Quaderni di Teoria Sociale

numero 1 | 2019

Morlacchi Editore

Quaderni di Teoria Sociale

n. 1 | 2019

Morlacchi Editore

Quaderni di Teoria Sociale, n. 1 | 2019
ISSN (print) 1824-4750 ISSN (online) ....-....

Quaderni di Teoria Sociale

n. 1 | 2019

Sommario

Parte monografica
"Emancipatory Social Science Today"

Saggi

Recensioni

***

Elena Fontanari, Camilla Gaiaschi, Giulia Borri

Precarious Escapes. Participative research and collective knowledge production *inside* and *beyond* the academia

Introduction

This paper addresses the issue of the contexts in which sociological knowledge is produced. It highlights the difficulties in doing critical and participative social research due to the ways how the university system is constructed and how it is changing. It gives insights into the crisis of social science in its relation to the social worlds studied, and in its capacity of building alliances with social actors and contexts outside academia.

The reciprocal contamination between the researcher or the intellectual and the world, in which (s)he is embedded in, is a contested debate since the birth of social science as scientific discipline. The public role of scientific knowledge and its autonomy from the political and social forces embedded in historical power relations have always been debated issues. This is particularly relevant in the social sciences because of their "boundary position" [Hammersley 2017] between academic forms of inquiry, emphasizing the need for "detachment", and the realm of politics and practices, which demand "engagement".

Several US scholars have focused on the crucial role of social sciences in engaging with issues that are the object of political concern. Michael Burawoy ad-

vocates for a *public sociology* [2005] and encourages to expand the disciplinary boundaries of sociology to create alliances with non-academic audiences and actors, while having a "public mission" aiming at changing the world [Burawoy 2013]. Similarly, Erik Olin Wright [2010] calls for an "emancipatory" social science to generate knowledge that is relevant to a collective project of challenging human oppression. In the francophone debate, Brière, Lieutenant-Gosselin and Piron [2018] defend the idea of an "open science" involving citizens in the production of knowledge and supporting social change. These ideas of sociology and social sciences as engaged and participative are threatened on two fronts. On an institutional/organizational level, the most recent – market-driven – university transformations make it (more) difficult to engage in these forms of research as long as they are more likely to require long research fields and interdisciplinary approaches. On the epistemological level, one of the main concerns about the idea of a public sociology is the risk to "dishonour" this discipline by weakening its *neutrality* as science.

We discuss these issues drawing on two experiences: collaborative research methodologies and collective processes of knowledge production. We report the experience of *Escapes*, a Coordinated Research Centre working on the topic of forced migration *inside* and *beyond* the Italian university. The participatory structure of Escapes – as a space of discussion including non-academic actors – challenges academic institutions as the realm of a neutral and *a*-political place of knowledge production. Furthermore, collaborative methodologies involving the active participation of research subjects give insights on the process of re-subjectivation occurring in ethnography. We embed these experiences in the historical and social context of the recent transformations of the university system. Finally, we will consider how *precarious escapes* towards an emancipatory social science are possible.

1. Can knowledge be emancipatory? Social sciences and university transformations

The recent transformations of university systems towards market-based principles and managerial practices are shaping both the contents of scientific knowledge and the career trajectories of those who produce that knowledge, namely

researchers and faculty. In parallel with the reduction of the public expenditure for tertiary education, academic organizations in many western countries have shifted from the classic liberal-humanistic model towards a system based on economic productivity and quantitative-based evaluations of institutions and researchers. Framed in terms of "academic capitalism" [Slaughter, Leslie 1999; Ferree, Zippel 2015] or "neo-liberal turn" [Connell 2015; Aavik et al. 2017], this recent shift had the effect to foster the competition among universities (or Departments, as in the case of Italy) for attracting funds, prestige and students [Connell 2015]. A wide range of literature – which partly refers to the "critical university studies" – has attempted to investigate the implications of these transformations in terms of knowledge production [Adler, Harzing 2009; Jacobs and Mizrachi forthcoming] and in terms of (in)equalities for academic and knowledge workers [Tuchman 2009; Riegraf et al. 2010; Van den Brink, Benschop 2011; Ferree, Zippel 2015; Bozzon et al. 2017]. Concerning (in)equalities, most of the scholars argue that the recent university changes are reinforcing existing imbalances among researchers based on gender, race and class. A few others are less clear-cut in their evaluations, by recalling how the old university model entailed entrenched elites and "old boy networks" preventing, for example, women's advancement in academia [Ferre, Zippel 2015]. In this perspective, current transformations may even disrupt such dynamics and create new opportunities.

Italian academia has not been exempted from the global trend of university transformations. Two main changes have been particularly important. The first is related to the last university reform, the so-called Gelmini reform (law n. 240/2010), which has recasted the academic career ladder by replacing the former tenure-track and open-ended contract of the assistant professor with two new types of short-term contracts: an A type, which is non-tenured, and a B type, which is tenured. This change has strongly flexibilised early career phases [Bozzon et al. 2017], extended the years of precariousness for young researchers [Picardi forthcoming] and anticipated women's obstacles to promotion from the associate professor to the assistant professor level [Gaiaschi et al. 2018]. The second change concerns the adoption of evaluation systems of the Departments' performances starting in the mid 2000s. Universities rely on these assessments for their ministerial funding, from the VQR "Evaluation of the Quality of the Research", to the first national ranking of

the "Departments of Excellence". Both changes occurred in parallel with the cuts in the public funds for higher education – which have fostered the need for external funds – and strong limitations on the turn-over. These two elements translated into a sharp reduction of the tenure-track positions and a parallel increase of precarious contracts [Bozzon et al. 2017].

The introduction of metric-based evaluation criteria based on the scientific productivity of researchers and faculty at the Department level has many different implications. First, at organizational structure level, it favours individual competition not so much in the production of research which, on the contrary, has become more and more collective[1], but rather in its evaluation. This holds true especially for the early, non-tenured career positions, who are historically under high pressure to publish in order to survive in the academic pipeline [Powell 2016]. Second, at the level of the organizational culture, it fosters the idea of a meritocratic system based on the objectivity and measurement of excellence [Deem 2009; Van den Brink, Benschop 2011]. However, this idea fails to acknowledge how power relations and unconscious biases can affect the evaluation processes at the base of the selection, thus reproducing hegemonic structures of inequality based on gender, race, and class [Castilla 2008; Van den Brink, Benschop 2011]. Third, it affects the content and the quality of science. The pressure to publish and the fall in recruitments push young researchers to increase their number of publications while relying on external funds [Powell 2016]. This leaves little time for engaging in complex investigations [Pellegrino 2018] which require long research fields, for example in ethnography. Moreover, it penalizes interdisciplinary approaches [Adler, Harzing 2009] and this is particularly true in Italy, where researchers are required to publish in a specific list of journals related to their "disciplinary sector" in order to obtain the national qualification for becoming professors.

As Pellegrino points out [2018], this pressure to publish, together with the growing precariousness at the level of the early career phases, lead to "discomfort and demotivation", especially among the youngest researchers. Complex, parti-

1. Team work is convenient because it increases the number of publications and because it is often necessary for winning research grants. On the collective production and circulation of knowledge related to the recent university transformations, see Connell 2015.

cipatory and interdisciplinary researches are not encouraged and this can make researchers that adopt such approaches to be and to feel isolated. On the other hand, new ways of teaching and doing research may arise [Pellegrino 2018] especially in the social sciences, as forms of resilience within the academic system of knowledge production.

In the last decades, alternative practices of *participatory* research have been experimented in several universities worldwide [see Pellegrino 2018]. The "participatory" approach, in which citizens and research subjects are active key players in the production and dissemination of knowledge, is the common denominator of these experiences. These efforts have "re-politicized" science not so much in terms of the militant classic tradition of action-research [Reason, Bradbury 2001], but rather in terms of *self-reflection,* that is a process where researchers, citizens and the social worlds interrelate their different perspectives to produce knowledge. The mechanism of self-reflection is related to the process of *re-subjectivation* through which researchers and research subjects are empowering themselves within the power structures and division lines that they experience in their everyday life. Recent participatory experiences in Italian university have given insights on the dynamic of "reciprocal re-subjectivation" [Pellegrino 2018] stemming from the encountering and the discussion between young researchers, social workers, and forced migrants. Such scientific approaches are based upon an idea of knowledge conceived as "open" – towards the civil society – and "engaged" – as long as it promotes social change [Brière, Lieutenant-Gosselin and Piron 2018]. The open science entails inevitable epistemological issues by calling into question the positivist idea of science (and scientists) as "neutral" and able to objectively catch reality as long as it is not influenced by the (socio-political-economic) context in which the research is produced. This idea of science is nowadays dominating in research institutions and it tends to legitimate some forms of knowledge production, while discrediting others, thus creating a hierarchy of sciences.

Many scholars have challenged this idea of science as free from contextual/non-epistemic values – i.e. moral, social, or political values. Feminist [Crasnow 2007] and de-colonial critics [Smith 2012] have raised crucial epistemological questions such as what counts as evidence and what good evidence is, and in what sense social science can be objective. Thus, the hierarchies among disci-

plines and the "androcentric" and "Westerncentric" origins of knowledge production have been tackled. Thinking "de-colonially" [Mignolo 2009] challenges the methodological objectivity and the analytical neutrality produced within western universities, opening spaces for new methodologies and narratives while developing critical research [do Mar Castro Varela, Dhawan 2015]. Similarly, feminist engagements demonstrate how non-epistemic/contextual values are embedded in the scientific practice, as long as they can be instrumental to its empirical and explanatory success. Helen Longino [1990; 2002] pushes for a *social* understanding of objectivity, arguing that a theory is objective if it has undergone a social process of critical scrutiny within the epistemic community. Moreover, she points out that epistemic and non-epistemic values interact and *shape* science by evaluating evidence, setting the research agenda and justifying theories.

In summary, whether social research should be objective and value-neutral or socially engaged is a contested issue, which is related to the uncertainty and the confusion around the meaning of key terms such as "objectivity", "values" and "neutral" [Hammersley 2017]. The following experience of Escapes gives insights on how building alliances *within* and *beyond* academia – i.e. involving non-academic actors – does not undermine the scientific relevance of the knowledge produced, but on the contrary opens up spaces for emancipatory practices throughout the process of a *collective* knowledge production.

2. The experience of Escapes: an alternative space inside and beyond contemporary academia

In the current historical phase – which is characterised by a crisis of the social sciences' ability to relate with the social worlds – Escapes emerges as an attempt to face – and partially overcome – this crisis.

Escapes was born in 2013 as a "research laboratory" promoted by a group of PhD students and Post-doc researchers working on the topic of forced migration at the University of Milan and at the University of Milan-Bicocca. In 2015, Escapes

was transformed to a Coordinated Research Centre based in four Departments[2] of the University of Milan. The organisation of a yearly conference and of seminars, and the participation in research projects with partners and an ongoing process of collective knowledge production are the main activities of Escapes.

At the core of Escapes lies the idea of developing a network of researchers and non-academic actors who work on the topic of forced migration from a critical perspective. The first aim was to create an *alternative space* of discussion and exchange in order to contribute to the public debate on migration in Italy by producing an in-depth and critical knowledge. Indeed, Escapes grew during a historical phase that saw Italy increasingly at the centre of the debate on the issues of migration to Europe. Since 2011, the debate has been framed through the rhetoric of humanitarian emergency, which shaped the discourses about migration in terms of security and control. Such discourses have pushed European and national institutions to deploy short-sighted policies aimed at containing migration, thus avoiding an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon as structural and embedded in global interconnections and power relations. In reaction to such overshadowing of the complexity of forced migration, Escapes proposed an alternative space to investigate this complex reality. It started from the dialogue between heterogeneous perspectives. The encounter between academic and non-academic actors working on forced migration opened up spaces of *public* knowledge production and dissemination, promoting non-stereotyped discourses on forced migration.

This paper start from the practices within Escapes as they were experienced by two of us – Elena Fontanari and Giulia Borri – who participated in the creation of Escapes from its start. We experienced Escapes as a space for experimenting resilient practices with respect to three dimensions. First, Escapes seeks alternatives to the positivist idea of science as "neutral" and "objective", as we are aware that the contents of science – from the choice of research questions to the interpretation of results – are influenced by researchers' norms/values as well as by the context in which the research is produced (paragraph 2.1). Second, Escapes attempts to

2. Department of Social and Political Sciences, Department of Cultural Heritage and Environment, Department of Language Mediation and Intercultural Communication, Department of Philosophy.

practice alternatives to the process of knowledge production recently reinforced through transformations promoted in universities. This process includes the difficulty to undertake long research fields, to adopt inter-disciplinary and participatory approaches as well as the emphasis on individual competition, with its consequences in terms of persisting inequalities among researchers (paragraph 2.2). Third, it provides the possibility to work out strategies to collectively face the precariousness and power hierarchies experienced within academia (paragraph 2.3).

2.1. The A-science and the alternative E-scapes

Contrary to an idea of science as neutral, objective, and, therefore, *a*-political (in its methods) and strictly *a*-cademic (as long as real science is produced only within university's walls), Escapes attempts to develop alternative visions of what science might be and how it could be produced.

We acknowledge that the social and political context in which research on forced migration is developed plays a crucial role in the process of knowledge production. The intertwining of the academic approach with the *practical*, *professional*, and *everyday* knowledge produced by the actors and the practitioners working in the forced migration's field provides alternative E-*scapes* – visions and horizons – of how social research can be conducted through a participatory process.

From an epistemological perspective, Escapes allows us to move towards an alternative *science-scape* to the supposed neutral, *a*-cademic and *a*-political "A-science", providing a space where researchers, practitioners and forced migrants contribute all together to a process of collective knowledge production.

2.2 Towards the horizon: collective knowledge production and horizontal structures

An alternative science-scape might offer new spaces of knowledge production in contrast to those imposed by current university practices. Rather than favou-

ring individual competition, Escapes bases its values on collaboration and solidarity. Moreover, it fosters interdisciplinary approaches as an added value for an in-depth analysis of social phenomena.

The idea of a collective knowledge production is developed through collaboration among researchers from different departments and universities, through a multi-disciplinary approach and through the interaction with the non-academic social worlds.

The horizontal structure on which Escapes is build, namely a network, allows to cut across various division lines that university institutions produce and reinforce. Escapes breaks the walls that separate academic organizations from the *outside* world, thus challenging the idea of academia as an ivory tower of knowledge production. It also breaks the walls *inside* the academic world, by challenging the competition among researchers, disciplines, universities and departments as well as by advocating for an alternative to the hierarchical structure of academia.

First, being many participants of Escapes both academic researchers and members of associations dealing with asylum rights issues, we struggle with the division line that makes the academic space as being the *only* legitimate world of scientific knowledge. We consider the various non-academic actors working on migration, and the migrants and refugees themselves, as active *partners* in the process of collective knowledge production. Thus, the creation of alternative spaces of critical discussion, where academics and non-academics exchange, share, and intertwine their knowledge from different perspectives, is experienced as a process of reciprocal re-subjectivation between the researchers and the social worlds studied. For example, doing research on the cross-border mobility of refugees and the related precarious housing conditions, *with-in* an association working on the housing integration of migrants, lead to a collective development of "alternatives" to existing institutions and social structures that Wright [2010] considers one of the basic tasks of emancipatory social science. Thus, the relation with local actors dealing with refugees across Italy is crucial: social workers, lawyers, activists, journalists, artists, NGOs, and various specialists and practitioners have an active role in Escapes. Moreover, seminars and initiatives are scattered over different cities and territories all around Italy to spread the debate and foster exchange as much as possible. Doing research *with-in* non-academic spaces and

with actors working at the local level allows discovering a scientifically grounded conception of "viable alternatives" [Wright 2010] that attempt to transform existing social structures. We work towards this aim by maintaining a deep exchange and reciprocal contamination, as long as the autonomy of the scientific research is preserved.

Second, Escapes breaks through the walls inside the academic world: it challenges the competition among different departments working on the same topic and it advocates for a strong multidisciplinary approach. Those two elements are Escapes' *conditio sine qua non*, because the research contents – forced migration – and the theoretical perspective – critical social theory – have priority over the competitive logic (among researchers, disciplines, departments, etc.). Alliance among disciplines is fundamental for grasping the multi-dimensional nature of forced migration and for producing scientific knowledge that captures the high complexity of the phenomenon studied. Anthropologists, sociologist, historians, geographers, psychologists, jurists, political scientist, experts of African and Middle-East studies, and researchers in international relations, contribute together to the discussion and understanding of the heterogeneity underlying forced migration to Europe.

Third, the inner academic walls do not merely relate to the reinforcement of the competition between researchers, disciplines, departments, universities. They also concern the reproduction of gender, race, class and generational inequalities. Hence, the horizontal nature of Escapes challenges the typical hierarchical power structures of academia that reinforces the divisions between men and women, junior and senior researchers.

2.3 Living precariousness and gender inequalities

Escapes was founded by junior researchers. This allowed us to build non-hierarchical relationships which are very different from the typical university power structure based on a hierarchical ladder. Organizing seminars and conferences through Escapes allowed us to be at the centre of the scientific decisions and to chair panels and conferences' plenary sessions despite still being in training as

PhD students. This participatory nature of Escapes enabled young researchers to develop skills and responsibilities that are usually a privilege of senior researchers. Through Escapes, we lived an opportunity to overcome the atomization in which young precarious academics often find themselves, by experiencing a constant and productive exchange among researchers and alternative ways to write publications and to produce research collectively.

Another specific feature of Escapes is related to the gender composition of its scientific committee, and in general of the wider network. While women in academia are under-represented among faculty members and, even more so, in senior positions [Rossi 2015; Bozzon et al. 2017; Zippel 2017; Gaiaschi et al. 2018], Escapes counts a high number of women as active members and crucial contributors of the activities and decisions concerning the research lines and their scientific content. The scientific committee is female-dominated, consisting of four women and one man. The four women are precarious researchers, while the man is in a tenure position. Our experience as young precarious female researchers in Escapes was that of having a central active role, with responsibilities, and of experiencing a form of leadership, neither individual nor authoritarian but, using Angela Davis' definition[3], *collective* and *feminist*.

To conclude, Escapes allows us to interpret our role of researchers as actors embedded in the social worlds that we want to understand and in which we want to intervene. Thus, the understanding of our role as academic researchers is very distant to the notion of the researcher as a "*disembodied* worker" [Acker 1990], i.e. an individual researcher that is alone, cut off from the social, family, or geographical milieu, and always available [Linková 2017]. On the contrary, we experience ourselves as researchers in a wider collective network of academic and non-academic actors. Moreover, we experimented with our role as researchers that can be *together* also in a (shared) research field, embedded in the social worlds we study, and geographically mobile like our research participants.

3. From the public speech of Angela Davis at the conference "Colonial Repercussion" at the *Akademie der Kunst* in Berlin, on 23 and 24 of June 2018.

3. Moving together: doing collaborative empirical research

The biographies of Elena Fontanari and Giulia Borri, the two of us participating to Escapes, were deeply interconnected to – and contaminated by – this participatory experience. Both of us started the PhD at the end of 2012 at the Universities of Milan (Elena Fontanari) and Berlin (Giulia Borri), in a time during which Escapes was growing. Our personal lives were characterised by various similarities: a mobile life between Italy and Germany[4], doing research on the topic of asylum and crossing-border mobility of refugees, and – *before* and *beyond* our research activities – the engagement in associations and activists groups supporting refugees and migrants. The understanding of our research field as characterized by *political* implications was the result of our everyday interaction with practitioners and actors of the migration process. Indeed, our social engagement echoes *interpretivism*: a methodological approach that calls for an understanding of social events through the interpretation of a researcher. The latter is considered as being part of the reality that is under observation [Della Porta, Keating 2008; Schwartz-Shea, Yanow 2012; Vacchelli 2018]. Rather than uncritically using standard methods, we focused on the context in which our research was taking place. We shaped the methods to the field and kept questioning ourselves about the impact of the research on the community [Smith 2012; Asselin, Basile 2018]. According to the literature on *collaborative research* [Clerke, Hopwood 2014], we decided to engage with *collective ethnography* by doing research together (paragraph 3.1) and using participatory methodologies (paragraph 3.2).

3.1 Co-ethnography: escaping individualization and time compression

Literature on collective ethnography, also called "team ethnography" [Erickson, Stull 1998; Woods et al. 2010; Clerke, Hopwood 2014] challenges the anthropological archetype of the "lone researcher" within the field since it

4. Elena Fontanari is living between Milan and Berlin since 2009, and Giulia Borri was living in Turin from 2008 until 2012 and then moved to Berlin.

reduces the loneliness, anxiety and self-doubt that can accompany the research endeavour. Moreover, doing empirical research together was a tool to face the complexity of our research topic and to overcome some problems related to the methodology we wanted to apply. The research focus was the intra-EU mobility of refugees and the ways EU and national institutions attempted to control it. We used ethnography as the methodological tool that allowed us to empirically grasp the relations between subjects and power structures [Biehl et al. 2007] and how they affect each other.

The advantages in doing ethnography together were related to the *mobile* and *multi-sited* characteristics of our research subjects´ lives. In order to study the (im) mobility of refugees across Europe, namely between Italy and Germany, we built on multi-sited ethnography [Marcus 1995; Coleman, Von Hellermann 2012], a method that looks at the interconnection between different sites, aiming exactly to follow people, connections, associations, and relationships across space [Falzon 2012]. Thus, we started to intertwine our two multi-sited ethnographies[5], while Berlin progressively became one shared research field. *Co-ethnography* [Colombo, Navarini 1999] allowed us to be doubly embedded in our spatially dispersed research fields and to better grasp its fragmentary nature.

Doing ethnography together also enabled us to better cover the spatial dimension of our research field. Even more, it gave us the possibility of *making time* in a research process that was very limited due to the deadlines set by our academic institutions. This was a crucial point because in contemporary academia, the time for knowledge production is compressed and frenetic. This penalises qualitative research and more specifically ethnographies that require a very long time on the field. Thus, quantitative methods as well as other – less time-consuming – qualitative methods better fit the new rhythms that are strongly linked to the metric criteria of scientific assessment, and are often a requirement for staying in academia.

In this context, it is more difficult to be engaged with social research that aims at a *reciprocal contamination* process between academics and social worlds.

5. The research fields were also connected to our personal biographies as usually occurs in ethnographic practices [Semi 2010]. The research field was set in the three cities in which we are or were living, namely Milan (Elena Fontanari), Turin (Giulia Borri), and Berlin (both of us).

Working together allowed us to build many enduring trust relationships with the participants in our research, to be more mobile, and to get in contact with more social contexts in which the phenomenon was embedded.

Making time, expanding space, but also sharing theoretical reflections let us produce an in-depth understanding of a complex phenomenon. Drawing on Clifford´s and Marcus´ [1986] arguments, collaborative ethnography is to share not only the fieldwork, but also the broader processes of research: interpretation [Gerstl-Pepin, Gunzenhauser 2002] and writing [May, Pattillo-McCoy 2000].

Doing research together was experienced also as a way to overcome hyper-competition among young researchers. The fact that we were collecting the same empirical data by sharing the same research field was often criticised by various senior professors claiming that uniqueness should characterize innovative research. We rather experienced the *sharing* of empirical data and theoretical reflection as the *added value* that allowed us to produce a high quality scientific research in a short time. Moreover, this allowed us to partially overcome the loneliness and precariousness which are often experienced by young researchers. Our co-ethnography has been an escape from individual performance, efficiency, competition, competitiveness, speed, and primacy which are embedded in contemporary academia.

Moving further, we shared the research process not only between the two of us, but also with the social actors, contexts, and protagonists of our research.

3.2 Collaborative methods: beyond alliance among researchers

"Collaborative ethnography" [Lassiter 2005] points to the relationship between a researcher and those being researched. The methodological debate focuses on new forms of participatory action research [Hale 2008], as well as new methodological tools – like digital technologies – that led to the statement of a "participatory turn" in the social sciences [Gubrium et al. 2016]. In short, the main contested issues around participatory methodologies are *self-reflections* about the position of the researcher within the research field, and the power relationships with the research subjects. Our ethnography was conducted as an ongoing process. We were continually negotiating, as well as reflecting, on our double role

as researchers and activists. We did so with the participants of our research, with NGOs' volunteers and other people active in the support of refugees. Despite some contested issues, we discovered how the double role can be an advantage both in the empirical research and in the activism. The close collaboration with activists and practitioners was an advantage for understanding the complexity of the research field. Moreover, many research participants already knew both of us because of our work as activists before starting the PhD, which favoured trust building in relationships.

Being aware of the power relations and the related social inequalities in which we and our participants were embedded, we considered refugees as *active participants* as one of our premises for the research process. Understanding methods as a set of principles rather than a set of rules [Cardano 2003], we experimented with participatory methods, namely "ethnographic dinners", collective cartography, and collective writing. We took the decision of which techniques to use based on every specific situation after having discussed it with our participants. Instead of defining methods exclusively *ex ante*, we developed our research design *in itinere*.

For example, in Berlin a substantial part of our ethnography took place around Oranienplatz, a square occupied by refugees who were involved in a political protest from Autumn 2012 until Spring 2014. This square was not only a place of political struggles, but also a place where refugees slept, met, organized collectively and shared information. The eviction of Oranienplatz led to a dispersion of the political mobilization and moved the interactions from the square to many fragmented private places. It was in this context that we started organizing what we later named "ethnographic dinners": collective dinners taking place weekly or monthly in a shared flat where we invited the refugees we knew. These dinners were declared as part of our research in line with the uncovered ethnography proceeding, and became a space where refugees and supporters could regularly meet having the possibility to stay in touch after the eviction.

This example sheds light on how ethnographic practice can intervene in the social world, and how the interaction between research and social life can lead to a process of collective and collaborative knowledge production.

The idea to use collective map drawing as a research tool came up during one of those dinners. A participant started drawing his travel routes while telling us

about his journey. He underlined the emotional aspects recalling the struggle, the hopes, and the strategies that he enacted. We all agreed to draw maps together as a collaborative process of storytelling. Creative and participatory approaches are considered crucial for developing a non-invasive method while working with research participants in a vulnerable position [Vacchelli 2018]. Through this experience, we engaged in a collective process of awareness building that let us reflect on how mapping is related to European colonialist practices and entails the representation of colonial power relations [Gubrium et al. 2015].

Thanks to such collaborative approach, our research became increasingly dynamic. Participants involved us in their activities and we used several opportunities to share the results of our collaboration. In the attempt to weaken the dualism "researcher/subject of research" we held workshops and presentations together with our participants at the university and we wrote an eight-hand article with two participants. It is important to underline that such collaborative practices do not fully overcome the duality between researcher and participants. However, the participation in the research process was experienced as a re-subjectivation thanks to the dynamism of interactions and the change of roles that sometimes happened during the ethnography.

3.3 Process of re-subjectivation: towards an emancipation?

According to Wright [2010], the diagnosis and the critique which are produced within the frame of an emancipatory science should be closely connected to questions of social justice and normative theory.

During our ethnography, we progressively became aware of the fact that we were conducting engaged social research. We aimed at drawing attention to the responsibility of the EU in the production of social inequalities within the process of migration to Europe. We were struggling with the issue of social justice related to the claim of freedom of movement. Working on refugees' (im)mobility across EU borders put us through a process of "reciprocal re-subjectivation". Our reflections started from the shared condition with our research participants: despite the obvious inequalities in the freedom of movement between EU ci-

tizens and refugees, all of us were part of the young generations of people on the move in Europe. As Italian researchers living in Germany but still being connected to Italy, we were moving frequently across Europe like our research participants were. Moreover, we shared similar desires and life projects being more or less in the same point of our life course. Still, several lines of distinction strongly emerged in different moments of the research process. Such lines of distinctions between us – female researchers – and our participants – male refugees – were embedded in the interrelated power forms of social stratification such as gender, race, and class. The process of reciprocal re-subjectivation led us to understand how the positions of the "strong" – usually the researcher – and the "weak" subject – usually the research participant – are not fixed identities. In our experience, while our privileged position as European, white high-skilled and highly educated persons was clear, the gender issue flipped the power positions between researchers and subjects of research upside down. Indeed, as women we often experienced not to be taken seriously by our male participants that clearly expressed to trust male white persons – like male journalists – more than us. Interestingly, they had the opinion that journalists, different from us, were exploiting their stories. Nevertheless, male journalists often received more recognition than we did as female researchers, making gender difference a decisive factor of the unequal treatment in personal relationships. Although in some occasions being white and highly qualified gave us credit in the eyes of our participants[6], in others we were treated with scepticism and even paternalism being women in their thirties, not married, without children, hanging out with many men during the ethnographic research. The intersection of race, class and gender drove us through a process of reciprocal re-subjectivation between ourselves and the research participants.

If the gender division line was a field of self-reflection, the access to freedom of movement and related life opportunities remained the core issue in the research. Mobility is not a neutral feature of our time. On the contrary, it is embedded in unequal power relations. White, highly qualified people enjoy a high degree of

6. We were trustworthy because of our basic knowledge of their legal condition and the possibility to support them; furthermore, we knew what they had been going through in Italy because we had lived there and worked with NGOs on migration management and control.

freedom of movement. Instead, refugees' cross-border mobility puts them at risk of incarceration. This division line strongly emerged during our research: we are privileged travellers, while our participants were often criminalised for crossing borders within the Schengen area. Looking at the bordering process deployed in the EU upon refugees who do not want to remain in the first country of arrival, made us fully aware of our privileges as Italians living and working abroad, moving freely between Italy and Germany and experiencing precariousness from a privileged position.

Precariousness and mobility emerged as intrinsically interconnected, and were experienced by our research participants as well as by the two of us as mobile precarious researchers.

Concluding remarks

The Escapes experience, the co-ethnography and the collaborative methods we adopted provided us with an insight on how academic knowledge can be produced through a *participatory* perspective.

We argue that a *horizontal space* of knowledge production, based on participatory practices, breaks different division lines deployed by the current academic world. Such "breaking through" the structures affects the idea of science, the processes of knowledge production, and the subjective condition as researcher in contemporary academia.

Escapes is participative as it advocates for collaboration among researchers, departments, disciplines and actors and social contexts outside university. Escapes is however also participative because it reaches out into the social worlds outside academia and is embedded in social processes, getting input from practitioners. Thus, we can understand this process of knowledge production as an emancipatory practice that is directly involved in the social processes that are studied. Ultimately, the encounter of heterogeneous actors *collectively* debating and sharing different knowledge on forced migration entailed processes of "reciprocal re-subjectivation".

In line with the Escapes experience, the development of collaborative methods such as *co-ethnography* and *participative methods* led to changes and transformations in the investigated phenomena. We are aware that participative methods cannot completely overcome the duality researcher/research participants. However, we experienced a process of re-subjectivation that challenged the classical division between "strong researcher" and "weak research participants". We build an understanding of our role as a *political* one through a collective self-reflection process on the role of the researcher in the field and on alternative ways to carry out empirical research. We are agents in the production of knowledge; we directly influenced the reality we study. Co-ethnography and collaborative methods offered *precarious escapes* from the time pressure imposed by the university's institutions, the competition among researchers, and the loneliness of the research process.

References

Aavik, K., Riegraf, B. and Nyklová, B.,
2017, *The Neoliberal/ising University at the Intersection of Gender and Place*, Gender, Rovne Prilezitosti, Vyzkum [Gender and Research], 18(1), pp. 2-8.

Acker, J.
1990, *Hierarchies, Jobs, Bodies: a Theory of Gendered Organizations*, Gender & Society, 4 (2), pp. 139-158.

Adler, N.J. and Harzing, A.-W.
2009, *When Knowledge Wins: Transcending the Sense and Nonsense of Academic Ranking*, Academy of Management Learning and Education, 8(1), pp. 72-95.

Asselin H., Basile S.I.
2018, *Concrete Ways to Decolonize Research*, ACME An international Journal for critical geographers, 17 (3), pp. 643-650.

Biehl, J.G., Good, B. and Kleinman, A.
2007, *Subjectivity. Ethnographic Investigations*, University of California Press, Oakland.

Bozzon, R., Murgia, A., & Villa, P.
2017, *Precariousness and Gender Asymmetries Among Early Career Researchers: a Focus on STEM Fields in the Italian Academia,* Polis, 31(1), pp. 127-158.

Burawoy, M.
2005, *For Public Sociology*, American Sociological Review, 70, pp. 4-28.
2013, *Public Sociology: the Task and the Promise*, in A. G. Kenneth, T. L. Lewis (eds.) *Ten Lessons in Introductory Sociology*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, pp. 279-299.

Brière, L., Lieutenant-Gosselin, L. and Piron, F.
2018, *Un espace de réflexions sociales et politiques sur les manières de penser et de faire des sciences,* in L. Brière, L. Lieutenant-Gosselin, and F.. Piron (eds.) *Et si la recherche scientifique ne pouvait pas être neutre?* Éditions science et bien commun, Quebec.

Cardano, M.
2003, *Tecniche di ricerca qualitativa. Percorsi di ricerca nelle scienze sociali*, Carocci Editore, Roma.

Castilla, E.J.
2008, *Gender, Race, and Meritocracy in Organizational Careers*, American Journal of Sociology, 113(6), pp. 1479-526.

Clerke, T., Hopwood, N.
2014, *Doing Ethnography in Teams: a Case Study of Asymmetries in Collaborative Research*, Springer Science & Business MediaBerlin, Heidelberg.

Clifford, J., Marcus, G.E. (Eds.)
1986, *Writing Culture: the Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, University of California Press, Berkeley.

Coleman S., von Hellermann P. (Eds.)
2012, *Multi-sited Ethnography. Problems and Possibilities in the Translocation of Research Methods*, Routledge, Oxon.

Colombo E., Navarini G.
1999, *Confini dentro la città. Antropologia della stazione centrale di Milano*, Edizioni Guerini e Associati, Milano.

Connell R.
2015, *The Knowledge Economy and University Workers*, Australian Universities' Review, 57(2), pp. 91-95.

Crasnow, S.
2007, *Feminist Anthropology and Sociology: Issues For Social Science,* Philosophy of anthropology and sociology, North-Holland, pp. 755-789.

Deem, R.
2009, *Leading and Managing Contemporary UK Universities: Do Excellence And Meritocracy Still Prevail Over Diversity?*, Higher Education Policy, 22, pp. 3 - 17.

Della Porta, D., Keating, M. (Eds.)
2008, *Approaches and Methodologies In the Social Sciences. A Pluralist Perspective*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

do Mar Castro Varela M., Dhawan N.
2015, *Postkoloniale theorie. Eine kritische einführung*, Transcript Verlag, Bielefeld.

Erickson, K., Stull, D.
1998, *Doing Team Ethnography: Warnings and Advice*. Sage Publications Inc., Thousand Oaks.

Ferree, M.M., and Zippel, K.
2015, *Gender Equality in the Age of Academic Capitalism: Cassandra and Pollyanna Interpret University Restructuring*, Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State & Society, 22(4), pp. 561-584.

Falzon M.A. (ed.)
2012, *Multi Sited Ethnography. Theory, Praxis and Locality in Contemporary Research*, Ashgate e-Book, New York.

Gerstl-Pepin, C.I., Gunzenhauser, M.G.
2002, *Collaborative Team Ethnography and the Paradoxes of Interpretation*, Qualitative Studies in Education, 15(2), pp. 137-154.

Gaiaschi, C., Falcinelli, D. and Semenza, R.
(2018), *Genere e carriere all'Università degli Studi di Milano. Il nodo critico dei ricercatori a tempo determinato e il buon esempio delle scienze della vita*, in A. Murgia, B. Poggio (eds.), *Saperi di genere. Prospettive interdisciplinari su formazione, università, lavoro, politiche e movimenti sociali*, Conference proceedings, University of Trento, Trento, pp. 364-381.

Gubrium, A., Harper, K. and Otanez, M.
2016, *Participatory Visual and Digital Research in Action*, Routledge, New York.

Hale, C.
2008, *Engaging Contradictions: Theory, Politics, and Methods of Activist Scholarship*, University of California Press, Berkeley.

Hammersley, M.
2017, *On the Role of Values in Social Research: Weber Vindicated?*, Sociological Research Online, 22(1), pp. 1-12.

Jacobs, J.J. and Mizrachi, N.
(forthcoming), *International Representation in US Social-Science Journals*.

Lassiter, L.E., et al.
2005, *Collaborative Ethnography and Public Anthropology*, Current Anthropology, 46 (1), pp. 83-106.

Linková, M.,
2017, *Academic Excellence and Gender Bias in the Practices and Perceptions of Scientists in Leadership and Decision-Making Positions*, Gender a výzkum / Gender and Research, 18 (1), pp. 42-66.

Longino, H.
1990, *Science as Social Knowledge: Values and Objectivity in Scientific Inquiry,* Princeton University Press, Princeton.

Longino, H.
2002, *The Fate of Knowledge*, Princeton University Press, Princeton.

Marcus, G.A.
1995, *Ethnography in/of the World System: the Emergence of Multi-Sited Ethnography*, Annual Review of Anthropology, vol. 24, pp. 95-117.

May, R.A.B., Pattillo-McCoy, M.
2000, *Do You See What I See? Examining a Collaborative Ethnography*, Qualitative Inquiry, 6(1), pp.65-87.

Mignolo, W.D.
2009, *Epistemic Disobedience, Independent Thought and Decolonial Freedom*, Theory, Culture & Society, 26 (7-8), pp. 159-181.

Picardi, I.
Forthcoming, *La porta di cristallo: un'analisi gender-sensitive dell'impatto della riforma Gelmini sull'accesso alle carriere accademiche*.

Pellegrino, V.
2018, *A «Collective» University: the Development of Public Knowledge in a Participatory Perspective*, Politiche Sociali, Social Policies, 3/2018, pp. 407-422.

Powell, K.
2016, *Young, Talented and Fed-Up: Scientists Tell Their Stories,* Nature News, 538(7626), pp. 446-449.

Reason, P. e H. Bradbury
2001, *Handbook of Action Research: Participative Inquiry and Practice*, Sage, London.

Riegraf, B., Aulenbacher, B., Kirsch-Auwärter, E., & Müller, U. (eds.).
2010, *Gender Change in Academia: Re-Mapping the Fields of Work, Knowledge, and Politics from a Gender Perspective*, Springer Science & Business Media, Berlin.

Rossi, P.
2015a, *Donne nella ricerca a quando una vera parità?*, in F. Marzano, E. Pietrafesa (eds.), *Anche i maschi nel loro piccolo,* (e-book), Wister.

Schwartz-Shea P., Yanow D.
2012, *Interpretive Research Design: Concepts and Processes*, Routledge, New York and London.

Slaughter, S., and L.L. Leslie.,
1999, *Academic Capitalism Politics, Policies, and the Entrepreneurial University,* Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, MD.

Smith, L.T.
2012, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, Zed Books Ltd., London.

Tuchman, G.
2009, *Wannabe U: Inside the Corporate University*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago.

van den Brink, M., and Y. Benschop
2011, *Gender Practices in the Construction of Academic Excellence: Sheep with Five Legs*, Organization, 19 (4), pp. 507-24.

Vacchelli, E.
2018, *Embodied Research in Migrant Studies. Using Creative and Participatory Approaches*, Policy Press, UK.

Woods P., Jeffrey B., Boyle M.L., Troman G.
2010, *A Research Team in Ethnography,* International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education, 13(1) pp. 85-98.

Wright, E.O.
2010, *Envisioning Real Utopias*, Vol. 98, Verso, London.

Zippel, K.
2017, *Women in Global Science: Advancing Academic Careers through International Collaboration*, Stanford University Press, Stanford.