

Unleashing the Chaîne Opératoire: Students' experimentation with an old methodology.

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Over the last five years, undergraduate and postgraduate students enrolled in the course emphatically called “Transforming and Creating Worlds: Anthropological Perspectives on Techniques and Technology” have been given as a short assignment the recording of a short task of their choice and present it in the form of a Chaîne Opératoire.

Originally developed by French anthropologist André Leroi-Gourhan, in the tradition of Marcel Mauss, and further developed by ethnographers such as Pierre Lemonnier, the Chaîne Opératoire is, ironically enough, more used by archaeologists (who, by definition, cannot see people doing things) than by anthropologists, who, per definition see people doing and making things and are supposed to participate themselves. In this assignment, students have re-appropriated this methodology as form of ethnographic and interpretative experiment.

The main criteria for this assignment were:

- No restriction on the operation chosen, as long as it was something they actually witnessed first-hand, or performed themselves.
- To include as much as possible detail in their documentation, with a particular attention to steps that that actors themselves considered as required, appropriate or necessary.
- To present their finding as a Chaîne Opératoire, that is a graphic representation of the sequence of actions; they could use symbols, colours or any graphic device to represent the different elements of the task.
- The diagram had to present the chronology of the events as they unfolded, including potential interruptions, breaks or oral comments made during the process.
- The whole was accompanied by 1,000 words, giving the circumstances of the process (who, when where), and commenting on some aspects of the task the student wanted to point out, stemming either from the diagram or the discussion with the actor(s), and testing it in relation to contemporary anthropological concerns (ontology, flows, politics, etc.).

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These experiments have proven themselves particularly exciting for several reasons.

Firstly, because of the wide range of tasks presented over the years: be it catholic mass, putting on make-up, sound mixing, playing online game, gift wrapping, raclette evening, lost wax casting, taking Instagrams, or Picture Exchange Communication System, students have not hesitated to select tasks that are not usually examined from the angle of the anthropology of techniques. Some performed auto-ethnography, other recorded tasks done by others.

Secondly, the exercise revealed the inherent heterogeneity of technical processes, challenging the preconceived idea of linear determinisms. By including words, breaks and parallel activities, students have given a much richer rendering of the sequence of operations, and made visible the fact that techniques are never restricted to tangible actions on materials proper. Materials themselves were not always tangible ones, and sounds or spirits were given the same weight as wood, stones or digital coding.

By interrogating the actors about what they were doing, students also revealed a how representations, beliefs, choices and interpretations were an integral part of the process. Hence, evaluations and judgements about appropriateness or efficacy of a particular action were essential, though not always verbalised and at times, only enacted.

These Chaînes Opératoire revealed not only the heterogeneity of materiality, but also of the logic at play with a single task. Material determinism would act at specific moment (water has to be boiled *before* to make a cup of tea), then giving way to particular choices in ways of doing things, pertaining to family tradition, habitus or taste (put the tea bag *after* having poured the water in the cup or *before*). If there were any form of determinisms, very few processes recorded so far demonstrated a continuous and single type (e.g. material or social), but on the contrary revealed discontinuities in logics and practices making each chaîne opératoire the singular record of a unique instance.

All of the records illustrated the transformative nature of the process, following specific temporalities, rhythms and sequence. These transformation were not only “material” but also could be considered as “ontological”. Hence, the catholic mass revealed the exact moment during which the altar was no longer empty but inhabited by the divinity (Joe Ellis 2011), or how sound played by an instrument would travel through air to a microphone, becoming then an electric signal, transferred through cables to a encoder, which would transformed it into a digital coding, recorded on a magnetic surface. The coded sequence then could be transformed by a software, adding or suppressing information which in turn, would be translated into a different sound.

The focus on actions performed by people, be they intentional and deliberate or not allowed the students to shift their analytical focus from the finished product or artefact to the actual process itself. In doing so, they reflected on the notion of “skills”, on the logics displayed by the sequences as well as, through interviewing the actors after the process, on the reasons deployed for doing so

given by actors themselves.

Here, we have used the Chaîne Opératoire only as a methodological device, in order to make visible the complexity of “technical actions” and *not* as a particular statement on what doing and making is about, “ontologically” speaking.

Instead of considering the Chaîne Opératoire as a restrictive understanding of making and doing, we have restricted the concept to a graphic representation, an exercise in observing and transcribing, that is making processes visible as a step in a wider reflection on material activities. Depending on the scale of recording and analysis, students have thus been able to witness the flowing nature of making and doing things and the complexity of engagement with materials (Ingold 2013). They also were able to follow a particular trajectory of recruitment and collection through a network of human and non-human actors, (Latour 1991), indicating their respective weights, agency and tensions, giving a topographical view of the network no longer flat.

By taking seriously Mauss’s definition of both technical and ritual acts (1935), as “efficacious” (according to the actor) and “traditional” (that is transmitted and learned), students have tested its potential and limits (not all experiments were successful, which in itself were also interesting cases) by engaging with contemporary theoretical debates. By doing so, they might be the ones succeeding in freshening up an “old” method by rubbing it against “new” theories.