

Ethnologie française

Call for papers

“To Make Silence”

Coordination

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Argument

Silence is a motif that stands out both, and paradoxically, for its omnipresence and its absence. Women and children "silent victims" of violence, citizens rebelling for what they are not "told" or for how their problems are "made invisible", "silenced" protest movements, organizations seeking to bring these demands into the public space so that they can be "heard"... Is it the omnipresence of the word in all its declinations, in today's conversations in the political and mediatic spheres, or is it the absence of an anthropological reflection conducted by means of empirical cases and ethnographic descriptions meticulously carried out that should prompt us to engage in a collective reflection on silence as a practice, on how *to make silence*?

Silence has sometimes been described as something that *is not here* (a word that is absent, a noise that dissolves, a void, a "hole" or a "blank" in communication), and sometimes as something that *is already here*, the basis of any speech act relying on it. This issue proposes to question silence while *being made*, by exploring its pragmatic dimension and the practical problems that this exploration implies in terms of methodology and even of research ethics. Hence the need to reinvest, in a reflexive and committed way, this notion beyond the real difficulties of grasping what it *is*, to explore the ineffable, the elusive, the unspeakable and the indescribable, which are precisely its modes of existence. What can be said about the experience of silence in itself, as a specific modality of action and interaction, with its specific qualities, constraints and possibilities?

Studying the multiple ways of *making silence* leads one to question what it *does* to social life, or *how* it drives the actors involved in it to do something (Puccio-Den, 2017): how to make or to make someone do something in silence by means of which driving forces, mediations, supports and objects? Silence as a practice has a twofold aspect: to silence something, i.e. censorship in all its forms, which has recently given rise to collective research works in anthropology (*Terrain* 72/2019), and to make silence as a know-how, in other words, these *acts of silence* that Keith Basso proposed to describe half a century ago. In his pioneering article, entitled "To Give Up on Words. Silence on Western Apache Culture" (1970), the American anthropologist identified and analyzed several "situations" in which the Apache voluntarily refrain from speaking, and called for the same type of inquiry and questioning to be extended to other populations. Sadly, this call was not heeded.

The first intention of this issue is therefore to take up this questioning and to make use of it for a descriptive endeavor: how can we describe the voluntary and collective *practices of silence*, and make them the subject of an ethnographic investigation? We should not treat silence as the tedious relic of a discipline that is successful merely through the exercise of speech and language interaction. Instead, it can help us to find a new way of observing, to take a different look at our fieldworks and at what they can tell us through their silence. From that perspective, in the words of David Le Breton, silence "is not only a certain modality of sound, it is first and foremost a certain modality of meaning" (Le Breton 1997: 150).

Indeed, silence becomes an original research topic that seems to tell a great deal about our past and present societies, their political configurations, and their cultural expressions. But there is more to it: its problematization is likely to lead us to take an innovative, and sometimes critical, look at the epistemological foundations of the social sciences. This project is thus bifid: one branch of exploration concerns silence itself; the other, reflexive, concerns what such question as silence involves in ethnographic practice, and more generally in the social sciences.

The paradigm on which social sciences are based discards silence as forms of failure, emptiness or vacuum, or even failure in relation to the successful performance that speech should be. Sometimes silence is even "pathological" in relation to a speech assumed as the basis of any legitimate therapy, whether individual or social (Kidron 2009). The variety of its declinations implies that silence sometimes appears as a salient part of social phenomena (inmates' silence, mafia silence and *omerta*, monastic enclosure, the artistic practices of mime and cinema), and sometimes as a lack, an absence (the pathologies of language, punitive impediment, concealment, imposed muteness). This issue is intended to become a space of discussion in order to collectively build, invent or manufacture the means of an analysis which, while taking these polarities into account, allows us to study silence for what it *is*, and not for what it *stands in opposition to*. Let us therefore endeavor to disentangle silence from its opposite – in relation to which we are used to grasping it – and to conceive it as an autonomous ingredient of the social facts it impregnates, as another means of expression available to the subject and to communities, as "one of the modalities of speech" (Debiais 2019: 50), or even as a "regime of speech and action" (Puccio-Den 2019a: 600).

Objectives

When one reviews the state of the art and available knowledge about silence as a research topic, one is struck by its multiform character, but also by the monotony of its approaches.

Some analyses, as we said, point out the *uncertainty* of what it is and attempt to define it in relation to what it is not: noise, sound, speech. Other analyses tend to associate it with fields of inquiry that regularly recur: silence as a way to establish a relationship with the divine; silence as a form of passive resistance (*omerta*); imposed muteness as a form of domination; silence as an individual psychic experience. Thus, if the Italian philosopher Pier Aldo Rovatti identifies in silence a space for non-coincidence between words and things, the cradle of the permanent oscillation of the signified (Rovatti 1992: 130), historians such as Alain Corbin (1994) make "making silence" and "inner speech" coincide as a return to oneself, a withdrawal into an intimacy where the person develops in the encounter with nature, with their loved one, with God.

Anthropologists place silence at the heart and at the service of a cultural device of resistance. That is how Maria Pia Di Bella (2008) interprets *omerta* the she defines as a cultural model of behavior adopted by the Sicilian people faced with the social contradictions that emerged in Sicily following the creation of the Italian state (1861). However, this "trick" used by the people can also turn against them; hence, silence can become an instrument of power, terror or mental coercion. In this case: 'thought no longer stands before the infinity of meaning, but it is silenced or forced to comply with the worst' (Le Breton, 1997: 94).

Our perspective will be quite different. First of all, we will be dealing with silence as a *shared practice* rather than as a technique of the self. Historians have been interested in "inner silence" as a space where individuality elaborates itself (Corbin 1994), by describing certain categories of individuals, such as monks, who are silent by antonomasia, rule or life choice. Ethnologists' studies of the muffled world of nuns (Sbardella 2010) have shown that for the latter, to make silence is a way of controlling the body in order to establish a metaphysical connection with the Divine. This issue proposes to explore many other social universes where silence is exhibited less frequently as a collective practice, or as a shared rule, even if it is equally important and structuring: what place does it hold within practices such as dance, music, art, pedagogy, politics or the social science knowledge fabric? A reflection of this scope ought to be interdisciplinary: anthropology, sociology, history, philosophy, art theory, musicology, epistemology will thus be summoned to achieve a better understanding of silence as a practice, a "making" and a know-how.

In order to complete this program, three primary lines of research have been defined; they are not exclusive of other possible approaches to the question of silence, and are presented as orientations or avenues to be explored first and foremost.

Thematic Axes

1. Ethnographing the Silence

The project of an "anthropology of silence" has been essentially based on literary materials in which silence appears as a dimension of being to be preserved in an intimacy far from the "din" of modernity (Le Breton 1999). On the contrary, this issue aspires to found an *ethnography of silence* as a method of investigation and as a theoretical approach where silence is no longer viewed as a mere vestige of a bygone era, but as a space of modernity, which the social sciences should invest. What are the fields of silence today? And how can they be "ethnographed"?

Ethnography involves focusing on the empirical dimension of social phenomena, apprehended through a set of observation techniques complemented by spoken interactions with informants. But they may resist this approach either because they are beings and entities that cannot speak - e.g. in the case of ritual or cult objects - or because they do not want to speak - e.g. in the case of members of criminal organizations, of secret societies, or of groups that wish, for various reasons, to keep the nature of their practice secret - or because what they do operates on other registers of language - e.g. in the case of artists or dancers. As anthropology stumbles over its limits, it also discovers its own heuristic power, for these limits often guide toward a fresh comprehension and understanding of our objects of study. This issue intends to contribute to the production of methodological tools for approaching fields where speech as an instrument of interaction is lacking, thereby encouraging us to explore new avenues, sensitive to the multitude resources of social action and communication modalities. The unspoken, the tacit, the implicit, the hidden word, the opacity of the signifier, the lie, interpreted as so many *figures of silence*, constitute an essential part of our social life that this thematic issue proposes to explore through the ethnographic method.

This issue proposes to take a new stance toward our work in its double dimension, not only as researchers investigating silence, but also as researchers writing about silence. Does writing about silence necessarily mean translating it *into words*? What are the implications of this operation, which is not only a translation but also an ontological transformation of our object? In other words, how do we deal with the gap between things as they are and as they exist in silence, and the words we use to describe them? One may also ask whether the beings or entities "about which we do not talk" (Williams 1995) really exist (i.e., as social and socializable realities), or whether these "invisible things" (Puccio-Den 2019b) are not in part created by these operations of translation or verbalization (Hirschauer 2006).

2. To Make Silence, to Make Bonds

Countering the current image of silence as a "wall", we will focus on the bonds created by the / in silence. In an article entitled "L'art d'infléchir les âmes", ("The Art of Inflecting Souls") Anne-Christine Taylor analyzes the place of silent songs in the making of symbolic kinship ties (Taylor 2017). It is well known that the bonds sealed by silence are all the stronger than they are not made explicit, all the stronger than they are not said (Jamin 1977). And recent scholarship has shown that they pass through the senses, the emotions (Bénéï 2008), the implicit, the unsaid (Bianchi, Sbardella 2019), and the tacit (Perret 2016). These bonds involve not only humans establish with fellow humans, but also the relations that humans forge with non-humans (animals, plants, metaphysical beings). this issue encourages reflections on the ontology of these beings based on ethnographic descriptions of the interactions between all these actants.

Research endeavors prior to ours explored secrecy as a "process", drawing attention to its structuring power, which confers "consistency to collectives through the production of cultural intimacy" (Adell 2014). This issue will further explore this heuristic approach by opening such reflection onto silence. Secrecy and silence do not overlap, nevertheless they share a common feature: they both go beyond the sphere of speech; they both are shaped by performative social practices. In her fieldwork into witchcraft in the bocage, Jeanne Favret-Saada already pointed out the devastating violence of the unsaid emerging through the silent exchanges with her interlocutors (Favret-Saada 1977). Other works have already been devoted to the unspeakable in acts of extreme violence and traumatic experiences (*Mots* 1998). But a great deal more work is needed in order to understand how to deal with the

violence of what is not openly expressed in ethnographic interaction, as well as the implicit violence exuding from the confessions of those who seem to have nothing to say, "or so little" regarding mass-atrocity crimes attributed to them (Rechtman 2020: 40).

3. Arts of silence, silence in art

Another side of the silence this issue proposes to explore is its political dimension, but in a somewhat different way from what has already been done. Historians of antiquity questioned the place of silence in political discourse (Montiglio 1994). More recently, the special issue of the journal *Mots*, devoted to "Les langages du politique" (103/2013), focused on the uses and interpretations of silence in contemporary political discourse. Our main concern in this issue of *Ethnologie française* is not so much to reflect on "What silence means"; our focus is, rather, on what silence can *make* politically. In history, this leads us to study "a pragmatics of silence", a pragmatics "codified, even dramatized, which generates a social hierarchy of those who keep silent or those who silence" (Debiais 2019: 26). However, the political dimension of silence is as ambiguous as it is reversible: is it the daily lot of the dominated party or the weapon of the dominant party? Is it a sign of the resistance of the people against the state (following the current interpretation of the *omerta*), or rather a sign of the hold that some people have on other people by switching between the subjugating power of speech and the paralyzing power of silence?

These themes have already been explored in studies on political theater (Boulanger 2010), or in theorizations that, like the MGT or Muted Groups Theory (Ardener 1975), point to a highly topical question, as part of the feminist turn of the 1970s: what words can the dominated find to express themselves if not those they find in the language shaped by the dominant? Here too, it is the possible reversal of positions that will interest us, likely to make the usual pattern of "silence of the dominated" versus "language of the dominant" more dynamic: what if silence was precisely the wording through which the dominated party try to reverse the balance of power established by the dominant party? The pioneering studies that ethnologists have devoted to nuns (Sbardella 2010) have shown that silence is a way of controlling the body in order to establish a metaphysical connection with the divine. But the silent work of the nuns on relics is also an emblematic example of the manipulation of the traces or "remains" of the divine by women who, in so doing, create the conditions for a privileged bond with a (metaphysical) order from which they have been excluded by the ecclesiastical paternal hierarchy. Would silence, then, be the art of appropriating power of those who, literally, are deprived of it?

Switching from silence as an art to silence in art, when art historians of the Middle Ages approached silence, they were interested in the shape it took in the past, whether in images, thoughts, representations or practices (Vincent 2017). Some of these works have recently studied silence in its "positive" dimension (Debiais 2019: 11) creating other modes of expression, other modes of communication, and original ways of being together. In medieval art history, the absence of writing can be examined as another form of language, likely to be deciphered. To study silence is not to study the absence of language, as well as to study emptiness is not to study an absence of image: this is the contribution of Elina Gertsman's work, which invites us to think "in its plenitude" about what art history had long considered to be an "emptiness" (Gertsman 2018). If the semiotics of silence has already been noted (Barthes 1971), its sensory, affective, emotional, phenomenological dimension remains obscure for the social sciences, a dimension largely exploited by artists, architects (*Forms of Silence*, 2016), and musicians (Laborde 2001). This issue intends to further develop those

aspects inspiring articles based on empirical cases or works that exploit silence as a living matter of creation.

Schedule

Proposals for contributions (title and abstract of 4,000 to 6,000 signs, including bibliographical references, in French or English) are expected by **January 15, 2021**. They will mention the main axes of demonstration as well as the material sources (surveys and/or archives) mobilized, and will be accompanied by a bio-bibliographic profile of the author.

They should be submitted to the coordinator, Deborah Puccio-Den: deborah.puccio-den@ehess.fr.

The selection of proposals will be communicated to the authors in **February 2021**.

The final texts (from 35,000 to 70,000 characters max., spaces and bibliography included) must be submitted before **August 31, 2021**.

The publication of this issue of *Ethnologie française* is scheduled for fall 2022.

The formatting of the selected articles will be based on the guidelines for contributors the authors of the journal: <http://ethnologie-francaise.fr/proposer-un-varia/>.

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