NOTE FROM THE EDITORIAL BOARD

The following article offers to an international audience some of the arguments its authors have developed more extensively in a recent book published in Italian, Etnografie militanti: prospettive e dilemmi *(*Militant Ethnographies: Prospects and Dilemmas*). Publishing them here in English aims at encouraging and engaging in a broader discussion about current evolutions in political anthropology on such widely debated matters as militancy and engagement, while considering the specific (linguistic, cultural, political, national) traditions, currents and references nourishing those debates.*

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How can ethnographic research be combined with political militancy? This article aims at offering an overview of different possibilities and their limits. It synthetises the analysis proposed in the introduction of our recently published book, *Etnografie militanti*, an analysis that relies not only on recently emerging literature in the field, but also on conversations with those who practise ethnography with a militant or activist intention. The ideas discussed in the book have been shaped by our personal involvement in various forms of activism and the organisation of several workshops and conferences around the issues of activist research, social movement studies and militant ethnographies. These experiences had a lasting impact on how we conceive the issues at stake. Here, we offer a concise reading of some of the issues that emerged in these events. In particular, we outline a brief history of political engagement in anthropology, clarify our positioning, discuss the concept "militant ethnographies" and distinguish these from similar research trends such as public anthropology or action research.

A Brief History of Political Engagement in Anthropology

Militant engagement derives from a desire to understand, to provoke, to change. Between the 1980s and the early 2000s, Italian intellectuals remained relatively disengaged from political activism, conceiving their work in support of a neutral and semantic approach to culture. However, more recently, awareness of the entanglements of knowledge and politics seems to re-emerge in social and human sciences. The contemporary engagement of social and human scientists is partially different from the one that characterised the 1970s. Those years, indeed, have significantly marked the history of contemporary intellectual militancy: Hans-Magnus Enzensberger and Jean-Paul Sartre engaged in solidarity trips to Leningrad; Sartre and Michel Foucault shared a megaphone during the Parisian demonstrations of 1968; Said returned to Palestine; travellers showed up at the Afghan border with membership cards of the Italian Communist Party.

After those years in which it seemed impossible to write without longing to change the world, in 1980, Umberto Eco, in his introduction to *The Name of the Rose*, breathes a sigh of relief: "…it is a consolation for the man of letters (restored to his very high dignity) that, yes, one can write for the pure love of writing. The times in which militancy was a prerequisite to write something are gone" (2012, p. 14).

The discomfort of Umberto Eco's generation with old-fashioned militant approaches in academia has not been sufficient to prevent the rise of new militant approaches. The reason for the re-emergence of this interest seems to derive from dissatisfaction with the global political status quo and, at the same time, with the intellectual tools and resources offered by anthropology.
In the 1980s, the discipline represented a marginal field in Italian universities with few teaching positions and courses. However, from the early 2000s, anthropology gained stronger recognition also thanks to the lifelong engagement and professional activism of many academic anthropologists (personal communication with Cristina Papa, University of Perugia, 2020).

The moral and psychological relief from the pressure of intellectual duty to (Marxist-oriented) militancy expressed by Umberto Eco is no longer shared by many of the contemporary generation of young Italian ethnographers who, on the contrary, are struggling today with a new ethical urge for engagement. So, what is left today of that season of political militancy? What forms of engagement in the social sciences seem possible today? We focus on the emergence of new forms of militant approaches in the recent ethnographic production of young researchers mainly educated in Italian universities, and stress the originality of such approaches, which do not seem deeply grounded in the Marxist (Gramscian, Maoist, etc.) grammar that influenced militant humanities and social sciences during the 1970s. In the 1980s, cynicism and self-reflection seemed to dominate. More recently, this relative political indifference seems to shrink again in many intellectual projects. New sparks of indignation, commitment and militancy emerge from different angles of the intellectual spectrum. In Italy, just to mention some of the best-known voices, Zerocalcare defends self-managed spaces and participatory democracy in the Kurdish areas of Syria, Michela Murgia speaks on behalf of migrants, and Roberto Saviano affirms the importance of legality and the rule of law—these are just some of the possible examples of a new generation of intellectuals and artists. Here, the first-person exploration of critical situations is combined with the desire to understand, to provoke indignation and to stir our consciousness so as to elicit reactions. These positions show that first-hand militancy out in the world is not dead, or perhaps never was, among scholars.

Within this variegated world of intellectual commitment, ethnography plays a unique role. Probably no other scientific practice exposes itself so deeply to first-person involvement. Probably also for this reason, issues of personal positioning and responsibility have emerged with force in anthropology. The awareness that every research is necessarily conducted right from the beginning from a specific positioning of the researcher has long decreed abandonment of the idea of objectivity of knowledge. The subjectivity of those who do fieldwork is particularly relevant in terms of choosing both research themes and methodologies. Each ethnographic research trajectory is necessarily shaped by the researcher's specific and necessarily subjective positionality: What moves and motivates them? What is expected from the research? How does their specific identity interact with what they study? What power dynamics does their presence in the field presuppose and trigger? Undeniably, the complex interactions between researcher and the research context have highly relevant consequences for the investigative dynamics, the results of the investigation and also the circuits on which the research focuses. Therefore, there are no politically neutral ethnographies. The declaration of political impartiality becomes itself a form of political positioning. The abandonment of the claim that neutral and objective representations in ethnographic fieldwork are possible implies the recognition that every research outcome is the result of a very specific encounter between the motivations of the researcher and the tensions that generate political relations both during research and during the dissemination of its findings.

The history of anthropology as an academic discipline, of its theoretical production and public exposure, has debated for long—and often controversially—the specific subjectivity and political positioning of anthropologists. Just to give a few examples, some of the best-known classics of anthropology (e.g. Evans-Pritchard, 1940; Benedict, 1946) are the result of research conducted in the context of military campaigns; the texts—even when they do not recognise it explicitly—testify to the concerns and consequences of warfare or colonial activities. Other investigations (e.g. Mead, 2008; Clastres, 2011) had the explicit intent of representing cultural diversity in order to trigger transformations in the societies in which the anthropologists themselves had grown up. More recently, some anthropologists have selected unpublished research topics to help recognise female protagonists and reinforce the claims of gender equality (Campani, 2016). The underlying research purpose is central to understanding how the ethnographic methodology is used and the results it produces.

What we designate as “militant ethnographies” represent a peculiar positioning that emerges with new confidence amongst anthropologists operating at the beginning of the third millennium in Italy, as part of a broader trend towards activist research, which involves other areas of human and social sciences such as pedagogy, sociology and geography. Recently, Berardino Palumbo (2018) argued that a critical perspective combined with a public, sometimes explicitly political, commitment has been one of the foundational features of Italian anthropology. This constitutive trait of the discipline underwent a setback from the mid-1980s to the early years of the new millennium. But, as we show in the book, this gap was momentary. The second half of the 2000s saw a new wave of politicisation of ethnographic practice. This wave feeds on an intellectual genealogy of public commitment, of a particular intertwining practice, and rapid interaction between scientific rigour and moral vocation.

Legitimised by the epistemological turn in anthropology, this recently revitalised debate unavoidably focuses on the researcher’s positionality. Palumbo states:

> “…recent anthropological research in our country has in fact embraced the awareness of the constitutive link between power, knowledge, ethnographic criticism and political positions of the same scholars who connote social sciences in the globalized scene of late modernity…. Often the reappearance of a committed and political attitude among Italian anthropologists, while inscribed in the discipline’s global scenarios, is triggered by the need to understand and criticize contemporary dynamics, also on a national scale

> [and]…is inscribed [in the] often radical problematization of political economy and of the moral economy of late neoliberal capitalism" (Palumbo, 2018, p. 180, 181, 243).

Approaching Militant Ethnographies

We, the authors, have participated in this renewed interest in research aimed also at intervening in the existing political equilibrium, often conducted with, for or from within social movements or other forms of political mobilisation "from below". Younger scholars have been experimenting often in recent years with these emerging forms of political agency, reflecting the changed context of political action and the growing mistrust towards institutional representation. Many of those who are not happy to limit their political agency to the electoral system of representative democracy found in social and human sciences the possibility to combine research and engagement. In this context, we believe that in the field of human sciences, the interest in anthropology is not so much tied to the uncritical reception of a set of critical theories, but to the possibilities offered by ethnographic methodologies and their capacity to narrate minute, marginal, forgotten but significant stories. Ethnography can be a powerful tool in countering the mystifications and trivialisations prevalent in mass media representations, as well as the simplifications and virtualisations in social networks. Ethnography allows a narrative able to well represent the complexity of political activism, the reasons behind mobilisations and the potential transformative force of those who move outside institutional boundaries.

The synergy between non-institutionalised political activism and qualitative research is further consolidated by several young anthropologists' inclination to the informal Left and the anarchist galaxy: activism and academic knowledge share a counter-cultural sensitivity that responds to the global neo-authoritarian drift, and work together to establish horizontal and meaningful relationships. The political positioning of militant ethnographers, often but not always, combines Marxism and anarchism in different degrees and shows a sympathy for forms of libertarian horizontality elaborated in the margins, in support of cultural experimentation and the struggles of the oppressed, distrusting hierarchical organisations and condemning inequality and commodification.

Although militant ethnographers feel a widespread scepticism towards bureaucracy and institutions, they often work for state-sponsored institutions like universities, schools or other public service providers. Inevitably, in Italy as elsewhere, an affinity is created between scholars and activists experimenting with collective action against the mix of rampant neo-liberal exploitation and rising xenophobia that characterises contemporary political situations. Within this framework, the interest in militant ethnography represents a new opportunity feeding on decades of debates on the role and the public responsibility of anthropology as an academic discipline, updating "classic" issues in new and unedited terms (see Severi, 2019, p. 161–67).

Although these practices bear witness to the link between ethnography and activism as developed largely within university activities, the phenomenon, as we will see, if compared to ethnographers who do not aim at a militant engagement, is projected more decisively outside the institutions of official knowledge. Militant ethnography is elaborated in a crucial interstitial space that aims to combine research and political action within the observed context: fieldwork documentation is used not only in universities but also in synergy with social and political practices beyond academia.

Much of militant ethnography is carried out by people who have been trained in universities but who work in the social sector, often with migrants, turning the ethnographic gaze to new contexts. Our work intends to explore the dilemmas of this explicit politicisation of the discipline, generated by what we have called "militant ethnographies". We realise that we are introducing an expression that seems to designate a new sub-field of ethnographic research. But for us, this label aims more at reflecting the explicit placement of many of the authors we discuss, although not all of them. However, we are aware that this label is reductive and can be misunderstood. We do not intend to transmit a false idea of homogeneity or to classify the rich diversity of ethnographic work under one rather trivial and schematic term. Indeed, one of the central objectives of this book is to fully recognise the possible variety of connections between militancy and ethnography, showing the many ways in which it can be understood and practised. However, militant ethnographies converge in facing certain similar dilemmas, even if they are very heterogeneous in their approaches and methods. Hence our choice of the plural in the title of the volume.

We use the term "militant ethnographies" to highlight several transversal questions and problems that may emerge during the ethnographic research trajectories that have a high degree of political involvement for both the researcher and the context studied, although the solutions adopted may sometimes appear divergent.

In our book, a reasoned review allows us to scatter the alleged homogeneity of militant ethnographies: the different authors we discuss form a polyphonic field of reflection that entails different positions on the issues arising within militant research. The link between ethnographic and political commitment offers a spectrum of possible answers and positions. Therefore, it might be useful to compare them so that each researcher can choose how to position themselves in the light of the choices made by other researchers.

A clarification of our terminology is necessary. On the one hand, there are those who believe the term militancy is "linked…to an old and…outdated way of playing politics, even if antagonistic" (Braun, 2013, p. 35). On the other, there are those who tend to distinguish between the terms activist and militant according to the radicality and intensity of the researcher's commitment.

In this book, we do not make a clear distinction between the two conceptions because we are interested in comparing the whole range of articulations between political engagement and research. So we use activism and militancy as different nuances of a single field delimited by imprecise boundaries and characterised by a transformative tension. We also believe that the fluidity of contemporary bottom-up actions requires avoiding net classifications. The idea of "militant ethnographies" is not so different from other options, such as "activist ethnographies" or "partisan ethnographies". For example, anthropologist Cinzia Greco (2016) raises a voice in favour of different forms of anthropological commitment, such as those expressed by militant ethnography (in which the research is politicised *a priori* and this politicised attitude orients the field survey), by activist ethnography (which understands emancipatory action in a more situational sense), and by partisan ethnography, which the author herself defines as an approach oriented to the political advocacy of those studied, especially in the phases of analysis and restitution of the research results. Greco, whose research is characterised by a partisan approach, calls for an extension of the areas of disciplinary legitimisation in order to grant greater protection to those researchers who decide to "take side[s]" for the subjects of their own investigations. The militant, activist and partisan approaches, according to this scholar, should be encouraged as they bring to light the power asymmetries that lead to the perpetrating of injustices in the contemporary world. These approaches are also part of the anthropological practice and contribute, as do other approaches, to the development of this discipline and of other social sciences, as also demonstrated by the existence of politically engaged sociological approaches from the 1960s onwards (Hillyard, 2004).

But our purpose is not to be exhaustive. Militant ethnographies take on many nuances, and in recent years, the literature has become huge. In the book, we examine the process of ethnographic immersion—simultaneously made up of research practices, relationships, and the restitution of the research results—by analysing a consistent number of investigations without pretending to be comprehensive. In order to delimit a field that risks remaining undefined because of its vastness, priority has been given to research carried out by Italian researchers and to their ethnographic experiences. We have chosen to offer only fleeting hints on similar reflections in progress in other contexts as, for example, in the Anglo-Saxon world and in Latin America. We thus review in the book publications that are both illustrative and intriguing as they raise important questions for understanding the recent developments in the renewed politicisation of social sciences. In the relationship between ethnographic and activist contexts, although the two often become so enmeshed as to be practically indistinguishable, overall, we favour the researcher's perspective, also because publications predominantly adopt such positioning. We also believe that it is necessary to highlight the fact that militant ethnography is rich in the contributions of women researchers and that many "gender" ethnographies are based on militant perspectives, leading these approaches to critically address the issue of women's and LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender) actors' participation in forging contemporary social, political and religious movements (Koensler and Rossi, 2012; Mattalucci, 2012, p. 7–11; Viola, 2015). The fact that research pertaining to this area is sensitive to self-reflection on the epistemological, methodological and political implications of anthropological inquiry, an issue seriously discussed in most publications, allows this operation of analytical comparison[1].

From the “Crisis of Representation” to New Experiments

The cracks in the confidence of an alleged objectivity of anthropological research have given rise to a profound renewal of the way in which the anthropological “mission” is understood. Positivism, with its authority and trust in those who “discover facts” or “describe the realities”, has been largely supplanted by more self-critical and relational approaches. In the first chapter, we start by discussing the crisis of ethnographic representation to show how part of the anthropological community tends to reply to such a crisis by enhancing the link between ethnographic research and ethical and political commitment.

Furthermore, we tend to distinguish militant ethnography from other forms of public engagement. Since the early 1980s, some of the stylistic and literary limits of classical anthropology have been discussed through a critical literary reflection based on essays edited by the American anthropologists James Clifford and George Marcus in the book, *Writing Culture: Politics and Poetics in Ethnography* (1986). By means of a critical literary analysis of key texts of classical anthropology, the authors unveil the strategies of construction of ethnographic authority, which tend to hide the subjectivity of the researcher and the fragility of their analysis. According to this perspective, the classical monograph published by Evans-Pritchard, *The Nuer: A Description of the Modes of Livelihood and Political Institutions of a Nilotic People* (1940), seems to offer more insights on the personal life of the writer than on the people and the situations described. The alleged objectivity, the detached analysis and the use of the third person in classical monographs normally hide and mask the fact that the analysis is based on personal entanglements between the author’s biography, the context and the author’s subjectivity. These critical reflections related to the effort to objectify the subjects in anthropological writings, known in anthropology as “the crisis of representation”, open up a new space of representation which absorbs the certainty of the positivist truths of classical social sciences.

In other words, the critique of the modus operandi of classical anthropology evokes the story of the Zen master called Nan-in. Nan-in was visited by a university professor who wished to interview him about Zen philosophy. Nan-in offered the professor a cup of tea, but he kept on pouring the tea even when the cup was already full, making it overflow. “As this cup”, said the master to the professor, “you are full with your opinions and conjectures. How can I explain the Zen to you, if you don’t empty your own cup?” (Senzaki and Reps, 1973, p. 67–70). In the same way as the overflowing tea poured by Nan-in, the consequences of the “crisis of the representation” has stimulated a renewal of epistemological issues related to the way in which anthropological knowledge is entangled with the researcher’s subjectivity. In brief, the shift of the theoretical paradigms of classical anthropology has become unavoidable.

This epistemological turn has generated various answers and different understandings of the anthropological enterprise. Firstly, it has given rise to a series of writing experiments using reflexive, autobiographical and dialogical approaches (Behar, 1996; Crapanzano, 1995) that have thrown light on the intersubjective relations at play during fieldwork. Narrative anthropology was born at the intersection between literature and qualitative research, and from the break in the technical and ideological boundaries of representation, thanks to the development of visual anthropology and the consolidation of feminist and gender anthropology. Narrative ethnography is furthermore based on the awareness that research experiences imply, above all, lively relationships and an intimate and embodied type of knowledge.

In his well-known ethnography, Vincent Crapanzano (1995, p. 108) chooses to transcribe his long and intimate dialogues with Tuhami, a man from Morocco, instead of explaining once and for all the general functioning of Morocco’s culture: “We have to respect in the Other the same mystery that we would like the others to respect in us. And this is also a social fact”, says the Chicago anthropologist, explaining his choice.

Such approaches understand fieldwork as a total human experience that, apart from analytical skills, involves the researcher’s emotions, intuitions and biography as well. A narrative approach may contribute to deepen and render more complex the intimate dimensions of knowledge and reciprocal identification between the self and the Other (Rossi, 2008), but the complete throwing off of any pretence to scientificity has puzzled many. The popularity of interpretative and reflexive anthropology cannot be understood without recognising the role played by the crisis of representation. Interpretative anthropology offers a theory of intersubjective connections, which is largely absent in narrative approaches, but shares with the latter the emphasis on the complexity of fieldwork relationships. The famous definition of culture as a text to be interpreted, offered by the founder of interpretative anthropology, Clifford Geertz (1987), is the most glaring example. According to Geertz, humans are "suspended among nets of meaning" and they are engaged in a continuous exercise of interpretation of the real world; consequently, anthropology cannot be a science searching for unchangeable laws, but has to be considered an interpretative or "semiotic" science, searching for meanings to be deciphered and translated.

These approaches have also prepared the ground for the advent of postmodern thought, which more radically rejects frameworks of all-encompassing references and is characterised, in the words of one of its greatest exponents, Jean-François Lyotard (1991), by its constant scepticism regarding the "great narratives". In a sense, many of these perspectives of anthropology were criticised by scholars such as Robert Borofsky (2000) and by the promoters of public anthropology in the United States and elsewhere for being too focused on largely irrelevant aspects of everyday life.

In this perspective, the emphasis on the specificity of the "webs of interpretations" would lead to excessive stress being placed on local dynamics, considered in some way as relatively detached from the great processes that shape the globally intertwined contemporary world. As we have seen, this attempt to read local—ethnographically investigated—phenomena in relation to large interpretative frameworks has fallen into disuse with the affirmation of interpretative and reflective anthropology schemes, but it is not entirely unknown in the history of anthropology.

Anthropology has always had, at least in some of its representations, an ethical as well as scientific dimension. For example, at the time when the interpretative schemes of orthodox Marxist anthropology predominated in anthropology, there was an attempt to relate local phenomena to structural determinism, in which each specific element assumed its function in a large unitary design of political transformation.

With the crumbling of socialist hopes for transformation and with the emergence of postmodern scepticism towards the validity and universality of great narratives, ethnography, and not only that inspired by interpretative and reflexive currents, has often limited itself to describing situations or events disconnected from the great socio-political dynamics, often reinforcing the image of a science withdrawn into itself.

Militant, Public and Applied Ethnography: Definitions and Nuances

The ethnographer's will to construct research with a militant purpose is not necessarily just the result of subjective indignation in the face of contemporary abuses and dramas. The academic perspective focused on description and analysis is rather enriched by political interrogations and moral commitments engendered by an attention to ordinary and often peripheral existences at the bottom of the social and political hierarchy, combined with an appreciation of the agents' self-representations and of the awareness of the wider frameworks producing the micro-dynamics of violence, inequality and marginality. To a certain extent, militant ethnographies transform anthropology into a life practice rather than a mere disciplinary field characterised by neutrality and scientific distance from the interlocutors, intended as a passive object of research attention. An engaged and participatory research pursues a thorough connection between ordinary experiences and larger macro-political schemes.

The season of militant ethnographies, within this wider context, generates a new momentum in the attempt to insert research experiences within far-reaching theoretical interrogations even though its references are not as clear as those prevalent in the 1970s and 1980s when classic Marxist interpretative schemes prevailed. After decades of suspicion towards grand narratives, there is a tendency to generate "a discipline capable of describing the little ordinary worlds in their relation to the great power systems" (La Cecla, 2005, p. ix). Michael Taussig (2004), as well as Nancy Scheper-Hughes (1995) and Anna Tsing (2005), are among the best-known representatives of this line of anthropological inquiry, which qualifies itself as activist and militant as it examines social reality with a moral orientation. According to Hale (2006, p. 100), this process is a logical consequence of anthropology's comprehensive theoretical rethinking of the last decades of the twentieth century: once the pursuit of objective knowledge has been abandoned and having recognised the intersubjective character of social sciences inquiry, there are new arguments to defend activist methodologies and their academic legitimacy. For those who believe that knowledge is produced in dialogues between politically situated actors, a further consequent and relatively unproblematic step is a more consistent incorporation of this awareness within one's research methodologies, especially if there is a political alignment with the subjects forming the research object. Militant ethnographies' far-reaching theoretical tools, certainly more eclectic than those used when classic Marxism prevailed, are evident in Erik Olin Wright's (2010) life project on "real utopias", which attempts to extend spaces for alternatives, sketching the key features of an "emancipatory social science" able to combine diagnosis with a critique of existing conditions in order to envision and promote a society—or just life trajectories—characterised by a higher degree of social and political justice.

The notion of activist and militant ethnography, as it has been defined in the course of the last decade, overlaps with other anthropological facets that have preceded it. In some instances, researchers who claim to conduct action-research, public anthropology or activist investigation carry out what we have labelled militant ethnography, at least in some parts of their investigation, those in which they operate as autonomous agents in a field loaded with power struggles, concretely employing anthropological knowledge and methodology with, for or against the social context chosen as their research object. There are evident similarities with other ways of conducting ethnography classified under other labels—we can only hint here at the main continuities and discontinuities with other manners of practising anthropology.

Two evident differences distinguish militant ethnographies from applied anthropology: the ethnographer's search for a more pronounced autonomy and the fact that the investigation's aims are less dictated by institutions. The large majority of studies conducted under the denomination of applied anthropology, on the one hand, clearly define in their terms of reference the limits and methods to which the ethnographer is bonded, while, on the other hand, the tangible implementation of the research findings is delegated to the institution that paid their consultancy contract. As Herzfeld (2005) points out:

> "I do not claim that applied anthropology represents ideologies contrary to anthropology

> itself, but the idea is that when an anthropologist works for an enterprise or for the government, he or she will be obliged to accept the institution's authority. When he works as an academic, with all that academic autonomy implies, he or she has the liberty to reach a kind of participation that could lead to choose the approach that best suits the situation both ethically and practically".

In Herzfeld's "engaged" anthropology, as in militant ethnography, the research's orientation and goal should originate from the independent relation between the ethnographer and the social context in which they are placed; moreover, the research's impact should be clearly perceivable and directly produced, not left to authorised institutions. In contrast to applied anthropology, which is often managed in a hierarchical and predetermined manner, militant ethnographies aim at enhancing the collaborative, dialogic and polyphonic research dimension. Notwithstanding the clearly militant approach of many Italian ethnographers working with and for asylum seekers and the fact that their commitment may produce political frictions while exercising as professionals, activism in institutional environments needs to be contained, at least during formal employment (cfr. Altin and Sanò, 2017). Often a more coherent militant approach is reserved for moments of extra-professional daily interaction or postponed till after the end of the work contract.

Some militant ethnographies are similar to those made with the research-action approach (for example, participatory action research), which considers interactions between researchers and the studied context crucial for both research planning and its implementation; which conducts inquiries aimed at social emancipation; and which seeks interaction between abstract knowledge and applied intervention. The principal difference is that action-research tends to privilege pedagogic or sociological methodologies that often do not generate the degree of personal participation characteristic of militant ethnographies; moreover, several studies that present themselves as action-research are managed in close synergy with institutional sponsors with regard to funds and goals, thus reproducing the divergences outlined for applied anthropology.

Our understanding of militant ethnographies differs from what has recently been labelled "public anthropology", which is focused on using the disciplinary tools and achievements to stimulate and intervene in relevant public debates with the explicit aim of sparking cultural transformation

(Borofsky, 2004). In the last decades, an increasing number of anthropologists have taken often controversial public stances aimed at producing “emancipatory knowledge” (see Fassin, 2013, 2015). These clearly political stances have concerned different sectors of the social sciences, among which, as Hale (2006, p. 103) reminds us, is cultural critique. Militant ethnographies differ from public anthropology because of their more decisive practical orientation. Participation in intellectual debates as speakers at public events and conferences, media appearances, or publications in books, journals, blogs, documentaries against racism as well as in defence of relativism (Remotti, 2008), or to promote an idea of cultural interactions that may outdo reductive policy schemes such as multiculturalism or cultural integration (Aime, 2004), is considered important but does not exhaust the political engagement of many of the younger generation of militant ethnographers. Compared to public anthropology’s speculative aims, the urge with which militant ethnographers seek to offer their knowledge back to the social context that has been the object of study is more profound and complex: it seeks more diversified, immediate and tangible ways to generate benefits. For the same reason, the appeal to anthropologists as independent and disinterested “witnesses”, interested in producing “narratives of suffering, victimhood and injustices…witnessing in the name of harm done to victims and the relatively powerless, and it is just this side of activism without being activism” (Marcus, 2005, p. 43), seems distant from militant ethnographers’ imminent, contingent and concrete purposes. Herzfeld’s (2005, p. 54) proposal for a “militant middle ground between theory and practice” falls half-way between public anthropology and militant ethnography. Within anthropology seen as “the political discipline par excellence”, Herzfeld sponsors a “militant middle ground…not applied but engaged, in the sense that anthropology generates influence through its involvement in daily political processes and is able to provide answers grounded on ethnographic experience in response to certain contemporary politicians’ generalizations”.

Militant ethnographies may have a similar public dimension, but may also opt for more discrete and private forms of return: the research may be discussed in restricted circles or be used by the studied group as a tool to construct alternative narratives to hegemonic representations.

There are affinities with respect to Gramsci’s idea of the “organic intellectual” that has long interested Italian anthropology, specifically in the effort towards a diffused intelligence able to act as political agency and to impact the research context (see Koensler and Papa, 2011, p. 16).

For example, Gramsci (1971, p. 1550–51) argues:

> "The mode of being of the new intellectual can no longer consist in eloquence, which is an exterior and momentary mover of feelings and passions, but in active participation in practical life, as constructor, organizer, 'permanent persuader' and not just a simple orator (but superior at the same time to the abstract mathematical spirit); from technique-as-work one proceeds to technique-as-science and to the humanistic conception of history, without which one remains 'specialized' and does not become 'directive' (specialized and political)".

Echoing Gramsci's proposal, militant ethnographers often combine technique-as-work (but intellectual rather than industrial work), technique-as-science and a humanistic conception of history. In many social struggles, researchers, especially militant ethnographers, are not orators, nor the elite, nor are ethnographers the sole active "intellectuals"; researchers have often been familiar with the social environment of the studied groups (Apostoli Cappello, 2017; Koensler, 2015; Olmos Alcaraz *et al.*, 2018). Three differences seem particularly relevant to sketch the discontinuities between contemporary militant ethnographies and Gramsci's organic intellectual. First, Gramsci believes that the intellectual should forge a class synergy, a notion that appears obsolete to many militant ethnographers in the understanding of current power dynamics (incidentally, that is why Graeber (2013) has successfully reframed the issue as "we are the 99%" to indicate an activism that mixes multiple identities). Second, in Gramsci's perspective, the role of the communist party is crucial (the organic intellectual should become one of its "leaders"), while today, activists tend to be increasingly sceptical of institutional and hierarchical organisations. Militant ethnographers are far from conceiving themselves as a vanguard in respect to the social movement they interact with (see, for example, Colectivo Situaciones, 2001; Olmos Alcaraz *et al.*, 2018, p. 142). Melucci (1982, p. 145) had warned researchers not to assume the role of the "missionary…[who] enters in the field of action to bring the actors an awareness that they are unable to produce". Third, if, at the beginning of the twentieth century, writing cultures produced power and authority, in the twenty-first century, this monopoly over narratives has increasingly vanished with the multiplication of devices able to produce representations readily available to activists (social networks, self-published books and journals, websites, documentaries, blogs). In contemporary social movements, the intellectual simply no longer wants to or can act as a vanguard by presenting exclusive and thus authoritarian narrative: representation is no longer an elitist privilege. As Juris and Khasnabish (2013, p. 370, 376; cfr. Braun, 2013) suggest: “rather than being the arbiter of ‘truth’, the ethnographer is but one knowledge producer in a ‘crowded field’…where so many other movement participants are carrying out their own quasi-ethnographic research and are writing, publishing, and distributing their own movement-oriented reflections and analysis”.

Mauro Van Aken’s description of his relationship with the politically active contexts with which he has collaborated exemplifies a diffused feeling: “I certainly contributed with an anthropological gaze in those situations, but alongside the carpenter, the farmer and other activists. Artisan or citizen among others” (personal communication with Mauro Van Aken, July 2019). These discontinuities in respect to Gramsci’s vision allow militant ethnographers greater freedom of action in negotiating their political and methodological position.

Foucault outlined a way of understanding the relationship between researcher and studied context that reveals a sensibility closer to those of militant ethnographers. When asked about the “role of the intellectual in militant practice”, Foucault (1975) answered:

> “The intellectual no longer has to play the role of an advisor. The project, tactics and goals to be adopted are a matter for those who do the fighting. What the intellectual can do is to provide instruments of analysis, and at present this is the historian’s essential role. What’s effectively needed is a ramified, penetrative perception of the present, one that makes it possible to locate lines of weakness, strong points, positions where the instances of power have secured and implanted themselves…. In other words, a topological and geological survey of the battlefield—that is the intellectual’s role. But as for saying, ‘Here is what you must do!’, certainly not”.

Foucault’s insights on the potentially fruitful relational dynamics between activism and research constitute the premise of many militant ethnographers, even though they do not share the view that the researcher’s contribution is best offered from a historical perspective. The ethnographic exploration of contemporary social and cultural dynamics offers an abundant and intimate material on dynamics that cannot be grasped through other methodological approaches, and thus produces a specific richness in the mapping of contemporary power relations’ complex topology.

[1] In the book, our review of the literature is accompanied by interviews with some colleagues who have conducted investigations that fall within our…

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NOTE

[1] In the book, our review of the literature is accompanied by interviews with some colleagues who have conducted investigations that fall within our definition of militant ethnography; their contribution was decisive for the consolidation of the reflection on these issues in the Italian intellectual landscape of the last 20 years, as was their collaboration in the realisation of this work with their answers to a semi-structured questionnaire posed to them between the spring and summer of 2019, which appear in the book as "personal communication".