
ARTICLES / ARTÍCULOS

**THE POLITICS OF EVIDENCE IN AN UNCERTAIN WORLD:
EXPERIENCE, KNOWLEDGE, SOCIAL FACTS AND FACTUAL TRUTH**

LA POLÍTICA DE LA EVIDENCIA EN UN MUNDO INCIERTO: EXPERIENCIA,
CONOCIMIENTO, DATOS SOCIALES Y VERDAD FACTUAL

Susana Narotzky¹

Universitat de Barcelona

Received: March 7 2020; Approved: February 12 2021

Citation / Cómo citar este artículo: Narotzky, Susana. 2021. "The Politics of Evidence in an Uncertain World: Experience, Knowledge, Social Facts and Factual Truth". *Disparidades. Revista de Antropología* 76(1): e002. doi: <<https://doi.org/10.3989/dra.2021.002>>.

ABSTRACT: Knowledge is never self-evident and is always a struggle about evidence: what counts and what does not count. Knowledge is part of the politics of evidence. We need to unravel the processes that create truth values in a field of power. Here I wish to address the tension between experience, vernacular knowledge, and evidence as they constitute the foundations of political mobilization during the economic recession in Spain. How is experience valued, and what kind of knowledge about society does it produce? How might we engage with this knowledge as anthropologists trying to understand what social facts are, and the value they have as evidence in political argument and struggle?

KEYWORDS: Evidence; Experience; Knowledge; Social Facts; Factual Truth; Recession; Austerity; Political Mobilization.

RESUMEN: El conocimiento nunca es evidente por sí mismo y es siempre una lucha por la evidencia: lo que cuenta y lo que no cuenta. El conocimiento es parte de la política de la evidencia. Necesitamos desentrañar los procesos que crean valores de verdad en un campo de poder. Aquí deseo abordar la tensión entre la experiencia, el conocimiento vernáculo y la evidencia, ya que constituyen los cimientos de la movilización política durante la recesión económica en España. ¿Cómo se valora la experiencia y qué tipo de conocimiento sobre la sociedad produce? ¿Cómo podemos involucrarnos con este conocimiento como antropólogos/as que intentan comprender qué son los hechos sociales y el valor que tienen como evidencia en la discusión y la lucha políticas?

PALABRAS CLAVE: Evidencia; Experiencia; Conocimiento; Hechos sociales; Verdad fáctica; Recesión; Movilización política.

Copyright: © 2021 CSIC. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0) License.

1 Email: narotzky@ub.edu. ORCID iD: <<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7390-7840>>.

INTRODUCTION

Evidence in anthropology is an issue of knowledge power; it interrogates the value of fieldwork experience and anthropological analysis as evidence in scholarship and politics. Here, I want to focus on how our interlocutors and companions in the field present their lived experience and how they construct shared experience as evidence of a particular situation and as argument for a particular kind of political and economic transformation.

To do so, I will use various vignettes from my fieldwork in Ferrol, an industrial town in Galicia (north Western Spain) during the post-2008 economic recession. My aim here is to contrast the expression of a particular kind of popular or “vernacular” knowledge based on experience with the “expert” knowledge, mostly based on quantitative data and mathematic modelling, that has justified policies of austerity. The questions I pose are of method: how are we, as anthropologist, going to deal with these diverse fields of knowledge? What is the truth-claims and truth-value of experience-based knowledge and what arguments for action does it support? How should we value potentially incommensurable forms of evidence?

The initial section explores how various anthropologists have dealt with the question of evidence by interrogating the value of fieldwork experience and the knowledge it produces. It is followed by a presentation of how particular logics and knowledge claims are produced as evidence in the field and provide arguments for action. This section is based on intermittent fieldwork I have conducted in Ferrol between 2010-2015 embedded in a long term ethnography initiated in 2004. A third section examines the academic debate that questions the value of experience for providing historical evidence. Here the complexity of historical truth emerges as authors engage with the material, social and emotional entanglements of lived reality. To conclude, the article develops the concepts of “factual truth” and “social facts” as flying buttresses supporting experience as evidence in vernacular knowledge arguments leading to action.

FIELDWORK, EXPERIENCE AND EVIDENCE

Anthropologists’ preoccupation with “evidence” refers to the questioning of fieldwork as an experience, and of the authority of the ethnography as a

faithful representation of social life (Asad 1994; Hastrup 2004; Engelke 2008; Borneman and Hammoudi 2009). With some exceptions in the area of applied, public or policy oriented anthropology (Liebow *et al.* 2013), the debate responds to epistemological issues. Talal Asad (1994), for example, compares the emergence of fieldwork as the central tool of anthropological research to the emergence of statistics as a tool of political administration and intervention showing the issues of scale and power that need to be taken into account in anthropological research. Fieldwork experience, he reports, went from an initial meaning derived from the natural sciences where it was “close to the idea of laboratory experimentation” (Asad 1994: 60) to a meaning stressing “the ethnographer’s living experience” representing “social life as a real, experiential whole” (Asad 1994: 61). Analysis of this experience could yield “social types” in the attempt to theorize recurrence as social structure, but these types were not akin to the “representative samples” of statistics. Indeed, statistics became a tool not only for “representing” social life but also for “constructing” it (Asad 1994: 70). As such, the statistical method, its categories and the data it produces are not so much inscriptions of social reality but interventions in and creation of that reality. Asad, then, does not reject the kind of knowledge that fieldwork experience elicits but he underscores the need to expand anthropological tools to include an analysis of the “strong language” of statistics as it is used for political interventions and struggles alike (1994: 78-79). Kirsten Hastrup in 2004 focuses on the anthropologists’ work, and in particular, on ethnographic experience as producing a kind of evidence that is not “external” to the object of study but leads to a valuable form of understanding. Matthew Engelke in 2008 makes a thorough review of the methodological and epistemological questions that anthropologists have raised—often implicitly—around the issue of the argumentative value of fieldwork experience and anthropological analysis as evidence in scholarship and politics.

Political value is also what moves Borneman and Hammoudi (2009: 20) to “reconceptualize the relation between observation, experience and representation as one of dialectical objectification” that underlines the “possibilities of sharing experience that lead to objectivity-in-progress and to interpretations that might converge into historically situated propositions and double-edged critiques. Objectivities-in-progress are possible only if ethnographers

re-establish a critical distance from the people and processes they study". This position introduces the dialectical nature of ethnographic evidence-making during fieldwork as an ongoing sharing of experience, interpretation, and critique between ethnographer and collaborators in the field. The situatedness of interlocutors in historically woven global and local geometries of power is recognized as contributing to the categories for experiencing and understanding, yet the possibility of producing ethnographic accounts that hold truth-value and comparative worth about the people and places studied is validated by the epistemological break that allows the process of dialectical objectification. As I understand it, Borneman and Hammoudi's position expands the concept of "participant objectivation" that Bourdieu (2003) developed for the researcher to become aware of his personal experience as distinct from the object of research. With "dialectical objectification" —unlike Bourdieu's assertion that the people observed in the ethnographic encounter "do not have in their heads the scientific truth of their practice which I am trying to extract from observation of their practice" (Bourdieu 2003: 288)—both parties to the encounter have a stake in proposing truth-value claims as valuable knowledge. Beyond the value of fieldwork experience and the ethnographic account, then, this poses the question of the knowledge value of the reflexive logics of objectification that the people we interact and debate with in the field apply to their experience when analyzing it. How can the problematics they define and the theories they elaborate to answer them be engaged with as reasonings of value in the field of economic and political knowledge?

These questions seem important because Southern Europe's post-2008 recession has had significant political outcomes that rest their force on alleged factual explanations of different kinds. Indeed, those sectors of the population whose expectations of security and stability are now faltering use their experience of declining material wellbeing and social worth as evidence for claiming radical political transformations (of different kinds along a wide spectrum of political ideologies). In this process they often contradict the "expert" evidence used to justify structural adjustment policies. At the same time, expert evidence itself is not consistent. On the one hand, economists, sociologists and political scientists who provide the main scholarly arguments for public policy provide different evidence or use the evidence to claim different

things, according to their methodological, theoretical and political frameworks and objectives. This was the case, for example, during the Greek sovereign debt crisis when the Syriza governments before and after the Referendum of 2015 were guided respectively by Varoufakis and Tsakalotos. As two expert economists that came from a similar tradition in the left they nevertheless increasingly diverged in their analysis and advice as they confronted other experts' theories and policies (such as Schauble's or Dijsselbloem's) during their endless negotiations in the Eurogroup meetings. On the other hand, even within the same framework, say that of the International Monetary Fund, powerful experts and policy advisors often contradict themselves: For example, they support or decry fiscal consolidation and are ambivalent about its results (Kentikelenis, Stubbs and King 2016).² What I wish to focus on, however, is on experience as a kind of evidence and on its value as a knowledge argument for change, as confronted with other —mostly quantitative—forms of evidence that guide policy.

I suggest that facts of power, aimed at systemic social reproduction, explain the lack of social relevance of some life experiences and conceptual logics about livelihood, wealth accumulation, and domination processes. These powerless voices, then, often get "translated" into some authoritative "expert" model —through statistics, the media, or mediators such as the anthropologist or sociologist doing fieldwork and writing theories. As Briggs (2004:177) has pointed out for the political economy of public discourse in explanations of a cholera epidemic in Venezuela, the participation of indigenous people "in public discourse is thus citational, as captured by reporters' questions and photographs". We have seen a similar use of references to ordinary people's accounts in the media in terms of their affective content during the Great Recession in Spain rather than in terms of their analytical value. In this process experience gets co-opted as an illustration within a different domain of discursive authority (Brenneis 1988). The argument I will develop here is that shared "experience"

2 On the expert debate around IMF conditionality see: <<https://www.brettonwoodsproject.org/2019/07/structural-adjustment-is-dead-long-live-structural-adjustment/>>; <<https://www.ohchr.org/en/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=22256&LangID=E>>; <<https://www.brettonwoodsproject.org/2019/06/what-are-the-main-criticisms-of-the-world-bank-and-the-imf/>>. Accessed: 25 Feb. 2020.

is constitutive both of “factual truth” and of “social facts”, two distinct yet similar concepts of the social sciences, and as such it can contribute valuable knowledge and become evidence supporting arguments for political action.

EXPERIENCE AS EVIDENCE IN ACTION

I started fieldwork in the town of Ferrol in Galicia (NW Spain) in 2004, well before the 2008 financial crisis, at a time when jobs in industry were dwindling but other employment, mainly in services and construction, was available. The town grew in the 18th century around a shipyard for the Navy and developed an industrial vocation with a strong union movement. In the second half of the 20th century the re-structuring of the shipyards resulted in high unemployment, early retirement and a shift to service sector unskilled jobs (mostly female) and construction related work (mostly male). Easy credit resulting from the European Monetary Union and the euro fueled consumption at the turn of the century, however. When the Spanish housing bubble burst following the financial crisis, unemployment hit record highs, credit dried out, and mortgage foreclosures became an impending menace for many. Austerity measures defunded public services and constrained benefits, making it very difficult for many people to get by without the help of older kin, charity and solidarity networks (Narotzky 2016). The period I will analyze refers to the post-2008 moment, especially from 2010 on, after the banking crisis exploded in Spain.

I will present here several propositions that encapsulate my interlocutors’ construction of *experience as evidence* and the claims for redress or reparations that this evidence supports. The evidence is based on shared experience that describes what they understand as factual truth and that constitutes the foundation for a political analysis that aims at mobilizing political action. It is evidence “of” a concrete reality affecting them, and evidence “for” calling a particular kind of action.

Starting in 2010 but increasingly during the period between 2012 and 2015 —when austerity measures were strongly felt—I encountered the proposition that [*Austerity degrades and humiliates*]. My interlocutors recurrently put forward as evidence their individual and collectively shared experience of unemployment, deprivation, dispossession, state ne-

glect, disrespect, and dependence. These facts were embodied in their direct lived experience of diminishing income opportunities (and the experience of friends and family whom they observed and spoke to, as well as case stories that appeared in the media) that degraded their human worth. At the same time, the media printed official statistics of unemployment and other indices of diminishing quality of life, such as the housing foreclosure crisis. The coupling of experience and statistical information was constructed as sufficient evidence of the effects of the financial crisis and its handling by authorities through the imposition of austerity measures. This verbalized *evidence of* produced experience as “truth claims” that constituted the foundation for calls to action. Most calls to action referred to different forms of “solidarity” underlining the connection between shared experience and collective mobilization. The action call was also based on experience and produced *evidence for*; it could be analytically summarized in the proposition [*Solidarity against austerity will bring dignity*]. Let me now present María’s story gathered in 2013.

María is a young divorced mother of two teenage children. She lost her home through forced eviction because she could not pay the mortgage after becoming unemployed; she went back to her parents’ apartment with her two children. She speaks of the pressure it put on her parents’ lives and on their retirement pension and she wonders how this family solidarity will be possible in the future, if the government reforms the public pension system: “I will never have a pension... I will never be able to do for my children what my parents are doing for me.” The experience of relying on her father’s modest pension for a living develops a logical argument: if the pension fails in the future, a crucial means of livelihood disappears. She fears increased deprivation in the future because of austerity measures restructuring the pension system (Narotzky and Pusceddu 2020). Here, her experience of retirement public pensions as the main family income that allows family solidarity is evidence of the danger of destitution in the future.

Speaking about austerity cuts in public education María says: “I didn’t finish high school, but even I know that the teacher is teaching them crap. I go there and tell the teachers ‘are you kidding me? My children don’t even know the basics!’” She attributes this neglect to a conspiratorial strategy that aims to render working class children unskilled, useless, and

pushed out to the margins of the labor force. Briggs (2004) has analyzed how conspiratorial theories can be interpreted as struggles aimed at debunking official regimes of truth in an unequal field of communication. For María, educational deterioration is a process that voids the substance of liberal citizenship. Her experience of state neglect in education is evidence of an ongoing process of political destitution.

María stresses the need to keep self-respect and dignity; she says: “People have to know that you still have dignity, that you still merit the respect of everyone around you, even in the worst situation. When your situation is bad and you are suffering from it, you can truly understand others coming from similar experiences. You feel useful [in solidarity action] because you collaborate, you participate with people who understand the situation, who give you alternatives, give you information. And you feel capable... all this helps you as a person (...) there are people there [in solidarity groups] who will support you, who will make you feel good”. Here a similar experience of suffering is evidence of better understanding, support, and respect, which in turn is evidence for the call to solidarity.

At a collective scale also, solidarity and activism are grounded on the experience of shared suffering and a mutual understanding of the causes that produce it. The evidence produced by this shared experience supports a moral critique of the collusion of state and capital in depriving people from their livelihood and their dignity and, thus, from their humanity. Stating claims for redress in moral terms, makes sense in a context where both political and economic institutions are viewed as liars and deceivers for not providing the wellbeing they promised. The evidence presented constructs moral degradation of institutions—in particular austerity measures and collusion with the financial sector—as the cause for loss of dignity. Claims then are framed in institutional obligations constructed as eminently moral. They address the pledge to care, highlighting the breakdown of social reproduction.

In the mobilizations, people speak of “dignity” as attached to universal social rights and equal access to public services, and vindicate it as a “conquest” of past working class struggles. To claim dignity is to be recognized as having an equally meaningful social position in society. Recognition expresses participation in a social and political community where

individuals hold a valued place as members of an interdependent whole. It is the means to acquire personal worth, while simultaneously creating worth for the collective. Here, the shared experience of deprivation of citizenship rights is evidence of a lack of recognition and respect on the part of government institutions, and evidence of social destitution. Activists mobilize this evidence as justification for reclaiming dignity, through claiming their constitutional and human rights.

On June 2, 2013, activist artist-citizens of this industrial town in Galicia organized a performance installation where they hung all kinds of personal garments on the gates of the shipyards. On the main entrance they displayed a banner with the phrase “*Carga de Dignidad*” (Dignity load) referring to the workers’ slogan “*Carga de trabajo*” (Work load) in demand for new contracts to the shipyards. This action highlighted the connection between work and dignity; it expressed how dignity is tied to work in the everyday experience of people in this part of the world. For the activists, the shared experience of lack of work and of livelihood opportunities was presented as evidence of market failure, it was also evidence of the fact that work and dignity are linked and, ultimately, it justified claiming work and dignity together, as a right to life.

A few days later, on June 12, a representative of the Confederación Intersindical Galega, the regional union, claimed that 120,000 had rallied in the town in a massive union organized demand for work. He added “*É unha manifestación da dignidade, porque digno é o dereito a traballar e vivir na nosa terra*” (It is a demonstration of/for dignity, because dignity is our right to work and live in our land) (Couce 2013). This sentence of a union leader in a labor demonstration expresses the intricate weaving of dignity with the right to work and a life in the homeland. The massive demonstration is also material evidence that people support this argument of dignity linked to work based on shared experience and collective understanding.

Dignity is also the cry that drove people all over Spain in what was defined as “*Mareas*” (tides) in support of public services in the face of austerity cuts and privatization: *Marea Blanca-Sanidad* (White Tide-Health), *Marea Verde-Educación* (Green Tide-Education) and the *Marea de Pensionistas* (the Pensioners’ tide). Tides were extremely important mobilizing forces during the years 2011-2013, and the White Tide mobilizations in Madrid in 2013 stopped at the

time the autonomous community of Madrid's plan to privatize public health services, in what many viewed as the victory of a broad-based citizen movement. These social movements expressed the shared experience of diminishing public support for health, education, and the public pension system. Tides were clearly targeting austerity cutbacks in public services. The metaphor of the tide is telling; it signifies something that cannot be stopped, with immanent energy, a rising tide, an expanding movement, a natural force. These tides rise from the natural force provided by the "event structure" of austerity. Tides are evidence of a collective unstoppable and expanding social movement, and evidence for the justified claim against austerity and privatization.

Tides gave way to the "*Marchas de la dignidad*" (Marches for Dignity). Here dignity was a call to converge around the general claim for basic constitutional and human rights that lawmakers and political institutions recurrently disregarded. The motive of political destitution voiced by María in 2013 was very central to the mobilizations. The mobilization went to the core of the everyday experience of austerity. The "*Marchas de la dignidad*" converged in Madrid on March 22, 2014 (22-M), and gathered according to different sources a total of between 50,000 and 2,500,000 people from different regions of Spain. Under the slogan "*Pan, trabajo, techo y dignidad*" (Bread, Work, a Roof, and Dignity) the marches protested against the experienced effect of the combination of recession and austerity measures as a result of the bailing out of an overleveraged banking system: job loss, mortgage foreclosures, food scarcity, and political destitution. Here, activists used people's experience of unemployment, food deprivation, foreclosures and the growing housing crisis as evidence for claiming the state's responsibility to uphold human and constitutional rights.

Tides and marches both underline "dignity" (recognition, social worth) as the central claim that encapsulates the limits beyond which the "system" is experienced as intolerable. Bread, Work and a Roof are all tied to basic livelihood and express social reproduction at the immediate level of bodies, households, and families. Their absence or deficient provisioning are immediate experiences that are intimate but also public, social and shared. "Work" is a claim to access a means of livelihood but also to retain autonomy through earned income, and agency through "doing".

Similarly, the claims for "bread" and "a roof" focus on immediate social reproduction while pointing at the foundations of social inclusion (as opposed to destitute poverty and homelessness). The tides also refer to past experience, as public goods are the result of a past of collective struggles that are now under attack: public provisioning of quality health care, education, pensions and public services. This past experience of struggle is folded into the present experience of deprivation and understood as a form of dispossession.

Experience here produces the evidence of factual truth claims. Experience is the evidence base for calls to action. Experience when shared is reflexive and analyzed, it produces a logic, a reasonable form of knowledge that struggles for value and authority (Briggs 2004; Brenneis 1988).

EXPERIENCE AS EVIDENCE: THE ACADEMIC DEBATE

In 1991, historian Joan Scott wrote an article on "The Evidence of Experience". Taking the perspective of the "linguistic turn" she engaged in a strong critique of social scientists that depended on "experience" as evidence of difference. She was mostly addressing scholars that relied on accounts of experience of generally marginalized groups "women", "black", "homosexual", or "working class" to challenge mainstream accounts of historical processes. In her view, this methodological position expressed the weaknesses of empiricism, with its primordial reference to a "real" world outside of discourse, and as a corollary was blind to the discursively constructed categories that framed any kind of experience. "When the evidence offered is the evidence of 'experience', the claim for referentiality is further buttressed—what could be truer, after all, than a subject's own account of what he or she has lived through? It is precisely this kind of *appeal to experience as incontestable evidence* and as an originary point of explanation—as a foundation on which analysis is based—that weakens the critical thrust of histories of difference" (1991: 777, emphasis added). Scott was rightly preoccupied with the seemingly pre-given aspect of identity categories that experiential accounts proposed and she underscored the need to historicize the categories that informed experience.

Her article provoked a heated debate but was mostly critiqued on political grounds that stressed the

value of sharing individual embodied experience in order to connect it with a wider problem, eventually empowering and creating the conditions of possibility for active solidarity and resistance (Kruks 2001: 139). These authors were far from naïve empiricists. Rather, they pointed at “the need to listen to such voices” (Pickering 1997: 212) and at how women’s personal narratives, for example, had the potential of unsettling and challenging hegemonic frameworks of meaning. “Women had something very real to complain about: if we assign no truth claims to their words, concepts such as oppression are rendered more opaque, less meaningful” (Sangster 2011: 158). These authors vindicated the value of experience as evidence as a necessity of political analysis and subversive agency. On the one hand, they recuperated the referential aspect of experience narratives as a valid instrument for understanding the oppressive nature of social relations as well as of discursive constructions that contribute to misrepresent them. On the other hand, they asserted the centrality that sharing individual experiences had for objectivizing similarities and producing solidarity and collective agency.

The debate had another –partially connected– expression within the field of Marxist historians and social scientists. Here the focus was on the tension between empiricism vs. theory on the one hand, and experience vs. structure on the other. Although E.P. Thompson became the main protagonist of this struggle with his attack of Althusser’s Marxist structuralism in *The Poverty of Theory* (1978) there were other internal disputes in the field of Marxist historians that revolved around the value of experience both theoretically and politically (Thompson 1978, 1981; Williams 1977, 1983; Samuel 1981; Hall 1981). Thompson understands the epistemology of the historian as “two ‘dialogues’ out of which knowledge is formed: first, the dialogue between social being and social consciousness, which gives rise to experience; second, the dialogue between theoretical organization (in all its complexity) of evidence, on the one hand, and the determinate character of its object on the other”. (1978:32-33). At the same time, he is very clear about the objective of the historical discipline which is “the attainment of that history’s truth”. In his view historical change “actually occurred” and while historiography might misrepresent what happened, nothing can “modify the past’s ontological status” (1978: 40). History’s truth, then, is close to what Arendt (1967) defines as factual truth, an elusive re-

ality that nevertheless should guide both the historian’s work and political debate. And experience, the weaving of moral values and material facts (Thompson 1978: 175) opens the door to a new form of the- orization (1978: 167-8). Moreover, he maintains that “experience has, in the last instance, been generated in ‘material life’” (1978: 171) thereby resting social consciousness in the materiality of social existence and processes.

In a further clarification of the concept of “experience” Thompson introduced a distinction between “social consciousness” –what he defined as “experience II”– and “lived experience” –defined as “experience I”, where “experience” lies “half within social being, half within social consciousness” (Thompson 1981: 405-6). With this, his concept of experience moves close to Raymond Williams “structures of feeling” (1978). In his seminal piece, Williams describes “practical consciousness” as “what is actually being lived, and not only what is thought is being lived (...) a kind of feeling and thinking which is indeed social and material, but each in an embryonic phase before it can become fully articulate (...) a particular quality of social experience” (1978: 131). These are qualitative changes that “do not have to await definition, classification, or rationalization before they exert palpable pressures and set effective limits on experience and on action. Such changes can be defined as changes in *structures of feeling*” (1978: 132).

When trying to define “experience” in his revised version of *Keywords*, however, Williams distinguishes “experience past”, lessons of experience as opposed to innovations, and “experience present”, the full and active awareness that captures the whole consciousness and the whole being. This last form –of which aesthetic and religious expressions are paramount examples– offers experiences “not only as truths, but as the more authentic kinds of truths” (Williams 1985: 90). Without resolving the dialectics between both kinds of experience as he tries to do with “structures of feeling”, he notes here that they are connected and introduces the meaning of “accumulated experience” as something that is consciously present as a reference, close in meaning to Thompson’s “social consciousness” or “experience II”. We could add that accumulated experience can exit the realm of full consciousness as in Bourdieu’s definition of “habitus” as embodied social and cultural dispositions that exert pressures towards the reproduction of a society

(Bourdieu 1980). What seems to emerge from this debate is a tension between an accumulation of experience, producing structures materially and morally constitutive of social consciousness, and an awareness of being, of lived experiences, “experiences to which the fixed forms do not speak at all, which indeed they do not recognize” (Williams 1978: 130).

Koselleck has addressed this complexity through his concept of “sediments of time” where he analytically distinguishes different layers of experience that unfold at different velocities. Similar to Braudel’s (1958) description of the various tempos of history, Koselleck describes three main sediments of time, but he ties them directly to experience. Although he defines history as “the science of experience” (2018a: 4) we find him also debating with the problem of “historical reality” what Thompson described as the “ontological status” of the past. Indeed, “historical reality first constitutes itself in between, before, or after the linguistic articulations that target it” (Koselleck 2018b: 17). Linguistic testimonies are tied to specific situations that produce them yet, at another level, the “reality of history (...) is a product of linguistic possibilities, theoretical pre-givens, and methodological points of access that come together in a narrative of depiction. The result is not a reproduction of past reality but instead (...) the *fiction of the factual*” (2018b: 20, emphasis added). I will return shortly to this fictional form of facticity but let me now get back to the layers of experience that Koselleck describes and in particular to the concept of “surprise” which appears to be close to those of “lived experience” and “practical consciousness” that we have encountered above.

The dimension of experience defined as “singularity” emerges as a surprise from the backdrop of everyday recurrent structures that express accumulated experience. “To experience a surprise means that something happened differently than one had thought. (...) The continuum between previous experience and the expectation of coming events is breached and needs to constitute itself anew.” (Koselleck 2018a: 7) But then, the craft of historians is to find the conditions of possibility of such singular events, that is, to find missed patterns that might explain what is experienced as surprise (Koselleck 2018a: 7). Thompson catches this surprise aspect of experience in his famous quote: “Experience walks in without knocking at the door, and announces deaths, crises of subsistence, trench warfare, unemployment, inflation, geno-

cide. People starve: their survivors think in new ways about the market. People are imprisoned: in prison they meditate in new ways about the law. In the face of such general experiences old conceptual systems may crumble and new problematics insist upon their presence” (Thompson 1978: 9).

These general experiences of surprise are what Koselleck refers to as “event structures” when he describes the commonalities of situations such as trench warfare, which still come to consciousness through concrete combinations of personal cultural and social interpretive frameworks (Koselleck 2018c: 208-9). Surprise disrupts routinized experience and embodied expectations and the shock pushes us to seek meaning to frame the singular experience in a narrative discourse. Following Dilthey, Victor Turner understands this process as one of relating the “pre-occupying present experience” to “past experiences of similar potency” resulting in a relational structure that we call meaning (1986: 36), and this process is mostly one of communication: “experience pushes toward expression, or communication with others” (*Ibid.*: 37). Here we find the entanglement of various dimensions of experience —surprise, routine, accumulated experience, and communication—into the sharing process that produced the evidence of factual truth that Arendt posed as the bedrock of political debate.

Arendt speaks of “factual information” although she stresses the testimonial aspect of the construction of factual truth. For her, “Factual truth (...) is always related to other people: it concerns events and circumstances in which many are involved; it is established by witness and depends upon testimony; it exists only to the extent that it is spoken about, even if it occurs in the domain of privacy.” (1967: 52). The distinction between shared “experience” and “information” is important, however, and revolves around the tension between Arendt’s factual truth and Durkheim’s social facts, around subjective objectification and objective subjectification. Walter Benjamin in his piece *The storyteller* (1936) makes a clear difference between “storytelling” —the ability to exchange experiences—and information —events that are verifiable, plausible and explanatory (2002 [1936]: 147). Storytelling is about sharing experience that is useful without recourse to explanation, it is about “counsel woven into the fabric of real life” in a recurrent manner (*Ibid.*: 146). For Benjamin, after the First World

War communication of experience became almost impossible and, as a result, the wisdom embedded in storytelling—expressing the “epic side of truth”—died out. The war shatters the communicability of experience: “Wasn’t it noticeable at the end of the war that men who returned from the battlefield had grown silent—not richer but poorer in communicable experience?” (Benjamin 2002: 143-4). The shock, the surprise of the war produces what Benjamin defines as “poverty of experience” that is, the inability to seek similar experiences in the past that may induce meaning. While this signs the death of the “epic side of truth” expressed in storytelling, it forces people “to start from scratch; to make a new start” (Benjamin 2005 [1933]: 732). The poverty of experience thus leads to a potential ascetic renewal “beginning anew and with few resources” spearheaded by some creative individuals (*Ibid.*: 735).

The breakdown of experience’s communicability emerges for Benjamin from what Koselleck describes as a collective experience framed in an event structure—trench war; it comes from the total absence of a framework of reference to speak about it and to weave it in an unfolding commonality of life. Storytelling, then, gives way to information. Indeed, if, following Arendt, factual truth cannot emerge without communication of personal experience, still event structures can be ascertained through information of other kinds: material remains and structures, statistical data on populations, formal institutions, etc. Here Durkheim’s social facts appear as another factual dimension that provides a basis for interpretation. Although social facts are constructed by the categories designed and selected by those managing the administration of populations (Desrosières 1993) so are narrative testimonies of experience subject to historically produced cultural categorical frameworks. Dealing with these two dimensions of facticity, one based on experience and shared narratives, the other based on institutional structures, material remains, documentary sources, and accounting categories of aggregation, the anthropologist can produce a form of historical realism akin to the reality of history that Koselleck’s defines as a “fiction of the factual”.

The political power of Arendt’s definition of factual truth, however, rests on the evidence value of experience. Here, as anthropologists, we might consider both the experience of our interlocutors and our own experience in and away from the field, as

we share the coevalness of a globalized world with a hegemonic economic system. The point here is to elicit the evidence claims that people make and to understand how they mobilize this evidence in the struggle to transform the structures that frame their everyday lives.

CONCLUSION: KNOWLEDGE, EXPERIENCE AND FACTS

Hannah Arendt, in her classic piece on “Truth and Politics”, (1967) carefully examined the difference between “factual truth” and its interpretation in order to show the political danger of obliterating the distinction between truth and opinion. She said: “Freedom of opinion is a farce unless factual information is guaranteed and the facts themselves are not in dispute” (1967: 52). While political projects and action rested on the interpretation of facts and on how to deal with them in order to change the world, they had to stand on the solid ground of factual truth. The social sciences, however, have long insisted on the social and cultural construction of the categories that are used to define and describe the “fact”. In this intellectual context, then, can we think of experience as an expression of “factual truth”? Or should we understand it rather as a “social fact”, an entity that emerges from sociality but becomes a force external to it?

Durkheim’s concept of “social fact” is both different from and similar to Arendt’s “factual truth”. Factual truth arises from individual witnesses giving testimony and sharing their conscious knowledge of an experience (Arendt 1967: 52, 56). Social fact, instead, is a collective “thing” unintentionally resulting from human interaction; it then exercises an “exterior” pressure on the individual who may not be fully conscious of it (Durkheim 1967 [1894]). For Durkheim, institutions were the paradigmatic social fact, reflected in statistical patterns and correlations. Social facts would explain social processes in the manner of experimental science, without resorting to the “interior” conscious knowledge that individual actors had of the course of events. To Arendt, individual experience and testimony as shared evidence—even if admittedly unreliable—were central to the construction of factual truth. Instead, they were decried by Durkheim (1975 [1908]) as ineffective and often misleading for understanding social dynamics, structure, and causality. Both authors, however, spoke of the “stubbornness” of facts—social facts and factual truth alike—a

quality of resistance to individual challenge and political lie (Arendt 1967: 78; Durkheim 1967[1894]: 19). Here, I have addressed the tension between these two understandings of facts and their social and political dimensions as a struggle around experience, facts, evidence, and knowledge.

The ethnographic case I have presented reveals the tension between different forms of knowledge that confront each other (often implicitly) in a political struggle for truth. On the one hand, people define factual truth based on their shared experience of everyday harshness under austerity. The collective aspect of the experience, constructed through continuous observation, reflexive analysis and putting in common individually experienced events through narratives—the testimonial aspect that Arendt highlighted—is constitutive of a particular kind of fact. On the other hand, the parameters and models that experts present as evidence justifying structural adjustment (other parameters and models being used for critiquing it) represent the kind of “external” forces that Durkheim would describe as social facts. Here, my focus has been on the kind of knowledge that ordinary lived experience produces and its value as evidence in political argument and struggle. I have addressed the tensions between experience, knowledge, and evidence in their connection with the production and challenge of particular fields of inequality. In parallel, I have presented the complex scholarly debate around the various dimensions and value of “experience” as pertaining to theorizations about “evidence” in social science’s production of knowledge.

Thinking about the value of knowledge that springs from long term communication with fieldwork participants reveals how dependent on vernacular explanations and practices our scholarly knowledge constructs are. It generally also exposes the reality of an epistemological break, a form of distancing, an involuntary objectification of our collaborators’ experiences and understandings. Thus, our own fieldwork experience embodies the tension between factual truth and social facts even as it becomes the basis of most anthropological knowledge.

While experience often produces a form of knowledge that is deemed less valuable than the macroeconomic abstract models allegedly guiding policy, it is a potent mobilizing instrument based on facts, social forces, and argumentative logic. The testimony of experience challenges the authority of expert knowledge that gives

arguments to the state for imposing its destructive solutions “against all evidence”. In many of my interlocutors’ discourses, “politicians” —policymakers— are pictured as out of touch with ordinary people’s everyday reality (i.e. with their experience of deprivation and loss of entitlements): to them, it is clear that those in power follow a personal agenda made evident through collusion and corruption linking high-ranking agents of government, financial institutions, and “the rich”. Likewise, an increasingly precarized population perceives economic neoliberal “expert” knowledge, with its insistence on fiscal deficit control and the benefits of austerity for rebalancing the budget, attracting investment, fostering growth and therefore wellbeing, as obviously wrong (i.e. incongruous with their real life experience). The fact that it retains enough knowledge authority in the eyes of policy makers —both in Spain and the European Union— is itself evidence of economic and political powers’ blatant disregard for ordinary people’s livelihoods and wellbeing.

On reflection —and supported by all kinds of alternative readings—our interlocutors’ analyses view governments as hostage to a dominant school of economic thought (glossed over as neoliberal) that privileges corporative wealth’s interests and its representatives and widens the gap of inequality. They counter with their collective experience as providing evidence of the failure of mainstream economic solutions and express this commonality of experience through many massive demonstrations apparently to no avail. However, in 2019, the stubbornness of this factual truth found its way to the final report of a parliamentary commission (Spain) investigating the management of the crisis by the financial actors and supervisors: the report found them responsible for the “harm and suffering” inflicted to a majority of people with their policies.³ At this point, through official for-

3 Boletín General de las Cortes generales, Congreso de los Diputados, XII legislatura, Serie D: General, nº481, 17 de enero de 2019. Comisión de Investigación sobre la crisis financiera de España y el programa de asistencia financiera. *Dictamen de la Comisión y votos particulares*. <http://www.congreso.es/portal/page/portal/Congreso/Congreso/SalaPrensa/NotPre?_piref73_7706063_73_1337373_1337373.next_page=/wc/detalleNotaSalaPrensa&idNotaSalaPrensa=32611&anyo=2019&mes=2&pagina=1&mostrarvolver=S&movil=null> accessed February 25, 2020. The report of the commission was validated by the Congress of Deputies <<https://www.elperiodico.com/es/economia/20190228/congreso-aprobacion-informe-crisis-financiera-7329224>>. Accessed: 25 Feb. 2020.

malization, their experience was vindicated not only as factual truth but also as responding to social facts.

The kind of factual truth that our interlocutors provide with their testimonies is validated through shared embodied experience and practice in a particular social context, but it is also constructed in relation to other kinds of information that provides social facts. It aims at producing a framework of valuation different from the one that has provided the evidence for designing austerity policies. This factual truth expresses multiple scales of power and struggle, and underlines ambivalence and ambiguity even as it seeks to state common evidence. People tell their stories to each other, they read the paper or watch television in a bar and comment the information provided (often statistical but also of other narrative voices) as they weave in their stories. They analyze and theorize; they debate with other more powerful forms of knowledge. The truth that emerges is complex and changing but it converges in simple truth-claim propositions that support collective mobilization.

Evidence is always of / for something else; it refers to a reality beyond discourse where individual and collective experience—with the categories that frame it discursively—are relationally produced in the struggle for the material and immaterial resources that make social life possible. Evidence emerges from experience, whether the direct embodied experience of factual truth shared through stories of testimony or the indirect disembodied experience that emerges from recording instances of socially constructed categories providing social facts. But evidence is also a knowledge argument for designing projects of change. Evidence is a will to assert a logical pattern: it is presented as proof leading to making a decision, the correct one or just the better decision, and taking action. As such, it is also a struggle for power, often a moral power that might reasonably ground a particular project of society.

Analyzing the procedures of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), headed by Desmond Tutu, Barbara Cassin (2014) proposes a reappraisal of the value of sophistic philosophy for a performative understanding of the truth as politically and pragmatically oriented. In her view “it is not an origin-truth, it is a result-truth. Nothing is already there... being is an effect of saying” (Cassin 2014:269). Her position underlines political intent while refusing ontological status to the past, an as-

sertion that is only partially supported by her appraisal of the truth dimensions elicited by the Commission. Indeed, she explains that the TRC worked with four connected notions of truth, which are explicitly rhetorical notions: (1) “factual” or “forensic” truth, (2) “personal” and “narrative” truth, (3) “social” truth of a dialogue, a confrontation and, finally, (4) truth that “cures” and “restores”, “the truth at which one decides to stop, that which is enough for producing a consensus... to construct the *rainbow nation*” (Cassin 2014: 269-70). I find this analysis of pragmatic dimensions of truth useful even if I disagree with the initial assertion that there is no reality beyond or without language. It represents a political viewpoint of the construction of factual truth—as Arendt understands it—and uses the sophistic rhetorical perspective to propose what I would describe as a weak form of referentiality: the objective is not to arrive at the “truth” as expression of an ontological reality, but to attain “enough of the truth” for grounding the better political action.

As anthropologists we are aware that evidence is constructed by using particular devices, defining significant categories, and by the structural constraint of institutions and powerful actors. However, we seek to understand how this happens: what kinds of relationships exist between individual lives, collective beliefs, material forces, and the construction of hegemonic evidentiary frameworks that drive social reproduction. We try to give equal relevance to “vernacular” and “expert” knowledge and make them both objects of research, including our own categories through the reflexive method. In the process, however, we force vernacular knowledge—often unwillingly—into different logics and abstractions, a form of distancing that expresses the scientific mode of knowledge authority where *structures of feeling* need to become *structures of reason* (Williams 1977; Narotzky 2014). Is it possible to escape this dilemma by using different knowledges as a method of reciprocally unsettling “evidence”? Can we bring “experience” back into factual relevance while retaining the factual relevance of wider social processes that can be empirically assessed, often quantitatively? Experience, evidence, and knowledge, all refer to instances of factual truth and social facts that are embedded in fields of power differentials, geometries of relevance and authority. Yet, all along, the stubbornness of facts emerges in its multiple forms and questions what it is that we value as knowledge.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The origin of this article is a Keynote I delivered at the SIEF 2019 14th Congress *Track Changes: Reflecting on a Transforming World* in Santiago de Compostela, Spain, 14-17 April 2019. I wish to thank Cristina Sánchez-Carretero (Congress Convenor) and Nevena Skrbic (President SIEF) for their kind invitation. Research has been funded by the European Research Council Advanced Grant “Grassroots Economics: Meaning, Project and practice in the pursuit of livelihood” [GRECO], IDEAS-ERC FP7, Project Number: 323743 and by the Fellowship ICREA-Academia (2016-2021), Institut Català de Recerca i Estudis Avançats, Generalitat de Catalunya. Finally, I am grateful to the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton for giving me the opportunity to spend many hours reading, writing and debating some of the issues in this article with many colleagues during 2019-2020.

REFERENCES CITED

- Arendt, Hannah. 1967. “Truth and Politics”. *The New Yorker*, Feb. 25, 1967: 49–88.
- Asad, Talal. 1994. “Ethnographic Representation, Statistics, and Modern Power”. *Social Research* 61(1): 55-88.
- Benjamin, Walter. 2002 [1936]. “The Storyteller. Observations on the Works of Nikolai Leskov”, in Michael W. Jennings and Howard Eiland (eds.), *Selected Writings*. Vol. 3, 1935-1938: 143-166. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- Benjamin, Walter. 2005 [1933]. “Experience and Poverty”, in Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland and Gary Smith (eds.), *Selected Writings* Vol. 2, Part 2, 1931-1934: 731-736. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- Borneman, John and Abdellah Hammoudi. 2009. “The Fieldwork Encounter, Experience, and the Making of Truth: An Introduction”, in John Borneman and Abdellah Hammoudi (eds.), *Being There. The Fieldwork Encounter and the Making of Truth*: 1-24. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1980. *Le sens pratique*. Paris: Les Editions de Minuit.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. 2003. *Méditations pascaliennes*. Édition revue et corrigée. Paris: Seuil.
- Braudel, Fernand. 1958. “Histoire et Sciences Sociales. La longue durée”. *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales* 13(4): 725-753.
- Brenneis, Donald. 1988. “Telling Troubles: Narrative, Conflict and Experience”. *Anthropological Linguistics* 30(3/4): 279-291.
- Briggs, Charles L. 2004. “Theorizing Modernity Conspiratorially: Science, Scale, and the Political Economy of Public Discourse in Explanations of a Cholera Epidemic”. *American Ethnologist* 31(2): 164-187.
- Cassin, Barbara. 2014. “Enough of the Truth For...: On the Truth and Reconciliation Commission”, in *Sophistical Practice. Toward a Consistent Relativism*: 261-273. New York: Fordham University Press.
- Couce, Beatriz. 2013. “Una manifestación multitudinaria corona la huelga en Ferrol”. *La Voz de Galicia*, June 13, 2013. Available at: <<https://www.lavozdegalicia.es/noticia/ferrol/2013/06/12/manifestacion-multitudinaria-corona-jornada-huelga-ferrol/00031371040198822914688.htm>>. Accessed 3 March 2020.
- Desrosières, Alain. 1993. *La politique des grands nombres histoire de la raison statistique*. Paris: Éditions de la Découverte.
- Durkheim, Émile. 1967 [1894]. *Les règles de la méthode sociologique*. Version numérique par Jean-Marie Tremblay pour Les classiques des sciences sociales, à partir du livre d'Émile Durkheim (1894), *Les règles de la méthode sociologique*. Paris: Les Presses universitaires de France, 16e édition, 1967. Available at : <http://classiques.uqac.ca/classiques/Durkheim_emile/regles_methode/regles_methode.html>. Accessed 3 March 2020.
- Engelke, Matthew. 2008. “The Objects of Evidence”. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute (N.S.)* 14(S1): S1-S21.
- Hall, Stuart. 1981. “In Defence of Theory”, in Raphael Samuel (ed.), *People's History and Socialist Theory*: 378-385. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd.
- Hastrup, Kirsten. 2004. “Getting It Right. Knowledge and Evidence in Anthropology”. *Anthropological Theory* 4(4): 455-472.
- Kentikelenis, Alexander E., Thomas H. Stubbs and Lawrence P. King. 2016. “IMF Conditionality and Development Policy Space”. *Review of International Political Economy* 23(4): 543-582.
- Koselleck, Reinhart. 2018a. “Sediments of Time”, in Reinhart Koselleck (transl.) and Sean Franzel and Stefan-Ludwig Hoffmann (eds.) *Sediments of Time. On Possible Histories*: 3-9. Stanford, CA.: Stanford University Press.
- Koselleck, Reinhart. 2018b. “Fiction and Historical Reality”, in Reinhart Koselleck (transl.) and Sean Franzel and Stefan-Ludwig Hoffmann (eds.) *Sediments of Time. On Possible Histories*: 10-23. Stanford, CA.: Stanford University Press.
- Koselleck, Reinhart. 2018c. “Sluices of Memory and Sediments of Experience: The Influence of Two World Wars on Social Consciousness”, Reinhart Koselleck (transl.) and Sean Franzel and Stefan-Ludwig Hoffmann (eds.) *Sediments of Time. On Possible Histories*: 207-224. Stanford, CA.: Stanford University Press.
- Kruks, Sonia. 2001. “Going Beyond Discourse: Feminism, Phenomenology, and ‘Women’s Experience’”, in *Retrieving Experience. Subjectivity and Recognition in Feminist Politics*: 131-152. Cornell, NY.: Cornell University Press.

- Liebow, Edward, Virginia R. Dominguez, Peter Neal Peregrine, Teresa L. McCarty, Mark Nichter, Bonnie Nardi, and Jennifer Leeman. 2013. "Vital Topics Forum. On Evidence and the Public Interest". *American Anthropologist* 115(4): 642-655.
- Narotzky, Susana and Antonio Maria Pusceddu. 2020. "The Challenge of Social Reproduction in Times of Crisis: Intergenerational Tensions in Southern Europe", in Susana Narotzky (ed.). *Grassroots Economies: Living with Austerity in Southern Europe*. London: Pluto Press. Forthcoming.
- Narotzky, Susana. 2016. "Between Inequality and Injustice: Dignity as Motive for Mobilization During the Crisis". *History and Anthropology* 27(1): 74-92.
- Narotzky, Susana. 2014. "Structures Without Soul and Immediate Struggles: Rethinking Militant Particularism in Contemporary Spain", in Sharryn Kasmir and August Carbonella (eds.), *Blood and Fire: Toward a New Anthropology of Labour*: 167-202. New York: Berghahn Books.
- Pickering, Michael. 1997. *History, Experience, and Cultural Studies*. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Samuel, Raphael (ed.). 1981. *People's History and Socialist Theory*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd.
- Sangster, Joan. 2011. "Invoking Experience as Evidence". *The Canadian Historical Review* 92(1): 135-161.
- Scott, Joan. 1991. "The Evidence of Experience". *Critical Inquiry* 17(4): 773-797.
- Thompson, Edward P. 1978. *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays*. New York/ London: Monthly Review Press.
- Thompson, Edward P. 1981. "The Politics of Theory", in Raphael Samuel (eds.), *People's History and Socialist Theory*: 396-408. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd.
- Turner, Victor W. 1986. "Dewey, Dilthey, and Drama: An Essay in the Anthropology of Experience", in Victor W. Turner and Edward M. Bruner (eds.), *The Anthropology of Experience*. Urbana, ILL.: University of Illinois Press.
- Williams, Raymond. 1977. *Marxism and Literature*. Oxford / New York: Oxford University Press.
- Williams, Raymond. 1985. *Keywords. A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*. Revised edition. Oxford / New York: Oxford University Press.