects for a structural anthropological approach (Gutwirth 1983: 885). This aspect should not be underestimated, for it has probably hindered many developments. On the other hand and put in a global manner, one could argue that in France contemporary ethnology has remained faithful to its own past: its main interest is still ‘the other and the others’, now including those living in the urban context – however, it has neglected to study ‘the urban French’, the culture and everyday life of the ‘natives’ in Paris and other large cities.

## Notes

1. Revised version of a paper presented at the conference “Kulturwissenschaftliche Sichtweisen auf die Stadt” (*Urban settings in view of cultural studies*) in Hamburg on 8th May, 1998, completed with bibliography. The original text will be published in German with the proceedings of the congress, edited by Thomas Hengartner and Waltraud Kokot.
2. Excepting A. Morel’s *Bibliographie* (1985), the brief evaluations published by C. Pétonnet (1985), G.-P. Azemar and M. de La Pradelle (1986), and the report by M. Clavel (1992).
3. One would of course need to evaluate the influence of the “old” urban sociology (such as it was practiced, e.g., by Paul Henri Chombart de Lauwe and Joffre Dumazedier, starting in the 1960s) on the more recent ethnological approach.

4. The author is planning to publish a detailed bibliography of the French publications devoted to urban ethnology. He spent some time in Paris, doing research for this publication.
5. Some researchers focus for years on the same theme, cf. the work of C. Baix-Choron (Laotian minority in Paris), Y. Delaporte (association regrouping insect collectors), B. Le Wita (bourgeoisie), A. Raulin (Asian minority) or P. Williams (Gypsies).
6. With one exception: the work of I. Joseph and Y. Grafmeyer in Lyon, based on a sociology of the city and showing strong interactionist and microanalytical tendencies (Joseph 1984).
7. A number of years ago Isaac Chiva and U. Jeggler attempted to eliminate part of his 'self-centrism' by organizing international debates and exchanges. For instance, a colloquium was organized in Bad Homburg, on "Städtisches Leben und pratique rituelle" (*urban life and ritual practice*). See the short report by B. Künsting (1987).
8. I am thinking for instance of the work of the Chicago school (L'École de Chicago 1984) or of the research done around Ulf Hannerz, in Sweden, which is easily accessible (*Explorer la ville. Éléments d'anthropologie urbaine*, Paris 1983).

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