

Attachements et Fragilités: Écrire dans le Cours des Choses

by Collectif Attachements: Jérémy Damian, Amandine Guilbert, Rémi Eliçabe, Anne-Sophie Haeringer, Antoine Hennion, Sophie Houdart and Brice Laurent (2025) Paris, Presses des Mines, 212 pp.

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On the cover of *Attachements et Fragilités* are one bird and two bird shadows. On the same cover is the name of one collective, Collectif Attachements, and seven people as its shadow. *Attachements et Fragilités* is an edited book that does not reference any editor. Similarly, its introduction does not reference any author. One gathers from these voluntary omissions the authors' insistence on the book as the product of collective work.

Indeed, the Introduction itself presents the book as both a "collective" endeavour and "the result of a long journey" (p. 13). The Introduction serves multiple purposes. It presents the collective – its genealogy, evolution, and theoretical influences. It outlines the theoretical and epistemological impetus behind this collaborative book, less as a programmatic statement for the chapters to come and more as a reflection on this "long journey" (p. 13) that made the book what it is. Finally, the Introduction offers an overview of the following six chapters which are all fragments of empirical research on widely diverging topics – the organisation of solidarity breakfasts for migrants, walks in and around post-Fukushima territories, experiences of osteopathic practices, (mis)understandings of end-of-life care in a palliative care service, contested definitions of Europe's multifaceted "objects", the plurality and ambiguities of what the authors call an urban "middle ground" (p. 173).

Considering the chapters' thematic eclecticism, the Introduction works as a knot that ties together this diverse gathering of research landscapes as it spells out the book's *raison d'être*. Thinking the social through our attachments – attachments to us as people *and* as researchers – does not mean applying a fixed method that this volume would offer a guideline for. It means getting attuned to a certain research sensibility: one that refuses both active/passive and subject/object dualisms, and remains attentive to the corporeal and affective dimensions of experience, including as researchers immersed in situations. Importantly, being attentive to people's attachments means caring about what they care about. Rather than predefining events, this means leaving open what is unfolding in and through them. This approach is empirical yet speculative, and embraces epistemic humility, uncertainty, and ignorance. Lastly, it encourages experimenting with a way of writing social sciences that leaves room for all of the above.

Understanding how the Collectif Attachements came about helps understanding the book's intentions and structure. In both the title and the collective's name, the term attachments is used in the plural form. It stands for a collective with no institutional or disciplinary affiliation, a group of people that evolved over the years, drawn together by a curiosity for open-ended approaches to research and an appeal to forms of social scientific "craftmanship" (p. 13) more attentive to situations than causalities. This gathering of like-minded but differently-focused researchers overcomes disciplinary and thematic boundaries. While there is one collective, there is also a multiplicity of attachments. Though it might run counter to the authors' collaborative intention to single out Antoine Hennion's work, the very insistence on attachments speaks to the centrality of the sociologist's "pragmatism of attachments" (2013) to the present project. In a footnote useful for situating the book vis-à-vis the STS corpus, the authors explain how the collective was originally formed during a seminar on music organised by Hennion in the 1990s at the Écoles des Mines in Paris, at a time when major STS figures – Michel Callon, John Law, Madeleine Akrich, Bruno Latour – were developing Actor-Network Theory. This genesis and early uses of the notion of attachments by those scholars (Hennion 2017) situate this book well within the STS tradition. However, both Hennion's explicit intention to relate to but stand in contrast with the sociology of translation school of STS, and three decades of a collective in movement have produced an object at the border of this borderless field which is STS. While the book displays its signature fine-grained (ethnographic) attention to the instability of worlds-in-the-making, it does not necessarily engage with typical technoscientific objects. The Introduction is also an illuminating piece for anyone interested in how the work of American pragmatists – with William James and John Dewey as key references – has been appropriated by European STSers.

In the first chapter, Hennion shares pieces of his experience as a volunteer at "Les P'tits Déj's Solidaires", a collective that organises breakfasts for migrants in Paris. The chapter takes us through the daily improvisations of a group dealing with situations as they *present* themselves, in the sense of making themselves present, temporally and spatially: they care about/for migrants "because they are there" (p. 64). And it confronts us with a difficulty shared by all – volunteers, beneficiaries, Hennion-as-volunteer, Hennion-as-writer, but also us-readers and us-citizens of nation-states where migration everywhere is being vilified: which word to use? "Migrants"? "Refugees"? "Guests"? "Homeless people"? What worlds are we bringing along with our words? Which wor(l)ds does a situation call for? Hennion's text sensitively touches upon the troubles of engaging with an ethically and politically charged presence, in situ and in writing.

In Chapter 2, anthropologist Sophie Houdart brings us along on wandering paths in post-Fukushima territories. We are immersed in the many attunings and fine-tunings that inhabiting and researching post-catastrophic worlds require: familiarising with instruments for measuring radioactivity, problematising the very act of measurement itself, sensing the limits of ethnography, attuning with one's own corporeality, but also with others, and with a living radioactive world. Houdart beautifully renders the complicated experience of our porosity to a toxic world and the difficulty of ethnographically observing and reporting on what is lively yet invisible.

Chapter 3 is written by dancer and anthropologist Jérémy Damian. From the situated position of an ethnographer training to become a practitioner, Damian chronicles several situations of osteopathic practices – with trainers, trainees and patients – thus turning away from

controversies over scientificity to instead explore the subtleties of what osteopathy does and how, as “a craftsmanship of the hand, the senses, and attention” (p. 95). Damian explores a number of paradoxes: learning to perceive what is unperceivable and doing so “without doing anything” (*ibid.*); touching from a distance, touching what cannot be touched; experiencing how the contours of who and what is being touched and cared for loosen in the osteopathic act. In an apt parallel between the work of the osteopath and the ethnographer, Damian calls our attention to the subtle work of developing the necessary attention for reading the world.

Chapter 4 narrates a distinctively demanding research situation, as sociologist Anne-Sophie Haeringer shares some of the tedious discussions taking place in a palliative care service. All present in the service are de facto implicated in the vicissitudes of end-of-life care. This includes doctors and medical staff, but also patients and their loved ones, as well as the ethnographer. By posing the ethnographer as “an ordinary moral agent” (p. 121), Haeringer avoids the double trap of the neutrality of a view from nowhere and the superiority of a judgment based on method. In chronicling differences of interpretations – for instance, over a patient’s desire, or lack thereof – Haeringer shows how interpretative work is done by all and how expertise – be it medical or sociological – cannot secure the validity of one moral judgement over others.

Chapter 5 pulls the thread of a critique of expertise, although in a different direction. In a somewhat colder writing style that contrasts with the rest of the volume but pertinently resonates with its object(s), sociologist Brice Laurent analyses European construction through its objects, “creatures at once material and reglementary” (p. 152): construction materials, Cypriot halloumi cheese, credit-default swaps, carbon nanotubes, GMOs. Thinking Europe through the objects people are *attached* to problematises ideals of European harmonisation founded on “an extraction of the political” (p. 152) and in the objectivity of either market or science, since attachments produce frictions, contestation, and resist classification within “objectively” (p. 164) defined borders. Laurent’s approach offers a way out of the impasse of populism versus expertise and captures what STS does best: displaying the ontological force yet contested manufacture of market or science classifications, and how our worlds resist them.

Similar to Chapter 2, Chapter 6 is a stroll through “les Murs à Pêches”, an urban brown-field site that Amandine Guilbert and Rémi Eliçabe invite us to think of through Richard White’s concept of “middle ground” (2010). Exploring the interstices of a space where urban planning has not yet sedimented, they chronicle plural and contested modes of inhabiting. On this site, which inherits from the decline of horticulture, a heterogeneity of temporalities, economies, and ecologies coexist, producing tensions and creativity born in precarious relationality. This wandering from garden to garden complicates stories of economic/urban development, environmental/patrimonial preservation, political activism or socioeconomic marginality by showing how they telescope in the frictions of locality.

The authors seldom refer explicitly to the concept of attachments in their respective chapters. What the reader is presented with are so many versions of what reading the world through our attachments can mean. The experiences written about are fraught with undissolvable ambiguities, voluntarily left unresolved. The shared embrace of openness and interpretation – in the literal sense of standing “inter”, in-between things, as they are made and unmade – means that contributors all develop their unique ways of getting attuned to the situations they navigate. This produces not just an eclecticism of topics but also an eclecticism of language and

focal points. For social scientific practitioners, the strength of such eclecticism is a demonstration by example that the very point is experimenting in and with research and writing (though given the space for exploration that this approach allows, contributors could have allowed themselves to experiment further with creative forms of writing). The weakness, common to such edited volumes, is a somewhat disparate gathering in which one can eventually lose track of what makes common ground, despite many echoes from one chapter to another.

As a feminist reader, one regret that persists throughout the book – especially in its introduction – is the limited engagement with feminist scholarship, including feminist STS work. Sure enough, any volume is bound to be lacking in this or that theory. And there are well-noted mentions to major authors associated with the feminist STS corpus (Vinciane Despret, Isabelle Stengers, Marilyn Strathern, Donna Haraway...). But the overlap between the most salient dimensions of attachment – materiality, tensions, instability, corporeality, affectivity, as both sources of joys and pains, constraints and resources – and much feminist work, particularly on the ethics and epistemology of care (Puig de La Bellacasa 2017) lent itself to a more explicit and thorough engagement with feminist literature. This is not a matter of citing feminist work *qua* feminist. As Noortje Marres (2023) explains in a critical homage to Latour, it is a matter of not closing off to the possibilities long explored by the situated knowledge of feminist scholars. These possibilities usefully illuminate any scholarship interested in thinking the fragility of our worlds and our attachments in/to it – particularly so in times of all-around environmental damage. They can also relevantly complement the work of the pragmatists so central to this book. Feminists have long thought about the ambiguities of attachment. The careful fragments of research collected in *Attachements et Fragilités* would have only benefited from fostering more attachments to the singularly careful corpus of feminist STS.

References

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