

Our Lives as They are Told

Interview with Sylvain Bourmeau

by Pauline Peretz

Media, publishing, photography, theatre and political discourse are now shifting their attention to the lives of ordinary people. Does this move serve the need to better understand contemporary society? Sylvain Bourmeau, an actor and observer of these changes, offers some explanations.

Sylvain Bourmeau is an associate professor at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales (EHESS). His seminars focus on the connections between journalism and the social sciences. He is also the producer of the radio programme “La Suite dans les idées” on France Culture, a forum for discussion of the leading works of social science and literary criticism. He is the editor of *AOC*, an intellectual daily online news media that will be launched in January 2017. He was deputy editorial director and an editorial writer for the daily newspaper *Libération*, having previously been a journalist at *Mediapart* and deputy director of the *Inrockuptibles* cultural pages. Sylvain Bourmeau has long reflected on the links between journalism, the social sciences and literature, three fields that are generally considered separate, and on the question of the political and literary representation of society.

Books&Ideas: Nowadays there are a great many projects aimed at discussing people’s lives – whether on the radio “*Les pieds sur terre*”; “*Sur les docks*”, “*À ton âge*”); on the internet (*legrandr-histoiresvraiesdevendee.com*, *direletravail.coop*, *la-zep.fr*); in publishing (*Plein jour*); in photography (*La France vue d’ici* project); or on stage (*Live Magazine* and the *Compagnie des hommes* shows). How do you explain this proliferation of initiatives?

Sylvain Bourmeau: If I had to highlight one reason, I would first mention people’s increasingly shared awareness of the challenge of representing the world in which we live. The causes are rooted in the extraordinarily rapid changes taking place in social practices, which are themselves sometimes the result of changes in the uses of new technologies. But they are also rooted in the

social sciences, journalism and literature, where specialisation mechanisms have been implemented: fewer and fewer journalists are interested in “the big picture”; fewer and fewer writers set themselves the task of grasping things on a macroscopic scale; and researchers began to work on increasingly microscopic subjects, sometimes losing sight of how their subject was connected to others.

There are political causes, as well. Politics works in a hyper-professional way; it has become increasingly autonomous from the other spheres of activity, and its capacity to represent society as a whole has been weakened as a result. The 21st April 2002 (when Jean-Marie Le Pen qualified for the second round of the presidential election) played a vital role in that newfound awareness. I remember I wrote at the time in *Les Inrockuptibles* that political parties were full of spokespersons but that they would do better off having more people that really listened. Their discourse was increasingly out of synch with that of the people living in this country. The growing gap between the institutional representations of the contemporary world and what was felt to be its more complex, contrasting reality created unease. The feeling was expressed in an extremely naive and clumsy way in the political world – I am thinking of Jean-Pierre Raffarin’s expression “*la France d’en bas*” (“the little people of France”), which exacerbated things instead of fixing them, but was based on that feeling. It was widely shared by very different people who felt duty-bound to try to represent society, ranging from the prime minister to an unknown artist, social science researchers, journalists – whose professional mission is to understand society as a whole – and writers.

Books&Ideas: What could in your opinion reduce that gap?

Sylvain Bourmeau: We cannot limit ourselves to juxtaposing microscopic perspectives; we also need to take the risk of adopting a perspective that is much more all-encompassing. There are several ways to go about producing this wider picture: we can either rise into theoretical generality, or we can create what I call, in the field of literature, “Google Earth literature”, with its very powerful micro-macro effects (but very few people attempt this because it is so difficult); or else we can imagine devices that are characterised by the systematicity of their procedures. This type of device makes it possible to connect among them the micro-samples produced through the same methods: we create a means of making addition possible by rendering things that are naturally heterogeneous more homogeneous.

During the Great Depression, the American government was incapable of grasping the economic difficulties and poverty that the country was experiencing. It implemented a series of programmes aimed at objectifying those realities, from statistical surveys to far more qualitative approaches in the area of public policy and the social sciences, but also books or art pieces by artists supported by the state. This American experience can serve as a point of reference to be explored. However, there are other examples from well before the 1930s crisis, as shown by Luc Boltanski in his book on investigations, which focuses on that point at which different methods

of police, literary and social science investigation arise simultaneously.¹ another example is inventories – I am thinking of August Sander’s work, which is central to contemporary photography, and that of the Bechers, who even now continue to influence Charles Freger in his photos of majorettes, sumo wrestlers and Breton women. The series, as methods of grasping reality, are a rather reassuring device, for we can easily understand the scientific logic governing the choice, the framework, the regularity... In all these works we can observe the same attempts at objectification, which are based on the same type of relationship with knowledge. Today we have reached a point at which art is trying to break away from increased subjectification in order to implement forms of objectification.

Books&Ideas: Are we seeing the same objectification process in literature?

Sylvain Bourmeau: For a long time now, literature in France has had a severe complex vis-à-vis Anglo-American literature. It has often been written that the *nouveau roman*, through its very particular forms of objectification, broke certain things in French literature, and that, fundamentally, a primary quality had been lost: the ability to tell stories. At the same time, a writing method was stigmatised, which was imprecisely referred to as autofiction, and French authors were criticised for being too self-centred. Without realising that the most interesting of these authors used objectification – I am thinking of Annie Ernaux and Hervé Guibert, who were among the first to do so, then Didier Eribon and Christine Angot, whom I consider to be one of the most social novelists of our time. This false debate and unfounded criticism had the effect of feeding a real complex that led a number of authors to feel required to get out there and experience things, to grapple with reality. I was among those who, in the 1990s, urged French writers to write books with “real doses of reality in them,” naively no doubt. Later, we saw that type of project develop. The work of Maylis de Kerangal probably provides one of the most illustrative examples of this type of method, with a very heavy investment in research and preparation before writing.

Books&Ideas: Nowadays are those writers paying more attention to the social sciences or have they taken an autonomous approach?

Sylvain Bourmeau: I do not get the impression that many writers read the social sciences. Some do, such as François Bégaudeau, Joy Sorman and Mathias Enard. Some of them want to. But it is still not a very natural approach. It is very different for documentary filmmakers. Both Fred Wiseman and Raymond Depardon, for example, have read widely the social sciences, even if they sometimes choose to distance themselves from them. Depardon has read all of Erving Goffman’s work and he asked the geographer Michel Lussault to write the preface to his book on France². We see this move toward the social sciences more on the part of literary critics, who have begun to read the social sciences more or have even branched out into the social sciences

¹ Luc Boltanski, *Énigmes et complots. Une enquête à propos d'enquêtes*, Paris, Éditions Gallimard, “NRF Essais” collection, 2012, see Nicolas Auray, “La sociologie en rouge et noir”, *La Vie des idées*, 16 November 2012, www.laviedesidees.fr/La-sociologie-en-rouge-et-noir.html

² Raymond Depardon, Michel Lussault, *La France*, Pointdeux, 2012.

– Marielle Macé and Frédérique Aït-Touati, for example, who work in literary studies. The relationship between social sciences and literary studies became somewhat distorted in the 1980s and 1990s, when there was a great deal of mistrust towards “cultural studies”, which entered the field of social sciences too hastily; they are growing closer again now, particularly somewhere like the EHESS.

Books&Ideas: Writers sometimes highlight situations or social types that the social sciences have not yet seen. Should literature be considered a place of privileged knowledge of society?

Sylvain Bourmeau: There is nothing new about that. Sociological notations can be found in classical authors. Many authors have given examples that have made sociologists think. The work of Goffman and Bourdieu contains many quotes from Proust and Balzac. For me, the contemporary author who comes closest to a vast ambition is Michel Houellebecq. He stands out in relation to many other authors for his capacity to take on major accounts of the evolution of society. There is something very Tocquevillian in his approach. In my view he is the only one capable today of giving a literary version of the great fresco of history and of the theoretical interpretation offered by political philosophy. Beyond that fresco lies the problem of reflecting on social issues and tackling them from a number of angles. Once again, I want to mention the work of Christine Angot, whose books deal with two questions: position in the social hierarchy (and the everyday implications of these small differences) and the racial question to which she has given priority in her work as a result of changes in her personal life. Living among black people made her see things she had never seen before in French society, and she set herself the task of portraying those experiences in her books. For her that is indissolubly a literary and political objective.

Books&Ideas: What changes have the social sciences undergone in France? Can we talk about a renewal of ethnography?

Sylvain Bourmeau: I am struck by the fact that a great many young sociologists continue to go out into the field. We are not always aware of this because their monographic research is not systematically published in book form, since publishers believe they do not sell as well as more theoretical books. We should also welcome the fact that some people in very senior positions in the academic world are still working on the field. This is true of Didier Fassin, particularly in his investigations into the police and prison conditions. In a chapter on racial discrimination in his book *Juger, réprimer, accompagner*³, he gets around the problem of racial accounting caused by the impossibility of producing ethnic statistics in France: by producing statistics on an institution that is fairly representative of other prisons, he reaches conclusions that the French public sphere has not assessed yet. When he shows that a black man is more likely to go to prison in France than in the United States he goes against what most of us believe. This kind of approach, based on an ethnography, is reminiscent of the sociological tradition of the Chicago School, founded in the early 20th century by a former journalist turned sociologist,

³ Didier Fassin *et al.*, *Juger, réprimer, accompagner. Essai sur la morale de l'État*, Paris: Le Seuil, 2013.

Robert E. Park, who acted in the sociology department of the University of Chicago rather like the editor-in-chief that he had been for so long in large American cities, sending his doctoral students out into the field as he had once done with his reporters. That led to a considerable number of monographs on the city, some of which are now classics of sociology, such as *The Gang* by Frederic Thrasher (1927), *Taxi-Dance Hall* by Paul Cressey (1932) and *Street Corner Society* by William F. Whyte (1943).

Books&Ideas: Isn't it regrettable that most of those monographs are unknown to the general public?

Sylvain Bourmeau: The problem really lies in the fact that these books have not been publicised. Of all the major general publishing houses that publish the social sciences, La Découverte is about the only one that publishes this kind of research. Some publishers do so occasionally – Fayard published Paul Pasquali's book on exam preparation classes in a large provincial high school.⁴ But most of the books these houses publish are theoretical. And when they are the result of research, these are much larger researches (for example the important work on the market by Laurence Fontaine, published in the Eric Vigne collection by Gallimard⁵) rather than monographs. Obviously I am not questioning the usefulness of publishing these theoretical books as well, because we also need to see the big picture. But that should not be at the expense of monographs.

Another problem is that many of these sociological or ethnographical studies are flawed not because of the quality of the information gathered but on account of the difficulty in translating their results into an accessible, convincing form of writing. To my mind, the greatest sociologists are also great writers – and I would mention Erving Goffman again. It sometimes feels like the only possible model for making a literary work out of a survey is Lévi-Strauss' *Tristes tropiques*. This is problematic, because that is an outdated model. Authors who undertake literary research often observe themselves writing. If they read the most recent literature, they would write differently and use other literary devices. There is a real timidity with regard to literature. Personally, I like to get my hands on social science books that are real works of literature. A book is not just about style; it is also a construction, the connection of different spheres, the montage of various techniques – one only needs to read the work of Georges Didi-Huberman, Patrick Boucheron, Philippe Artières or Arlette Farge. For historians, that literary tradition is more established, and we are continuing to see what the path carved out by Michel Foucault has produced.

⁴ Paul Pasquali, *Passer les frontières sociales : Comment les "filières d'élite" entrouvrent leurs portes*, Fayard, 2014. See Catherine Marry, "Les cloisons de l'ascenseur social", *La Vie des idées*, 17 June 2015, <http://www.laviedesidees.fr/Les-cloisons-de-l-ascenseur-social.html>

⁵ Laurence Fontaine, *Le marché. Histoire et usages d'une conquête sociale*, Gallimard, 2014. See Arnault Skornicki, "Le marché, entre domination et émancipation", *La Vie des idées*, 16 January 2015, <http://www.laviedesidees.fr/Le-marche-entre-domination-et-emancipation.html>

Books & Ideas: What are the main differences between the modes of knowledge proposed by literature and the social sciences on the one hand, and the journalistic mode on the other?

Sylvain Bourmeau: In journalism, what gives a story its newsworthiness is its exceptional, deviant, singular nature. Canadian criminologists showed this very well 20 years ago in *Visualizing Deviance*.⁶ By studying deviance, they observed that the work of visualisation carried out by the press is intrinsically biased on account of its prejudice of looking only at trains that arrive late and not at those that arrive on time. A sociologist studying the SNCF has no methodological or scientific reason to favour one over the other. Journalism, meanwhile, does have that bias. In my opinion, a novelist is closer to a sociologist, even if he or she might be tempted by heroisation and singularisation. Nowadays, literature has largely rid itself of this picaresque temptation. The work of the media, however, remains very much trapped by it. For me, that media bias plays a pivotal role in the gap that exists between the world as it is and the world as we represent it. We are continually subjected to representations that are prejudiced by that prism. Hence the need to oppose them with other forms of representation.

In newsrooms there is often the idea that, in order to counterbalance that intrinsic bias, positive information must be generated (hence *Libération's* “*Libé des solutions*”, a solution-based journalism initiative). But that is not the question, for it is not about being optimistic rather than pessimistic. It is not a question of value but, rather, a mode of objectification. The other way to counter that bias is to publish series that aim to offer a cross-section of the country at a given time. At Mediapart, we drew a straight line across the map of France, along which we launched a whole series of reportages; we also traced a “crisis route” for launching reports,⁷ and another time our editorial team partly relocated to an average – in other words, typical – town called Roanne, in the Loire.⁸ We were looking for an objective space, but bias crept into every single story.

Books & Ideas: And yet, does journalism not give ordinary people an important role?

Sylvain Bourmeau: Through the concept of “human interest stories”, Robert E. Park showed that the role of the press was to embody and represent through characters. Embodiment often operates as a form of heroisation, the heroisation of the guilty party or of the victims, in the case of a news item, for example. Park shows how these articles make a powerful contribution to social integration, by highlighting social norms, whether explicitly or implicitly. An example of heroisation is the series of portraits that *Le Monde* devoted to the victims of the terrorist attacks of 13th November and later those in Nice. We should question the rise of this heroic figure: the victim. The current obsession with victims seems indicative of something in the society in which we live: where Foucault sought out the infamous parricide Pierre Rivière, many contemporary journalists (and authors) focus on the victims.

⁶ Patricia Baranek, Janet Chan and Richard Ericson, *Visualizing Deviance*, Open University Press, 1987.

⁷ <https://blogs.mediapart.fr/edition/sur-la-route-de-la-crise/article/140109/sur-la-route-de-la-crise-nos-etapes>

⁸ <https://www.mediapart.fr/journal/france/010610/mediapart-sinstalle-roanne-jeleve-mon-enfant-seule-avec-1000-euros>

Books & Ideas: Is journalism's intrinsic bias you have described exacerbated by current working conditions in the profession?

Sylvain Bourmeau: When, in 1984, as a freelance journalist at *Libération*, I had to write a news item, I used to feel dizzy thinking about all the different ways I could tell that story, knowing that my decision would have an impact on the people involved. The professional organisation of a newspaper does everything to neutralise that feeling of dizziness, otherwise it would be impossible to create a newspaper every day. These questions of responsibility are swept under the carpet in the name of the column to be filled. From time to time a crisis arises because a mistake is made. Then an abyss of perplexity opens up, but is quickly closed again. Unlike doctors or architects, who learn from their mistakes by taking the time to understand what went wrong, journalists have the bad habit of pushing ahead without looking back, and only living in the present.

With few exceptions, journalists are characterised by their lack of reflexivity. The acquired know-how has been automated. They sleep-walk through their work and no longer ask themselves the essential questions: To whom are they speaking? What must they retain of what they have been told? Most of them no longer see that their article has been made possible by decisions relating to editing and narrative effects, or by micro-fictions. They do not ask themselves if they could have told the story differently or have seen something else – all of these are questions that sociologists and writers ask themselves constantly. The writers I know well have a high level of reflexivity. They are people who spend most of their time thinking about their gestures and their positioning.

When they want to break these automatisms, journalists carry out a search for style without seeing the forms of aestheticisation of the raw material that are problematic. They have no complex with regard to sociologists, but they are very hung-up about writers. They envy their style, but they do not see their reflexivity. Naturally there are counter-examples, the finest being Jean Hatzfeld, who has written very important books both in terms of investigation and his work on language.

Books&Ideas: Does narrative journalism offer a possible alternative? What other forms can be imagined?

Sylvain Bourmeau: Unfortunately, the media ecosystem is less favourable to long forms than ever before. The only way to publish them is to find a way into the publishing circuit, which the *revue XXI* realised. Undeniably, there is a demand from one sector of the readership, probably readers of literature. These attempts made in the French editorial field (the non-fiction books published by the Éditions du Sous-Sol also come to mind) are a sign that we need to update our representation of the world and catch up, particularly with what is happening in the United States. "Escaping" through fiction is fine (even if it is clearly not the sole virtue and purpose of good fiction!) but we also need realistic representations, which does not contradict the fact that these might be interesting from a literary point of view, as shown by these forms of narrative journalism. However, it would be tragic if literature were to boil down to fiction on

the one hand and narrative non-fiction on the other. It is increasingly difficult, but literature must try to multiply its forms, to transgress those that already exist and to invent new ones. It has a lot to gain from looking at what is happening in the world of contemporary art, whose aesthetic point of reference seems to me to be richer and bolder. From that perspective, one of the challenges for literature lies in the area of renewed, subverted forms of poetry, and gestures that are likely to participate – in other ways than by (wrongly) endorsing the tired form of the classical novel – in a critical knowledge of the world.⁹

In the media world in which we live, what we need most are texts that do not seek to join the flow but, rather, to stem it – texts that introduce verticality and stop time. We need to find a way to realise the marvellous utopia of Nicholson Baker's hero in *Le point de l'orgue*: having the ability to stop time by clicking one's fingers. We also need to be able to insist upon the notions of authorship and work. One should not wonder if the author is a journalist or a researcher or a writer, but should read the author's book as a work of literature. There are very few spaces that equate authors from different backgrounds – a few radio programs, a few series of books such as Maurice Olender's "La Librairie du XXI^e siècle". We need to help individuals and texts with multiple trajectories to coexist in the same spaces, much like an ideal democratic assembly.

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⁹ Sylvain Bourmeau's work *Bâtonnage* was published by Stock publishers, on 4 January 2017.