

From Practice to Theory and Back Again? How Mixed-Class Backgrounds Shape Academic Trajectories

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Abstract

“Academics don’t have any idea of real life” was often directed towards my son-of-peasants father who was the only academic to marry into my mother’s family. My mother, who is descended from peasants and whose older siblings were working on factory shop floors, turned into a stay-at-home mother, which shaped me and my siblings into kids with a (para-)working-class background and a middle-class gender habitus. Having been socialised at a crossroads of peasant, (ascending to) middle and working class, the resulting friction between theory and practice (also described by Willis 1977) came to build itself into the way I think and work to this day, now an Assistant Professor at an Austrian university. Engaging in an internal dialogue and deliberately refraining from delivering my insights on a silver platter, I take the reader with me on the journey of trying to understand my class (non-)belonging. This journey also entails tracing back my fear of corrupting real life with social theory and might irritate the reader at times. By re-reading and re-framing field notes from my PhD research on knitting, I ultimately carve out how the frictions mentioned managed to reinsert themselves into my ethnographic research practice. Finding their continuation in antagonisms such as mind and body or science and real life, I reflect on how these frictions and their effects become intelligible through a reflection of my class (non-)belonging.

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Imbroglio

“As if I were falling down a rabbit hole!” That’s what she would say if anybody asked her how she was feeling at the moment. Her jaw hurts from the tension it seems to have had to process during the last nights. Her body is tense from the emotional turmoil she has been going through in the last few days. Breathing seems hard and unnatural, as if she had to take each breath consciously. How to write an article while constantly having to remember to breathe?

It had made complete sense to contribute a chapter reflecting on how social class shapes ethnographic research. She had already been wondering about this anyway, just a few months before the call came out. Why not take this chance and finally go the whole hog?

This would not be the first time she would consciously use her Self as epistemic medium in order to uncover larger societal and cultural issues as she had been a member of the ethno-psychoanalytical interpretation group at the department for six years. However, due to changes in her role at the department, she had to give up the group. Maybe this is why she spent the last Wednesday seeking out her colleagues and spinning her stories through conversations with them one after the other in order to make sense of the chaos inside?

She had been putting it off for weeks, trying to reach her Self while running away from it. Figuring out in which ways her social class background shapes her intellectual and personal trajectory as an ethnographer first and foremost meant identifying her class identity beforehand. "But where do I belong?", she wonders.

An auto(socio)biography would have to precede the autoethnography, she realizes. Born and raised in Vorarlberg¹ and having spent half of her life away from her once-home, mostly on the other side of Austria, she sometimes wonders, how much being from Vorarlberg shapes somebody, even if they do not live there anymore. The fact that Vorarlberg is heavily industrialised sometimes disguises its rural characteristics and the role they play in one's view of the world. Rurality, here, is not referred to as a kind of remoteness from urban centres (of work and entertainment). Rurality means being confined to a more one-sided perspective on the world. Counter-culture or alternative perspectives on how our society is or could be organised were hardly heard of in her youth. Even now, she at times wonders how she could be brought up in such a conservative way when her parents grew up during the hippie era. How was this possible? Did they live in a parallel world?

Another aspect of her Vorarlberg heritage that shapes her strongly to this day, is that she first learnt to speak in dialect. German feels like a second language to her. In academic teaching, combatting the resulting feeling of inferiority has been one of her biggest challenges in order to feel up to the game, she usually admits.

The path down this particular rabbit hole began when she started looking into her 'ethnic' background as being a Walser. The Walsers were the people who populated the high-altitude regions in Vorarlberg from the 14th century onwards. Popular knowledge has it that they were tough people. They probably had to be as farming this steep land was quite challenging. They are said to be very persistent and hard-working. Her ancestors, including the generation of her (grand)parents, are Walsers², they grew up in very remote Alpine villages and lived strenuous, humble lives. She ordered book after book about the Walsers from the university library, well aware that she was getting lost before she was getting started. And before she knew it, her grandmother's war-torn autobiography turned up in her literature search.

¹ Vorarlberg is the westernmost federal state of Austria (roughly the size of Luxembourg) and a region shaped by the Alps which seems rural due to its mostly peasant population until a few decades ago. It is, however, also one of the most industrialized and densely populated regions in central Europe and shares borders with Switzerland, Liechtenstein and Southern Germany, making it a well-off federal state. Vorarlberg is, furthermore, the only federal state whose inhabitants speak Alemannic dialects in everyday life (as well as south-east Germany and the German-speaking part of Switzerland).

² In this context, this means that they grew up in the Walsertal (not to be confused with the special legal status – as Freeman – the Walsers enjoyed in the late Middle Ages). Walsertal here refers to the Great Walser Valley located in the heart of Vorarlberg. It's a misleading denomination as the valley part is not habitable because it is too narrow. Settlements are situated only on the steep mountains the valley is comprised of.

“I came across an article about Omile and her brother and fiancé”, she told her mother on the phone. Omile – a diminutive of *Oma*, German for Grandmother – is how they used to call her because she was very petite. Roughly twenty years ago she had helped her mother proof-read Omile’s autobiography after her mother had typewritten it.³ Her family had known about Omile’s suffering during the war. She was imprisoned in Munich after she had given birth to her first child because her brother and fiancé had deserted from the army in 1943 and were then executed in Graz in 1944. A decade later, her husband, two years her junior and just returned marked by his experiences during the war, and the first four children barely survived the Avalanche Winter of 1954 in the Walsertal. The avalanche hit their rented house⁴ while Omile and her children were waiting for her husband who had been helping to find two buried children to return. They managed to escape by the only window not blocked by the snow, but they lost their home and livelihood forcing them to move away from the mountains into a village outside of the valley where access to work was easier.

Omile was almost eighty years old when her account was printed on paper and began to be shared beyond her extended family. Only now she realises that Omile’s woebegone story still keeps on living in academic literature on anti-National Socialist resistance, in monuments for resistance fighters, in documentaries, in exhibitions.

“But where is all this going?”, she wonders, with a touch of despair. “How will I ever reach the question of social class?” It was the conversation over the phone with her mother that gave her a glimpse of where to go. Remembering their – despite all the suffering – cheeky and cheerful grand/mother gave way to a communicative space in which they could talk about how both women were shaped by post-war and post-avalanche scarcity, both of which forced former peasants to find a (first) footing in the uneducated working class.

Her mother, Erika, the sixth of eight children, at age fifteen had not even finished her mandatory school years when her father had already found her a place to work. Erika had always wanted to become a nurse, but they needed money and work was the only way to get it. She was not even allowed to learn to play the guitar. “A woman does not need this for her life as a future wife”, she had been told. “This is not going to happen to my children”, was Erika’s younger self’s resolution.

It was natural for her as a high school kid to wonder what she might end up studying, getting a degree was simply taken for granted. During her years at the music high school, she wanted to become a graphic designer, a fashion designer, an architect, a sound engineer. Eventually, after spending one year abroad in Australia, paying for her livelihood by working in an Italian café, and taking private music lessons at the city’s music university, she surprisingly opted for a career as an orchestral oboe player and studied at different music universities in central Europe. Cutting a long story short, health issues forced her to abandon her music studies and finally made her an accidental anthropologist.

The fact that it seems so difficult for her to pin down her class identity is most probably linked to a feeling of being somewhat classless, not determined by class, or better: not deter-

³ Omile had been encouraged to write her autobiography (Burtscher 2015) by her eldest son and had been invited to tell her story at the radio show *Die Drehorgel* at the Vorarlberg branch of the Austrian Public Service Broadcasting Station (ORF) in 1996. The book is called: *Meine Lebensgeschichte* and was published by the local municipality within their historical series in 2005. Meanwhile it has been expanded and reprinted another three times.

⁴ The rent consisted of mowing the lawns surrounding the house.

mined by any one class in particular and, as such, being conflicted in terms of class belonging. Ambiguous elements certainly made their way into everyday bodily gestures. Her father's family, some of whom were moving towards the middle class, were (rather dogmatically) practicing Catholics. As a result, her parents and siblings spent every Sunday morning and religious holidays at church up until she was twenty. They made a habit of greeting family members with a strong handshake and a friendly smile, but still keeping some distance. Her mother's family who had found a foothold in the working class, in contrast, lived religion either very pragmatically and with a dash of humour or did not go to church at all. In personal interactions, they took a much more intimate approach. Not only did she hug her aunts, uncles and grandparents, they also exchanged kisses on the mouth when meeting and embracing each other. As a child, the difference was merely noted, lived and habitually kept alive. There were times when she started to wonder how these habitual differences came into existence. But this wonder about what the anthropologist in her might call conflicted habitus never led to a reflection in terms of class belonging, although it very well might have.

Instead, she still feels class as a marker of different milieu positions was invisible to her. She did not feel any less or any more than any of her peers. Where did this (non-)feeling come from? How could anyone feel classless? Didn't this point towards a somewhat privileged position in itself?

Her mother's family had to emigrate from the valley and ended up in work that was available for them at the time: The first four of her mother's siblings throughout the years mostly worked in factories (as did their future spouses), e.g., as seamstress in the booming textile industry, in production at the Liebherr factory in the village, in the nearby food production plant, on the production line of an international dental company across the border etc.; the fifth child became a recorder teacher at the regional music school. Her own mother, Erika, ultimately became a bank clerk (trained on the job). The remaining two siblings were allowed to begin an apprenticeship for a proper profession, however, one of them still ended up in factory work. Work was chosen over education, but the youngest siblings did have more choice in their professional trajectories than the older ones. Social mobility slowly made its way into the family, one sibling after the other.

Her father's family were also peasants from a remote village in Vorarlberg located roughly 1000m above sea level. For them, education had a higher priority. Her father's mother, back in the 1920s, trained to become a weaver in Tyrol. Her father's paternal family line, on the other hand, was proud to already have raised priests as well as teachers throughout the previous generations. As the first-born, her (paternal) grandfather was forced to take over the small (mainly self-sufficient) Alpine farm, which he was very unhappy about. Whenever things went wrong, he would put the blame on being forced to run the farm.

This generational background in a scarce world of reduced resources, she realizes, is one of the reasons why what nowadays is termed DIY is an engrained practice in her core as well as her extended family – a relic of remote peasant living, of making do with whatever is available. Making tools and machines, maintaining and repairing them, reassembling broken parts into newly functioning things, making furniture, building houses, knitting socks, sewing clothes, crocheting curtains, mending textiles, reassembling broken textile parts into new items, repairing rather than discarding in general etc. There is a long list of skilled practices that socialized her ancestors, and eventually also her own family, into a way of life where the world is understood as mouldable; a social imaginary that deems the human an agent capable of shaping the material (and, as she would like to think, also the social) world.

In contrast to her mother, her father was granted academic education despite the post-war scarcity on the farm. One of his older brothers inherited the farm, another became an electrician and the third pursued an academic education and became an engineer. Being the first and only academic to marry into her mother's family, her father was an object of pride. He chose the most practical kind of academic education and became a high school teacher for music and woodwork. However, his holding an academic degree managed to disguise, for her, both the long-lasting peasant background and what then became a working-class background. As a child, she at times found it curious that all her mother's siblings drove a Mercedes although they were working in factories. Her father, on the other hand, had an academic title. It did, however, not seem to convert into distinguishable economic prosperity. If it were not for him conducting a choir in Switzerland on Tuesday nights and performing on all the important religious holidays, her parents would have never had the means to provide instruments for her and her three slightly younger siblings, fittingly referred to as "organ pipes". At times she wonders if the importance her parents gave to their children playing classical instruments – a 'sophisticated' bodily and, as such, middle class practice par excellence – from a young age on points to her parents' desire to habitually gradually move towards the middle class.

The more she ponders her class belonging, the more confused she gets. While she bodily actualized her working-class 'para-heritage' in factory work summer jobs sticking labels onto bottles of chemicals in a Swiss chemical plant, she herself was not 'from there'. She only temporarily slipped into the body of a factory worker, only to leave it behind her once she would return to her life as a student. Then again, her family had all the German literature classics on the bookshelves in the living room, but nobody ever read or discussed them. There were no (intellectual) debates at all. Instead, she and her siblings were encouraged to develop and refine practical skills: using fretsaws, baking cakes, making hay bales at her uncle's Alpine farm, climbing mountains with the family as a child; designing and sewing her own clothes in high school; dismantling and reassembling mopeds when already a student and – this summer – designing and making a sideboard and shelves with her father for her own family's living room.

What does this mean in terms of class belonging? Could a couple of decades of factory work transform her family's habitus (on her mother's side) into working class? Could a single university-educated high school teacher bring out a middle-class belonging? Could the peasant way of living pose such a strong force of social class determination, when hardly any remnants seem to be left? Maybe this feeling of classlessness, then, has its roots in the hybridity of her belonging materialising in a conflicted class habitus? Maybe class is invisible as a determining factor because it inserted itself in so many nuanced ways that it's barely detectible?

When her parents visited her over the past long weekend, she asked her mother how come she decided to be a stay-at-home mother, given the fact that all of her older siblings including spouses (with children) were working. Her mother barely managed to answer when her father burst out: "It's not possible any other way if you have four children." That may well be the case. None of her mother's siblings had so many children, most only had two. Decent childcare was unheard of in the 1980s and it was rather unusual for a father, at that time, to be involved in childcare even though her father would have had sufficient time as a teacher who spent most afternoons at home.

It is this experience which brings out gendered determination and constraints the most for her. It's very hard to not give way to the anger surfacing within herself and to not condemn her father for the patriarchal system which allowed him to reproduce it so easily within the boundaries of his own family. She had not heard of feminism in her teens, but she always knew something was off. Something was not fair. And yet, it was normal(ised).

Her mother had stayed home caring for the children for fifteen years until she was finally allowed to return to work – five half-days per week. Having been socialized with a mother whose working persona was invisible to the family has further nurtured the emergence of a middle-class gender habitus, she contends. It does not come as a surprise that reconciling her own family (husband and two school-age daughters) with a full-time job in academia has been a great challenge because she feels she is lacking a 'real' role model, pointing to what the anthropologist in her would call a *cleft habitus*⁵ (with regard to gender). The fear she might be a bad feminist or a bad mother or both at the same time sometimes haunts her. And, while her mother managed to not reproduce the withholding of education for her daughters, she herself now hopes to not reproduce the invisibility of her own working mother persona. Having already struggled with serious exhaustion, she now also makes a habit of rendering visible to her daughters not only the effort but also the (self-)care it takes to make these changes.

Frictions

"How long do you still have to go to school?" was an often-heard question by Omile as well as her factory worker aunts and uncles as a first-in-extended-family student.⁶ While her father did have an academic education, he never had to write any thesis. Both of his final theses were practical – a few compositions on the one hand and a wooden electrified tractor including a remote control on the other hand. While his stories about his student life created the sense that pursuing academic studies after school was natural, his lack of experience in academic thinking or writing (which is required in the humanities) meant she had nobody to draw on. In that sense she feels she was not only the first *female* student in her extended family, but the first student altogether.

"Academics don't have any idea of real life!" was another attempt at inadvertently diminishing the path she had chosen by some in her extended family on her mother's side. While she never felt it was directed at herself, these utterances nonetheless made space for questioning her choice of the 'real' value of academic studies. This phrase is the epitome of the clearly drawn line between what is perceived of, in opposing terms, as practice and theory, body and mind, real life and science, and captures the power of her working-class background the most.⁷

⁵ This concept refers to instances when the habitus 'provided' in familial socialization is found to be useless for one's own life, which causes feelings of loss (Barlösius 1999, drawing on Bourdieu's extensive work). It is, however, not often discussed in terms of gendered habitus dimensions.

⁶ Here, she refers to her mother's side – the working-class branch – of her extended family, since she grew up much closer to her mother's seven sisters and brothers and their fourteen children.

⁷ The theory versus practice dichotomy articulated in the contempt for theory and appreciation of practical knowledge as a tenet of working-class identity is also illustrated in the seminal work *Learning to Labour* by Willis (1977).

Having been socialized at the heart of the friction between devalued theory and overvalued practice, the seemingly accidental choice of becoming an anthropologist turns out not to be so accidental after all. Anthropologists study the way people live their lives and in which ways this is culturally and societally shaped. How better to reconcile the antagonism of theory versus practice than *studying* 'real life'?

Knitting and female (needle)craft more generally had suddenly suggested themselves to her for ethnographic enquiry. When she unexpectedly embarked on a doctorate suggested by her MA supervisor in September 2010, knitting as a research topic made complete sense – to her and her factory worker relatives. It was tangible, practical and there was concrete knowledge to be discovered and passed on. Academic interest was easily justifiable, albeit in different terms than expected. During an intense phase of fieldwork in Vorarlberg, she once visited her aunt, an avid and skilled crafter, who asked: "What do you actually want to know from the knitters? Do you want them to show you how to knit? Do you want them to explain all of the steps entailed?" This was, of course, not what she wanted, which is why she tried to carefully explain that she was after the meanings: "What do knitting and crafting mean for the practitioners (and their everyday lives)?"⁸

She had already been struggling to reach the meta-level for so long. After her original PhD supervisor unexpectedly died during the initial stages of her doctoral research, she had found herself a new supervisor in the newly appointed professor and was trying to convey her anthropological interest in knitting. She had a hard time bringing it across, which manifested itself in the first fully formulated research diary entry from November 11, 2012 – different from the bullet-point style notes she had jotted down on scraps of paper or digitally recorded on her smartphone whenever she had a minute while breastfeeding her baby-turning-toddler. "The fear of not writing sufficiently intelligent diary notes has been keeping me from even trying to transform my snippets of thought into properly articulated notes." Instead of writing down "even the most banal things", which would then have allowed her "to productively use my entanglement on an analytical level, I lost myself in thinking about intelligent research questions." "Banal things" in this regard also referred to emotions and irritations, which – from an ethno-psychoanalytical stance – upon reflection render visible latent field and cultural logics.⁹

By the end of the two-and-a-half-hour-long written rant about her shortcomings, entanglements, socio-economic positioning (compelling her to write one PhD grant proposal after the other) and her lamentations about knitting projects that went wrong, she had reached an unexpected level of clarity. All of a sudden, she realised why she had planned to employ a particular interview method she referred to as thing-elicitation – knitted things were to be used in order to elicit storytelling:¹⁰ "Lacking intelligent (research) questions [...], I handed over the questions which I don't seem to be able to pose [...] to the thing."

⁸ Diary entry from 10.02.2013.

⁹ Unravelling emotions articulated within the research diary and thus making use of subjectivity "as the royal road to an authentic, rather than fictitious, objectivity" (Devereux 1967: XVII) is one of the central hallmarks of ethno-psychoanalytic research and interpretation approaches. Transferring the theorem of transference and countertransference from the therapeutic setting and, here, furthermore into a group setting, ethno-psychoanalytical interpretation groups (which she was a part of for six years, as mentioned) helps ethnographers disentangle themselves from the field and navigate the at times messy process of learning to interpret ethnographic materials but also serve a supervisory function (Arantes 2021, Bonz et al. 2017).

¹⁰ This method wouldn't have required its 'invention', as the knitters naturally dug out their knitted things and immediately told the things' stories. It turned out knitted things cannot exist without their stories.

Interestingly, while she was trying to move away from the practical aspects (vis-à-vis her aunt), she simultaneously searched for comfort in and advocated for them. A few months later, on February 6th, 2013, she complains in her diary about her supervisor being afraid of “me only talking about knitting patterns with my participants” as she does not seem to be able to leave behind her subject position as a knitter and to climb onto a more abstract level allowing a more critical, objective and most of all theoretical view. She is enraged about the fear of knitting patterns and defends their ethnographic and epistemological value: “And even if we only talked about knitting patterns, this would most probably reveal something significant about the field per se [...]. I am sure that we would not only talk about knitting patterns without referring to implicit field logics.”

The complex mix of her conflicted class and cleft gender habitus stemming from her peasant background, her working-class para-heritage or even her (middle class) music education and the refinement of sensibilities entailed, eventually seems to have conjured up a strong affinity not only to practical research topics such as knitting, sourdough bread making, crafts and DIY, but also to practice- and experience-laden research methodologies such as sensory ethnography, autoethnography and ethno-psychoanalysis.¹¹ In attending to nuance, aesthetics and the affective, she advocates for a recognition of the corporeality of culture and cultural practices – as fields of research as well as research methodologies and epistemologies.

However, European Ethnology, even today, only reluctantly seems to open itself up to the researcher’s own body and emotions as valuable epistemic source for ethnographic research. After all, European Ethnology is labelled a *Geisteswissenschaft*, a Science of the Mind, whereas in the anglophone context (e.g., in the United Kingdom) it falls under the label of the Arts and Humanities and the Social Sciences, which sheds a very different light onto how this kind of research (field) is conceptualised and what role the body, emotions, practice and experience play within it. She sometimes wonders if sensory ethnography, autoethnography and ethno-psychoanalysis seem too practical, too experiential or too radical for a European Ethnology bound to a rational(ised) philosophical tradition in the German-speaking scientific community. Even more so when in tandem with (feminised) knitting and (needle)craft which (as incomprehensible as it seems) for some still reeks of *Volkskunde*¹² as it was instrumentalised at the time of National Socialism and is hence not considered a legitimate ethnographic research field, which ultimately exemplifies a clash between the ethnographer’s complex habitus and the discipline’s ambivalent positioning towards its own past.

It is no wonder that she ended up labelling knitting as multifaceted knowledge practice entailing not only intricate sensory but also mathematical skills. She felt the need to write against the belittling of knitting and in favour of its appreciation as knowledge valuable for individuals as well as social bonds – because knowledge is all that counts in academia and

¹¹ Sensory ethnography (Pink 2009) pursues a two-fold agenda: On the one hand it reminds us of the multisensoriality of everyday life and thus renders the senses a research field for cultural analysis. On the other hand, it advocates for the recognition of the ethnographer’s own body and sensory experience for understanding the phenomena they study. For those interested in the differences between autoethnography and ethno-psychoanalysis and how these approaches might complement each other in the search for reflexivity, refer to Stadlbauer & Ploder (2017) or Winter (2019).

¹² In light of the problematic concept of *Volk* which was instrumentalised in National Socialist times, *Volkskunde* and its succeeding disciplines had to redefine themselves, which meant abandoning what was perceived as traditional folk life of which knitting seemed to be a part. During her research she realised that her knitting research seemed to be shifting the hard-worked-for boundaries of a discipline grappling with its past and that this, in turn, also shaped her own research (Arantes 2019, 2021).

the knowledge society she is part of. Had she built up more professional guts (and come across Kaspar Maase's¹³ work on everyday aesthetics sooner), she might have managed to allow knitting to (also) be a 'mere' pleasurable, sensual practice which (nowadays) is pursued for its own good.

The story of theory versus practice is, however, not over yet. "Of course" she did not want to research the practical aspects of knitting her aunt was wondering about – which is only half the truth. Only a couple of weeks after having had this conversation with her aunt, she disappointedly remarks:

"I still regret tremendously that I have not managed [...] to get my research participants to get out their needles in my presence. I wish they would have explained what they do when they knit, how they go about it and what they pay attention to. To come closer to (bodily) experiential knowledge and its verbalization would have been really interesting. However, I somehow could not get myself to ask for knitting to be explained to me."¹⁴

Not only did her knitting body and hence knitting knowledge get in her way of being able to formulate questions from a position of not-yet-knowing. The urge to reach an abstract meta-level and to find 'intelligent' research questions had ultimately made her incapable of addressing the very questions she found most interesting: the practicalities of knitting.

Only years later it became clear to her that the working-class *Theoriefeindlichkeit* (anti-theoretical stance) she implicitly had accused her aunt of had become part of her own habitus and influenced the way she went about ethnographic research. While the young anthropologist trying to navigate and gain a foothold in the academic world devalues the practical and makes a case for the abstract-theoretical vis-à-vis her aunt in order to intellectualise or academize craft, she advocates in favour of all things practical vis-à-vis her discipline in order to counter the "Sciences of the Mind" with the experiential, with the practical, with 'real life'. Constantly advocating for either one or the other, she seems to attempt balancing the two antagonistic spheres that have settled within herself.

I, anthropologist

While falling into the rabbit hole last week, I came across a beautiful treatise about the Vorarlberg peasant and poet Franz Michael Felder. He had been asked to write his autobiography by an intellectual from Leipzig who had grown fond of his peasant poetry. Felder finished the first part of *Aus meinem Leben* (engl.: *A Life in the Making*) in 1867, shortly before his death, barely aged 30. The treatise by the German Studies scholar Twellmann gives a detailed account of how the concepts of autofiction, autosociobiography and autoethnography might contribute to the study of autobiography. The part that spoke to me most at that very moment, however, was the question of authenticity versus corruption. Felder's intellectual patron from Leipzig cautioned him not to get too intellectual so that the "inner voice of his natural spirit" would never be silenced. Already J.W. Goethe had touched upon the inner conflict looming over uneducated poets who come in contact with intellectuals; "mixing the noble with the common, the natural with the conventional, the naive with the sentimental would disturb the enjoyment of his [the poet's] productions" (Goethe 1823, *Deutscher Naturdichter*, quoted in Twellmann 2022: 507, translation by the author).

¹³ He has worked intensively on this topic over the past decades; see, for instance, Maase (2017).

¹⁴ Diary entry from 28.02.2013.

I think that this passage resonated so much with me because it drove home the point which the previous section elaborates. The fear of corrupting 'real life', inculcated in me by my extended family on my mother's side, led me to neglect theorising. And maybe this is also why, as an anthropologist, I never felt quite comfortable with social theory and with (what I feared to be mere) pigeon-holing of people into certain predefined (and once clearer) notions of what classes are. I could not even grasp my own class identity. Why would I have any business pigeon-holing others? Not being able to even pin down my own class belonging hence led to an antipathy for possible class conceptualization(s) and to me mostly ignoring class as a determinant of social life and everyday life experience. It might very well have gone the other way and make me aware there was something wrong with my idea of class. I could have drawn the conclusion that clinging to a notion of class as something stable and static, something to be easily pinned down, would get me nowhere and that, instead, class belonging and habitus are more complex and dynamic. But I didn't. What's more – having become aware of my inner conflict, I could have read up much more on Bourdieu & Co. and finally made a step towards reconciling these two worlds so closely tied up within myself. But for the time being I am not there yet. These stories need to suffice.

While I dismantled the artificial antagonism of practice and theory in my own thesis (Arantes 2017), showing how knitting and crafts in general rather point to a continuum of body and mind, where abstract thought is not the obverse of concrete experience but instead is closely related, I now realize that I have still kept this friction alive in my thinking. And the present article is the best example of this friction. It gives an experience-charged account deliberately light on theorising, reproducing the internalised artificial dichotomy of theory versus practice via the split into a narrative main body of text and theoretical-analytical contextualization relegated into footnotes which I am not even supposed to use. The fear of corrupting *my* real life is apparently still too big, inhibiting me to bridge the gap between the supposed antagonists in a harmonic synthesis.

When I finally started to write this article, I quickly fell into the mode of the internal monologue, my favourite genre in my high school years. The familiar style helped navigate the slippery slope I had manoeuvred myself into and I decided against rewriting the text once I had made it through a first draft. Longing for a sense of security when falling down a rabbit hole of unexpected self-discovery is also articulated in the choice of writing about myself in the third person in the first two – and more challenging – sections. Writing about my own experiences and memories of my youth, my grandmother, my family, in the third person not only helped me objectify my trajectory to some degree; it also made me feel less exposed and vulnerable. The visibility of the ethnographic I in the last section stems from the sense of security gained over the course of writing on the one hand and from advocating against what I still perceive as an I-shy position of Germanophone European Ethnology. Finally, taking an evocative approach in writing, as many autoethnographies do, I also decided against giving way to the urge of putting the experienced imbroglio into neat categories or sub-sections and against attributing each experience, memory or thought to a specific facet of my complex habitus. Class as manifested in my habitus, it appears to me, is lived integrally and as such it is present in atmospheric terms.

Allowing the stories to suffice for now – Who knows where the opening of this Russian doll to infinity eventually will lead to? – also can be seen as building a shelter from potentially wrongful theorisation. The search for the 'perfect' question is still alive in the fear of not theorising my own biography correctly. Interpreted as a manifestation of the feeling of not quite fitting in which is present in many academics with working-class or mixed-class

backgrounds, this position marked by inner conflicts arising from (lower or hybrid) class positionality, however, also allows for shifts of perspective within academic disciplines. It doesn't come as a surprise that it was this experience of "in-between-ness and out-of-placeness" (Lindner 2013: 26) which was so strongly shared by the British Cultural Studies scholars. Stuart Hall, Raymond Williams¹⁵ or Paul Willis all had working-class backgrounds. Hall (as quoted by Lindner, *ibid.*) states: "It makes possible insights that you can't really get any other way, because it takes you deep and close, and it frames you emotionally as well as analytically, and it takes you subjectively as well as objectively. So there's certain kinds of insights you can't get without that". Lindner draws the conclusion that newness comes into disciplines by way of experiences which themselves are culturally shaped. "Paradigm shifts in the Cultural Studies¹⁶ are preceded by experiences of cultural discordance, discrepancy and dissonance. This is why qualitatively different patterns of thinking are not only the result of a paradigm shift but its very precondition" (*ibid.*, translation by the author; see also Bausinger 1999).¹⁷

Having been socialized in a mixture of (what I have termed) a conflicted habitus and a "cleft habitus" (Bourdieu 2007) – a habitus which is "the product of a 'conciliation of contraries' which then inclines one to the 'conciliation of contraries'" (Bourdieu 2007: 102) – an ethnographer's sense of self emerged that is capable of empathizing with manifold forms of lived realities. Irritations in terms of class belonging not only cause a feeling of not fitting in; they also open up new possibilities for the discipline as much as for my ethnographer self. My hybrid self can feel home (enough) in many fields, it's attentive in multiple ways and directions, as a participant as much as an observer. What's most important to recognize in epistemological terms, however, is that it is the irritations – among others caused by my conflicted class habitus or cleft gender habitus – which eventually open the way towards understanding. Ethnographers have a lot to gain from embracing and cultivating frictions and irritations within themselves, in an autoethnographic vein. Ultimately, this also allows rendering them epistemologically productive (as ethno-psychoanalysis well illustrates; Arantes 2021).

Before I come to an end, I briefly want to make the case – supported by Devereux and Bourdieu – that every anthropologist at some point should embark on the journey illustrated in this article. Drawing on different theoretical and disciplinary frameworks, both conclude that the researcher should reflect their social background and its influence on their academic practice making use of their subjectivity (Devereux 1967). Bourdieu proposes "objectifying the act of objectification" and suggests practising a sociology of sociology. "The sociology of sociology questions the charismatic idea intellectuals often have of themselves as well as their tendency to think themselves as free of any kind of social determination" (Bourdieu 1999: 365, 369; translation by the author). Getting to the bottom of this, especially as ethnographers who rely on their bodies and subjectivity as epistemic medium, means understanding what we do, why we do it and how we do it a bit better and brings us closer to critically reflecting on our positionalities and the culturally- and socially-shaped epistemological vantage points entailed as has long been called for by the Writing Culture debate.

¹⁵ See the brief discussion of Hall's and Williams' trajectories in Lindner (2013).

¹⁶ Cultural Studies here serves as translation of the broad term *Kulturwissenschaften* and does not refer to the British Cultural Studies per se.

¹⁷ I thank Helen Ahner for this reference which showcases that reflections of class habitus within the discipline, at least in Tübingen, go back a few decades (and are relevant to this day).

A warning is in order, however: It is quite easy to ask for autoethnographies of how social class background shapes ethnographic research and academic trajectory. It is something else entirely to deal with what flares up when you start tackling it. The tensions stemming from the rabbit hole I was falling into had already started to gradually dissolve with the words gushing out one after the other. But in the passion of unexpected self-discovery and of putting it into writing, the tensions made their comeback in my right hand and lower arm, which is now bandaged. While I can breathe again and have found more clarity, my body aches from the mental work it has translated into words on a screen. Intellectual work is also bodily work, mental strains inscribe themselves into the body and most of all: I need my hand to think. As I finish this article, typing more slowly and carefully with each phrase I come up with, I realise that my hand has ultimately shown me that the artificially held antagonisms of theory and practice, mind and body, science and real life collapse *indistinguishably* within myself.

And so, the original imbroglio that gave way to rather clearly bounded antagonisms articulating themselves in the frictions they cause, ultimately led to a recognition of that which and how is me, the anthropologist.

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