**Revisiting Plozévet**

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**Abstract**

A special issue of *French Cultural Studies* in 1999 sought to explore the ways in which Modern Linguists have often tended to erase traces of their personal lives from their work. Contributors responded in an autobiographical mode by exploring the ‘hidden selves of scholars and teachers’. This article builds on these reflections by exploring the extent to which Edgar Morin’s *Commune en France* (1967), his contribution to the multidisciplinary project in Plozévet in Brittany, may be understood as ‘autobiographie involontaire’. The study reads Morin’s *Journal de Plozévet* (published over three decades after the research was completed in 2001) in relation to the original monograph and suggests that the diary operates as the second panel of a diptych that reveals the texts’ interdependence. The *journal* fulfils a ‘genetic’ function, providing the sources for elements of Morin’s monograph and giving an indication of the extent to which Morin drew on the work of his wider team to complement his own observations. More importantly, however, reading the two texts in counterpoint – the one providing spontaneous reflections in the field; the other revealing their processing in the immediate aftermath of the *enquête* – is part of the revelation of the ‘hidden selves’ of a researcher embedded in a monograph that has been long considered a classic of French post-war sociology.

**Keywords**

‘autobiographie involontaire’, Brittany, *Commune en France*, diary, Edgar Morin, fieldwork, hidden selves, interdisciplinarity, Plozévet, popular culture

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*Je suis allé plus loin dans mes voyages à Plozévet que dans mes randonnées aux deux Amériques.* (Morin, 2001: 312)

*In stressing the local, the particular and the personal, I hope to give some social texture to the often general and abstract discussions of modern popular culture*. (Rigby, 1991-2: 3)

**Revealing hidden selves**

Modern Languages is one of the most embodied and personal of disciplinary fields. The acquisition of linguistic skills, of culturally-specific knowledge and of the intercultural agility with which these are associated depends on a highly physical relationship to language as the tongue, mouth, vocal cords and lungs adapt to the challenges of what is studied. At the same time (and, arguably, more significantly), high-level language learning relies on physical, cultural and often social mobility, on a going to and dwelling in the societies and communities in which different languages are spoken – and as a result on undergoing changes that Nicolas Bouvier in *Le Poisson-scorpion* associates with the traveller more generally: ‘On ne voyage pas pour se garnir d’exotisme et d’anecdotes comme un sapin de Noël, mais pour que la route vous plume, vous rince, vous essore’ (1996 [1992]: 53). There are several notable examples of memoirs produced by scholars in Modern Languages in which these reflect on these itineraries,[[2]](#endnote-2) but it is surprising that, on the whole, such subjective, often personal and even intimate considerations are largely absent from reflections on the disciplinary area.

A special issue of *French Cultural Studies* sought, almost two decades ago in 1999, to address this particular lacuna in understandings of Modern Languages by exploring the ‘hidden selves of scholars and teachers’. In an essay introducing this collection of articles, Brian Rigby noted the extent to which it was necessary to wait for *Festschrifts* and obituaries to discover ‘traces of the personal and the autobiographical’ (1999: 241), suggesting that acknowledgement of such aspects were only acceptable posthumously or at best as *fin-de-carrière* indulgences. ‘It is as if’, Brian suggested, ‘studying a foreign language and culture – as opposed to one’s native language and culture – demands the repression of the scholar and critic’s own personal, social, linguistic and cultural identity’ (1999: 241-2). He continued by arguing that the disciplinary evolution enabled by the emergence of French cultural studies reflected a growing willingness on the part of teachers and scholars in the field – arguably as that group expanded and was increasingly diversified in the post-war period – to reflect on the ways in which aspects of their personal identity impacted in various ways on their publicly-available research: ‘an underlying need and desire on the part of more recent generations of teachers and scholars to bring into play, and make more explicit, aspects of personal identity […] which, whether acknowledged or not, inform the writings of the scholar and critic – and which perhaps could be said to have always done so, albeit in an indirect and unavowed form’ (1999: 242).

In his earlier inaugural lecture in Hull in 1994, Brian’s reflection on his own trajectory had noted a shift away from initial high cultural aspirations – i.e., the choice of a Modern Languages degree as a means of ‘get[ting] away from one’s origins to a more exotic, beautiful, refined place’ – to the adoption of a more complex position of self-reflexivity in which personal aspects, generating a *regard de l’étranger* on France and Frenchness, could play a key role in analysis (1995: 2).[[3]](#endnote-3) In the reflection that follows in Brian’s article on ‘hidden selves’, Michel de Certeau provides a case study for exploration of the role of the personal in public scholarship. The author of *L’Écriture de l’histoire* and *L’Invention du quotidien* furnishes a complex and on occasion troubled example, for any emphasis in his work on the fundamental locatedness of scholarly activity is tempered by his own sense of personal solitude as well as of the institutional constraints he experienced regarding any desire to foreground subjectivity. Brian nevertheless detected in de Certeau the extent to which a historian ‘wanted to challenge the idea of the neutrality, objectivity and “scientificité” of scholarly work’ (1999: 244). This tension surrounding the scholar’s latent self and the presence nevertheless of persistent autobiographical traces leads to a conclusion that combines insight and audible relief:

Fortunately, the rest of us are not mysterious and charismatic lapsed Jesuit priests: we are allowed to have bodies as well as minds; we are allowed to have personal selves; we are allowed to be sons, fathers, brothers, mothers, daughters, sisters, friends and lovers, as well as scholars and teachers. We don’t have to take vows of abstinence, nor vows of silence. We are permitted to delve into our own ‘monde-mémoire’ and even speak of our past selves. And when we speak of our personal selves, past or present, we don’t have to do so as disembodied ‘voices’ divorced from our ‘everyday’ selves – with all which that crucial term ‘everyday’ implies in the context of modern French cultural studies. (1999: 252-3)

In sharp distinction to de Certeau, Brian notes, as a clear exception as well as an inspiration for his own reflection and wider practice, the case of Richard Hoggart, a key figure in the emergence of (British) cultural studies who – like his own contemporaries Stuart Hall and Raymond Williams – dwelt significantly on his origins, on the personal trajectories and transformations underpinning his scholarship, and on the political implications that these aspects generated. There is accordingly an emphasis – to borrow from C.L.R. James in *Beyond a Boundary* – on ‘movement; not where you are or what you have, but where you have come from, where you are going, and the rate at which you are getting there’ (2005 [1963]): 149). In his inaugural lecture at Hull, Brian takes as an illustrative example Hoggart’s *Uses of Literacy*, a text whose afterlives in French translation – *La Culture du pauvre: étude sur le style de vie des classes populaires en Angleterre* appeared in the influential series ‘Le sens commun’ with Éditions de Minuit in 1970 – have arguably eclipsed and outlived the impact of the original work. Quoting Jean-Claude Passeron, Hoggart’s French translator, Brian identifies in this text of the cultural studies pioneer aspects that would be central to this own research methods: ‘He had talked openly, honestly and truthfully about the working classes and popular classes without adopting either a stance of superior disdain or one of populist idealisation’ (1995: 10).

**Edgar Morin and the ‘enquête pluridisciplinaire de Pont-Croix’**

In parallel to the work of Hoggart and his peers on popular culture between the 1950s and the early 1970s, Edgar Morin was developing, in ways that were similarly often in tension with the institutional inertia that surrounded him and invariably depended on the development of interdisciplinary approaches, new means of studying social change in a French context. Central to Morin’s approach was a willingness to treat French mass culture during the *Trente Glorieuses* not only as a credible object of study, but also as a key source for understanding significant changes in post-war society. Central to his analysis was a conviction that, despite rhetoric to the contrary, the educated, intellectual classes were unwilling or unable to embrace the dynamic potential of rapid social change, whilst the wider population in fact had limited nostalgia for the past.

In an article on ‘The notion of “the anthropological” in Morin’s cultural analysis’, included in a special issue of *French Cultural Studies* devoted to the philosopher and sociologist, Brian Rigby described the importance for his subject of ‘the cyclical patterns of death and life and the unending and multifarious processes of germination, birth, growth, metamorphosis, decay and rebirth’ (1997: 335). Here, he linked this emphasis not only to an influence noted by Morin himself, namely the death of his mother when he was nine years old, but also to his belief in the capacity of human beings to find renewed ways of living in community. Morin’s work in this period was characterized by a willingness to adopt the perspective of those often marginalized in academic study:

his positive account of the process of modernization is governed not only by his belief in the profound ‘anthropological’ necessity to move forward, but also by his populist empathy with the feelings of the people, tastes which naturally coincide with the new mass culture emerging in France from the late 1950s onwards. (1997: 338)

A key text for understanding these processes is *Commune en France*, Morin’s contribution to the multidisciplinary study of the Breton community of Plozévet that had been launched by the Délégation à la recherche scientfique et technique (DGRST) in 1961 and whose work would last until 1967 (Morin, 1967).[[4]](#endnote-4) Brian Rigby describes the exceptional nature of this book in the context of its production in 1960s France: ‘Edgar Morin represents an interesting case of an eminent figure who not only tried to understand youth culture, but also felt positively drawn towards it, and readily admitted to the liberation it could offer him’ (Rigby, 1991: 168). In the context of a rapidly changing rural community, with social life increasingly atomized and focused on those domestic spaces radically transformed by consumer society (a process epitomized by objects such as the television), Morin sought to intervene by encouraging the young people of Plozévet to develop a youth club, which would serve as an autonomous space over which they would have control. Much of the focus of *Commune en France* is on the decline and fall of this plan as the dynamism of the project is slowly recuperated by adults into the structures of *Jeunesse et Loisirs*, and as Morin is forced to admit that the radicalism who had sought to project onto the young people perhaps says more about his own aspiration for revolution than about their own political instincts. Divergent attitudes to a screening of *The Wild One*, which leaves the teenagers in Plozévet largely unmoved, epitomizes this disappointment, although Morin retains nevertheless a positive sense of the adolescent culture he observes, not least because – in line with the underpinning principles of his work discussed above – ‘it challenged the puritanism and earnestness of an older militant culture solely preoccupied with political and educational goals’ (1991: 170).

Despite its subsequent prominence,[[5]](#endnote-5) Morin’s study of this Breton commune was just one of a series of outputs from the ‘enquête pluridisciplinaire de Pont-Croix’, the largescale interdisciplinary study involving a substantial team led by the anthropologist Robert Gessain, who was himself committed to an ‘étude transversale des petites populations’ (Paillard, 2010, 60). One of a number of projects based in French rural communities in the 1950s and 1960s – important examples, not least because of the outsider perspectives they involve, were the work of American anthropologist Lawrence Wylie in Roussillon in the Vaucluse and Chanzeaux in Anjou – the study of Plozévet focused specifically on the *commune* in the *pays bigouden*. This site was distinguished by the quality of its archives, the willingness of community leaders to support the proposed research, evidence of continued political duality between factions seen as *rouge* and *blanc*, and the persistence of a congenital hip disorder that suggested a relative degree of endogamy amongst the local population. Belonging to a particular ideological and intellectual niche in the 1960s,[[6]](#endnote-6) the wider project operated – in the terms of one of Morin’s collaborators on the original project, Bernard Paillard – ‘à la mesure de la volonté gaullo-pompidolienne de ce début des années soixante’ as it sought to ‘mobiliser et organiser la recherche autour des grands programmes’ (Paillard, 2001: 6). The initiative brought together anthropologists, sociologists, historians, social psychologists, geographers and gerontologists in what aimed to be an exhaustive study of a community in transition. It deployed principles of ethnographic observation and film developed in earlier work by the Musée de l’Homme to explore the relationship of the local and the global and to understand rapid changes evident in post-war French society. In his introduction to Morin’s *Journal de Plozévet*, the subsequently published diary on which this article will now focus, Paillard sets out the wider project’s ambitions: ‘sur le plan scientifique, de faire coopérer différentes disciplines, tester une hypothèse chère à certains promoteurs du projet, celle d’une articulation entre la réalité biologique et les faits sociaux, favoriser l’émergence de l’expertise dans le domaine des sciences humaines et sociales’ (2001: 5).

The long-term impact of the study was mixed. In scholarly terms, its legacy seems limited as the commitment to exhaustive, cross-disciplinary, site-focused studies subsided rapidly after the 1960s. Locally, however, the *enquête* created controversy, not least following the publication of Morin’s own book in 1967, as some members of the population took exception to being ‘ethnologized’ by Parisian intellectuals, as Breton figures such as Pierre-Jakez Hélias detected an insensitivity (not least linguistic) to the local context, as certain participants claimed their views had been misrepresented or their anonymity breached, and as others saw in the project findings an attempt to impose a reactionary adherence to the past in a community that saw itself committed to modernization.

Edgar Morin had been invited to join the project in early 1965 when the work was already well-established, an addition to the scheme of research motivated partly on political grounds as Gessain sought to maintain good relations with Georges Pompidou by providing a report on modernity and modernization in the *commune* (Lemieux, 2009: 434-5). Morin had previously little experience of working in rural communities, and was at the time entertaining plans to write an ambitious book on ‘la théorie de la nation’ (Paillard, 2001: 9). His specific role in Plozévet was to study the place of modernization, a concept he has subsequently claimed was ‘absolument flou’, in both practical and structural terms (Morin, 2010: 113). This was a topic he had already addressed in relation to popular culture in *L’Esprit du temps* (1962), but in Brittany a particular interest emerged, as I have suggested already, in ‘une poussée émancipatrice chez les adolescents et chez les femmes’. This was a development in which Morin detected embryonic traces of wider social upheavals that would mark the end of the same decade. The methodological response – underpinning much of the reflection in *Commune en France* – was a form of participant observation that Morin, previously unaccustomed to such sustained fieldwork, sought to develop progressively and in response to experience on the ground. Challenging approaches in the wider project that prescribed methodology and transformed it into ‘un veritable rouleau compresseur’, Morin adopted instead two core principles: reflexivity – ‘l’enquête devait s’autoétudier pour mieux étudier le terrain’; and responsiveness – ‘tenir compete de tout ce qui nous arrivait’ (2010: 119-20).

The result is a highly personal form of engagement, implicit in the text of *Commune en France*, but only rarely fully manifest. There are occasional glimpses of the highly engaged nature of Morin’s work, such as a reference in the acknowledgements to Morin’s close complicity with the group of young people with whom he interacted in the core piece of participant research: ‘salut du “capitaine Haddock” à ceux qui se sont lancés dans l’aventure du comité des jeunes’ (Morin, 1984b: 19).[[7]](#endnote-7) The identification of a ‘défense de la *privacy* individuelle’ among the population of Plozévet is also reflected in Morin’s own scientific method, not – given its emphasis on participant observation – aiming at any sort of neutrality or objectivity, but nevertheless tempering any admission of subjectivity with a reluctance to engage in unnecessary self-exposure or de-anonymization of informants (Morin, 1984b: 37). The sociologist has nevertheless commented regularly on the impact that the research conducted in Plozévet had on his own trajectory as a researcher. In the introduction to *Commune en France*, for instance, he notes:

J’ai été salutairement contraint à me plier à la singularité de Plodémet. Les idées clefs auxquelles je tiens aujourd’hui ne sont pas celles que j’apportais dans mon havresac, mais celles qui me sont venues de Plodémet, en pays bigouden, canton de Plogastel, Sud-Finistère. (Morin, 1984b: 13)

The impact of this ‘noce inattendue, inoubliable, avec le concret’ is accordingly considerable, but its personal dimensions are presented customarily as stages in the sociologist’s trajectory as a scholar and thinker: ‘J’y ai retrouvé les traces d’une lutte grandiose entre deux mondes, j’y ai retrouvé les courants du temps, les grands problèmes de l’homme’, embodied not in his own life experience but in that of others: ‘incarnés dans des visages, des regards et des destinées irremplaçables’ (Morin, 1984b: 12-13). In the interview with Paillard, Morin goes further and explicitly identifies the Breton fieldwork and the reflection it allowed with the emergence of ‘la Méthode’, the means of grappling with complexity that characterizes much of his later work and is outlined in the six volumes with that title published between 1977 and 2004. The aim of the rest of this article is to suggest that the crucial intellectual development to the experience in Plozévet is accompanied by the evolution of a parallel set of more personal questions. These aspects are far from discrete and tend, as the discussion below makes clear, to be closely entangled. Read together, they provide valuable insights into the genesis of a key text of the social, cultural and intellectual history of post-war France.

***Journal de Plozévet* and the ‘hidden selves’ of Edgar Morin**

Still unpublished when the special issue of *French Cultural Studies* devoted to Morin (including Brian Rigby’s article on the ‘anthropological’) appeared in 1997, *Journal de Plozévet* is a document that does much to illuminate further the author’s ‘hidden selves’ implicated in this Breton fieldwork as well as the personal dimensions of the research this research entailed.[[8]](#endnote-8) A sociologist and philosopher, Morin is certainly not a Modern Linguist, but reading the diary in relation to *Commune en France* provides a telling contribution, from which those in Modern Languages have arguably much to learn, to the discussions of self-suppression and self-revelation with which this article opened. Morin’s *journal* appeared in 2001, in a version edited by Bernard Paillard. It constitutes a key document for understanding the autobiographical elements often sublimated in *Commune en France*. In the ‘Mémento de l’enquêteur’, notes aimed at the students who conducted much of the research on which his observations drew, and which now form an appendix to the *journal* itself, Morin notes the centrality of the disciplined keeping of a diary (including his own) to the methodology he envisaged:

Dans la tenue quotidienne du journal s’accomplissent ensemble les processus susmentionnés: ressentir, percevoir, noter, réfléchir. Le journal permet de percevoir l’association entre la réalité subjective et la réalité objective. Il permet la decantation entre ces deux réalités. La tenue du journal est donc indispensable à cette recherche. (Morin, 2001: 375)

The future publication of the *Journal de Plozévet* is also a subject addressed self-referentially in the document itself when Morin, preparing the main programme of research to be conducted in summer 1965, reflects on its publication:

…j’ai compris que ce journal, j’allais le publier. Mais quand? Comment? Expurgerai-je? Selon seulement le principe de sauvegarde d’intimité? Ou selon un principe de prudence? Je sens que je vais devoir lutter contre la prudence. De toute façon, en ce qui concerne Plozévet, je ne donnerai pas les noms et je l’appellerai non pas Villefranche, mais Changebourg. (2001: 81)

Such overt reflection on this subsequent dissemination of his text signals to the reader that the personal nature of the diary and the appearance of privileged access this seeks to generates are themselves tempered by its author’s awareness of an imagined future audience. It goes without saying, as Michel Leiris demonstrates in a text such as *L’Age d’homme*, such self-aware self-revelation entails further layers of obfuscation, and the reader must remain as attentive to the gaps in the *journal* as to its disclosures.

The diary appears fleetingly as one of the underpinning sources of *Commune en France* when, in the appendix devoted to ‘une démarche multidimensionnelle’, Morin refers in his book to ‘l’intercommunication des journaux d’enquête et notamment de notre propre journal’ (1984b: 405). Although this crucial underpinning data is largely eclipsed as it is absorbed into the monographic approach, the importance of the diaries is implicit in Morin’s methodological comments, not least in his comments on ‘la relation entre le chercheur et le terrain’:

Il ne s’agit pas seulement d’une relation sujet-objet. Le terrain est humain. […] Nous pensons que la relation optimale requiert à la fois, d’une part détachement et objectivation à l’égard de l’objet de l’enquête, d’autre part participation et sympathie à l’égard du sujet enquêté. Comme le sujet enquêté et l’objet de l’enquête ne font qu’un, nous sommes amenés à être doubles. (1984b: 401)

Morin’s approach to Plozévet sought to accentuate this relationality, and he eschews any attempt at active effacement of the researcher by adopting methods – such as the direct interview rather than the more traditional questionnaire – that required face-to-face contact and permitted as a result for a more spontaneous adjustment of interventions in the light of responses elicited. The reader discovers in *Journal de Plozévet* that the diary itself becomes a point of contention on occasion: the psychosociologist Jean-Marie **Jakobi – ‘chargé d’enquêter sur les enquêteurs’ (Morin, 2001: 98) – requests access to Morin’s text. This is a suggestion that fellow researcher Jean-Louis Peninou rejects (‘il vaut mieux, pour lui, que le journal demeure en circuit très fermé’ [Morin, 2001: 99]), but to which Morin replies: ‘Je dis que je pourrais communiquer un journal autocensuré où seraient caviardées quelques astuces paillardes. Silence’ (Morin, 2001: 99).**[[9]](#endnote-9)

The Morin who emerges from the diary is one largely absent from his monograph: humorous, fickle, judgemental on occasion and prone to error, and above all an embodied researcher recording his human limits (suffering not least from the prolonged aftereffects of a previous illness):

ce dimanche après-midi, je suis complètement écrasé, crise hépatique, à la suite du coup de soleil attrapé la veille. Je suis complètement hébété et, après les crêpes chez Jenny, […] je suis étalé dans le jardin Le Bail, entre sommeil et latence végétative. Couché tôt et long sommeil réparateur de treize heures. (**Morin, 2001:** 117)

Dîner-gueuleton chez Roma à Cleden Cap Sizun. Le lendemain, j’ai une crise hépatique qui me met K.O. (**Morin, 2001:** 139)

Je rentre à Paris le lundi 27. Je tombe malade le surlendemain (angine? grippe?). La fièvre ne me quitte que le dimanche. (**Morin, 2001:** 231)

There are also, on occasion, moments of genuine *mise-en-abîme* as the diarist describes himself as subject to the daily discipline of the form: ‘Il fait froid dehors et moi, je rédige le journal jusqu’à une heure du matin, ratant le bal de Pouldreuzic’ (**Morin, 2001:** 52). As such, the diary provides an indication of the scaffolding on which the writing of *La Métamorphose de Plozevet* relies. This is an element disguised as a result of the generic and institutional constraints of the monographic approach on which the book relies, but one nevertheless foregrounded in Morin’s more experimental work in the same period, not least the film *Chronique d’un été*, co-directed with Jean Rouch, whose opening and closing sequences retain aspects of the disagreements between the two men over the representation of social reality (see Forsdick, 1997: 315).

As Bernard Paillard notes, the *Journal de Plozévet* fulfils – in this context – a ‘mission polyvalente’: a place for daily observation and notation, including of the contingencies – such as his own cashflow problems (**Morin, 2001:** 224) or struggles with the administration (2001 :366)– that impede the progress of the research; a forum for personal reactions to challenges in the field; a notebook to set out emerging hypotheses; and a safety valve allowing the researcher to release frustrations relating to his colleagues (Paillard, 2001: 11). Inherent in all of these functions are the deeply personal elements central to the genre of the diary, and in addition to the intellectual and methodological concerns that fascinated Morin is an insight into the sociologist as an individual grappling with the challenges of the everyday. In Paillard’s terms:

On le découvre avec ses sensibilités et ses insatisfactions, avec ses curiosités et ses indiscrétions, avec ses attirances et ses indifférences. On peut le voir taquin et agacé. […] On décèle un Morin bouillonnant d’idées mais peu organisateur, capable d’empathie mais aussi parfois quelque peu égoïste, sachant se remettre en cause mais aussi capable de certaines préventions. (2001: 16)

***Journal de Plozévet*: between the *quotidien* and the *intime***

The diary begins with Morin’s arrival from Paris in his 4 CV, ‘balayée par les rafales de vent et de pluie’, in March 1965 (**Morin, 2001:** 19).[[10]](#endnote-10) His initial impressions are far from promising: ‘long village-rue. Il pleut. Tout semble desert, mort’. This ‘découverte de Plozévet’ provides, however, an account of the sociologist’s progressive engagement with the Breton *commune*, an element inevitably lacking from the retrospective account of his study, eventually written away from Brittany, at first in Denmark where he was invited in early 1966, subsequently at Neaulphe-le-Château where he stayed with Marguerite Duras, and finally at a friend’s house at SidiBou-Saïd in Tunisia (Lemieux, 2009: 441-2).

Seeking a room in vain in the hôtel de Voyageurs, the opening scene is almost a formulaic one as the traveller, already self-conscious of his outsider status, is reminded acutely of his unfamiliarity with these surroundings. ‘De rares personnes observent la voiture’, not least, we learn subsequently, as a result of its Parisian number plate. The sociologist, whose role it is to observe, is observed, and farcical efforts to integrate fail for multiple reasons:

Croyant me mettre à la couleur locale, je commande une eau de vie de cidre, ignorant que cet alcool est appelé ‘lambic’ dans le pays, que sa vente est interdite et qu’il n’est pas commercialisé. Nous dégustons un quelconque cognac sous le regard curieux des vieux qui parlent en Breton entre eux. [Morin, 2001: 20]

Like a traveller or ethnography arriving in the field and performing his outsider status, Morin writes of ‘premiers contacts’ (2001: 22), and a recurrent feature in these is the tendency of the population to ‘regarde[r] avec curiosité’. The curiosity directed to the traveller in these scenes of arrival arguably says more about the anxieties and self-consciousness of Morin than it does about the inquisitiveness of those who observe him, not least because the latter would, by this stage, have been somewhat blasé as yet another Parisian researcher disembarked in their everyday spaces. The sense of the ‘chercheur […] ethnographié et sociologisé par la population plodémétienne’ (1984b: 34) is nevertheless recurrent throughout the journal as Morin discovers – particularly in the context of his intervention with the young people of the *commune* – that the inhabitants ‘s’interrogent sur [lui]’ (2001: 170).

The opening pages yield a clear insight into Morin’s knowing engagement with the generic features of the forms with which he engaged, but the diary nevertheless provides access to everyday, personal details of its author’s life that are evacuated from his subsequent monographic treatment of work in the field. The *journal* reveals, for instance, the eclectic reading in which Morin engaged during the Plozévet project, with sources as varied as Teilhard de Chardin (2001 :28) and Lawrence Wylie (233). It provides glimpses of the music he was listening to (Tom Jones [182], as well as Sandie Shaw, The Beatles and The Rolling Stones [235]) and the films he went to see (e.g., *La Belle Américaine* [204]). It details the media with which he engaged to maintain a connection with intellectual life in Paris: ‘Au café des Sports, toujours pas *le Monde*. J’achète *France Soir* et le *Télégramme de Brest*’ (47); later, *Paris-Match* provides details of the Nobel laureates of 1965 (278). The diary also provides an insight into an aspect of Morin’s life that is apparent to anyone with an overview of his activity at the time, but which is inevitably absent from *Commune en France*: i.e., the extent to which the Breton fieldwork fits into a much more diverse pattern of commitments, including travel, other writing, lecturing and editing a major journal. At times, these multiple responsibilities are overwhelming: ‘Je suis claqué. J’écris des lettres savantes. J’ai un gros courier en retard’ (277). He continues for instance, to arrange his monthly seminar in Paris on ‘sociologie du présent’, substituting on one occasion his own talk on Plozévet for a planned intervention on disaster studies by Béatrice Lartigue (who is ‘frappée par une dépression nerveuse accrue par les lectures catastrophiques que je lui infligeais’ [87]); he notes that a day is spent in July 1965 writing his ‘introduction au numéro de *Communications* sur la chanson’ (217). In September 1965, as the research of his team draws to an end, Morin is absent twice: to be part of a film festival jury in Venice, and to attend the opening of a faculty of mass communications in Brazil (227). The following month he participates in the conference of the Société française de sociologie (232-34), where a paper by Lawrence Wylie about work in the Vaucluse contains clear echoes with Morin’s own research in Brittany and appears even to influence his thinking at a crucial point in its conduct.

Most notably, however, in its focus on such everyday detail, *Journal de Plozévet* gives prominence to a figure only fleetingly present in *Commune en France*, Morin’s partner and later second wife, Johanne Harelle. Their relationship features throughout the *journal*, and there are numerous glimpses of domestic intimacy as, for example, the couple celebrate (on 22 June 1965) ‘l’anniversaire de [leur] rencontre’ by dining ‘à l’auberge du Menan à Locronan’ (110). The 1967 monograph is dedicated to her: ‘A Johanne, / qui fut toujours présente, / participante, / qui a aimé et m’a aidé à aimer / les Plodémétiens’ (Morin, 1984b: 3), and this dedication makes allusive reference to the importance of Harelle’s participation in the fieldwork as well as her key role in Morin’s own evolving relationship with his object of study. She emerges only fleetingly in Morin’s monograph, asking a group of adolescents, for instance: ‘Quels événements vous ont frappe?’ (1984b: 190), but her identity is otherwise unclear. Johanne was a Canadian actress (best known for her semi-autobiographical role in Claude Jutra’s *A tout prendre*), model and writer, now recognized as the first Black woman to have gained visibility in the world of fashion in Quebec. Having met Morin in 1964, she played a key role in introducing the sociologist to contemporary youth culture, and several entries in the Plozévet diaries describe her taking him to nightclubs in nearby towns. For Morin’s biographer Emmanuel Lemieux, Harelle took on the role in Plozévet of ‘assistante improvisée’ (2009: 435), capable of creating connections with elements of the population – most notably women and young people – crucial for Morin’s research, but with whom making connections was not for him obvious. Another researcher on the team, Jean-Louis Peninou, describes the ‘couple pittoresque’ that Harelle and Morin formed: ‘elle une superbe *Black* pleine de fantaisie, et lui qui sera bientôt surnommé “capitaine Haddock” pas les jeunes du village’ (cited in Lemieux, 2009: 435).

There is interest in the couple – ‘[c]ette gamine et ce vieux!’ (Morin, 2001: 295) –, but this is focused almost exclusively on the nature of their relationship and the apparent age difference between them; the diary records only two incidents that pertain to questions of race (and racism), in the first of which Johanne is insulted in a bar (144), and in the second of which she is subjected to an ‘air dédaigneux’ by a visiting missionary as a result of her ‘peau foncée’ (266). However, in the later interview with Paillard, Morin focuses positively on his partner’s ethnicity and its potential impact in 1960s Brittany: ‘je vivais avec une femme qui pouvait paraître très exotique pour les Plozévétiens puisqu’elle était noire de peau. Mais elle avait beaucoup de sympathie, beaucoup de chaleur humaine, beaucoup de qualités de communication. Ces deux éléments ont favorisé la connaissance de ce terrain’ (Morin, 2010: 121). The diary provides a clear reflection of her unofficial role in the project, and captures the tipping point in April 1965 when, in an initial conversation with the three teenage girls who become central to the research, Johanne – ‘cette belle personne noire aux yeux peints qui leur parle en camarade’ – becomes ‘un personnage actif de l’enquête’ (Morin, 2001: 35). Her interventions at key moments – cooking, for instance, ‘un sensationnel curry’ (180) during a meeting with the committee of young people – ensure the evolution of research in ways that are not captured in the eventual monograph. Johanne plays a catalytic role in the team also, on one occasion breaking a confidence regarding Morin’s frustration with his fellow researchers. She says during another meal: ‘Edgar m’a engueulée à votre place. C’est moi qui ai tout pris. Il dit que vous êtes feignants, que vous ne foutez rien’ (112), and as a result breaches an *impasse* in the research.

Morin underlines in his diary the invaluable nature of what he called the ‘phénomène Johanne’:

Venue d’abord comme présence purement privée, elle s’est attachée aux jeunes, aux gens. Mue par son insondable curiosité, par sa spontanéité inouïe, par sa faculté de sympathie, elle est devenue une Margaret Mead à l’état sauvage. (186)

He concludes by acknowledging that the *enquête* he is leading would not have been possible without her presence: ‘son incomparable force d’empathie nous a tous plozévétisés à sa suite. […] Johanne est la grande communicante, la grande communicatrice de notre groupe’ (186).

***Une vie normale de Plozévétien*: Edgar Morin in the field**

The diary also provides a clear reflection of the conditions in which Morin lived in Plozévet, a key element of participant observation but one that is often minimized in subsequent accounts. He describes, for instance, the rejection of accommodation in a hotel (many of the researchers lived in nearby Pont Croix, where heated rooms were available), and the decision to rent a local *penty*, a simple traditional dwelling with few home comforts. In his interview with Paillard, Morin outlines the benefits of this arrangement:

vivant une vie normale de Plozévétien, je pouvais me mêler aux gens, discuter avec eux, avec les voisins. J’allais faire mes courses dans les commerces de la commune, je fréquentais ses cafés. […] Cela nous a permis une sorte d’imbibition, d’imprégnation de la réalité plozévétienne. (Morin, 2010: 121).

As the diary draws to an end, Morin – spending an afternoon in Quimper – reflects on the normalization of the *commune* in his life: ‘Plo est devenu mon décor naturel et me voilà tout émerveillé de me balader en ville’ (Morin, 2001: 329). Such an observation reveals the extent that he achieved a core aspiration set out in the ‘Mémento de l’enquêteur’, notes aimed at the students who conducted much of the research on which Morin’s work drew and which now form an appendix to the *journal*: ‘Il faut jouer mentalement, affectivement à être plozévetien, dans une sorte de simulation sincère’ (373). This approach depends on the forms of social insertion that the diary records in great detail: many of the reflections on modernity emerge from chance encounters as Morin meets people going about their business in the town or engages in everyday activities. The journal gathers a series of these random moments that are classed as ‘instantanés’ (110). At times, these are a performance of the quotidian: at the *kermesse* in Plogoff, Morin wins a tin of peas and two cups and saucers in the tombola, Johanne ‘un petit mouton en peluche’ (126); again, at the *fête* in Poulhan, he wins ‘des lots minables, horribles petites statuettes de plastique ou de plâtre’ (174), an occasion on which the author’s rare sense of aloofness regarding this environment is captured in the observation that ‘[t]out est laid’ in this ‘grand vide culturel’ (175). At other times, however, these moments fulfil a different function: a passing observation of attendance at mass on a Sunday in June takes on an epiphanic dimension as Morin, Johanne and Peninou find themselves ‘fascinés et, encore une fois, bizarrement émus’ (123) to observe the convergence of different worlds: ‘Le moderne et le traditionnel se mélangent, arrivent par corpuscules successifs, en ondes mêlées. (123).

Despite these claims of integration, it is clear that Morin remains an outsider, but the diary nevertheless shows him being drawn into Breton culture – ‘cette civilisation assez ouverte, très communicative, très conviviale, avec ses bistrots, ses buvettes, ses fêtes’ – to the extent that he concludes, in the interview with Paillard: ‘Je me sentais très à mon aise à Plozévet’ (Morin, 2010: 121). His attraction to the geography of the area around Plozévet – including sites such as the pointe du Raz (Morin, 2001: 183) – is evident throughout the *journal*, and as the diary evolves, Morin attempts to go native. At one point, he even fantasizes about moving to the *commune*, buying a disused mill, and becoming ‘un Daudet Breton des sciences humaines’ (308). His nickname amongst the young people – ‘Capitaine Haddock’ – results from his wearing the ‘casquette de marin’ that Johanne gives him for his birthday, and this sartorial assimilation to Breton culture is completed by his adoption also of ‘le pull-over marin sur lequel je me cristallisais de plus en plus ardemment’ (154). Approached at a birthday party for a centenarian in the *commune* by a ‘demi-soulard’ who claims that Morin is from Pouldreuzic, he notes in his diary: ‘Merveilleuse réussite de méthode mimético-identificative: j’apparais, à ces braves gens, comme un authentique et rustique Breton’ (267).

*Journal de Plozévet* thus reveals a genuine attraction to a *commune* Morin would later describe as his ‘troisième patrie’ (Morin, 1984a: 172), and this becomes increasingly evident throughout the diary as its author discusses the role of his methodological adoption of *combibendalité* and (to a lesser extent, largely as a result of budgetary restrictions) *commensualité* – i.e., drinking and eating with his research ‘subjects’ – as key aspects of the approach to Plozévet. In this context, Morin notes the types of socially differentiated familiarity that are not reflected quite as openly in *Commune en France*: ‘les populaires ou ruraux me tutoient […] alors que les “bourgeois”, que je tutoie, me vouvoient’ (Morin, 2001: 177), and it is clear that this contact gives him access to a sense of the ‘plozévéité’ (187) that is central to his project. In this way, the diary deploys its observation of the everyday to provide a clear account of the progressive elaboration of a methodology in the field, not least in collaboration with the team of young researchers Morin built up and in response to findings as they emerged. The *journal* reveals, for instance, the way in which – having returned to Paris following his initial visit to Plozévet – Morin first imagined the sociological intervention with the group of young people in the *commune*: ‘S’introduire dans un groupe de jeunes ou en former un (autour du “tourne-disque”, par exemple). Former un “club”’ (26). His observations of youth culture in the *commune*, whilst in line with previous analyses of what Morin had famously dubbed ‘yéyé’ culture, reveal also a clear process of *bricolage* as he adapts observational techniques from elsewhere – comparisons, for instance, between ‘Mods’ and ‘Rockers’ (50) – to understand what he encounters. It is this work with the young people that plays a key role in the *journal*, triggering reflections on the political conservatism of the *commune* – ‘inertie de la municipalité, inertie du corps enseignant, inertie des commerçants’ (135) – that he was inevitably obliged to express with much greater subtlety in his monograph.

What emerges also in the *journal* are the (often highly personal) details of the other team members with whom Morin worked: he seems fascinated by a young researcher Anne, who is seen to have allowed herself to be ‘englouti[e] par les voluptés plozévétiennes’ (237) or described elsewhere as drawn into the ‘*Dolce vita* plozévétienne’ (321), developments that ironically prevent her from conducting the work she was allocated on ‘l’eros plozévétien’ (237). At the same time, Morin focuses on fractures highly evident in the team but largely absent from the more homogenized account of the research in *Commune en France*. Robert Gessain is a particular source of animosity for him as the project’s overall director is understood – according to a source kept anonymous even in the diary – to be ‘peu favourable à notre recherche’ (80). The diary regularly records disappointment with Morin’s direct collaborators too: ‘Camoufler son informateur et saboteur l’enquête d’autrui, telles sont les normes spontanées de l’enquête “interdisciplinaire”’ (73). Such tensions are apparent throughout the *journal*, and Morin notes that ‘[l]a plongée sur Plozévet a dévié en plongée sur les moeurs des chercheurs’ (74). Romain Denis, for example, one of the original researchers on the project, is described as torn between loyalty towards the sociologist Georges Lapassade (Morin’s friend and Denis’s previous collaborator) and to Morin himself (under whom he was now working). This is not least because of methodological disagreements between the two men over the sociological value of intervention which surface during an account of a dinner in April 1965, when Morin describes Denis’s dilemma not without a certain glee: ‘préoccupé, voire travaillé par un conflit entre sa foi lapassadienne et son engagement pratique morinien’ (36).

There are numerous other strains recorded in the diary between Morin and his fellow researchers, often presented in strongly affective terms: ‘si Peninou m’a trompé’, he notes in the journal, ‘c’est le divorce. Je veux dire pas tant sur le plan travail que sur le plan affectif. C’est simplement la rupture d’un rapport amical’ (145); a major methodological disagreement with the student researcher Pierre Thébaud is similarly presented in terms of ‘divorce’ (185). One of the researchers, Solange Petit, confides to Morin that she has written a novel on the project, a revelation which leads him to speculate that ‘ce qui sortira de plus sociologique sur Plozévet sera, peut-être, ce roman’ (73). The fictional account has not yet surfaced, but the *Journal de Plozévet* gives a strong flavour of the tensions, intrigues and disputes it might have contained.

**Conclusion: the diary and the ‘double “je” de l’enquêteur’**

The late Myron Kofman – who, together with Brian Rigby, was one of the most astute readers of Edgar Morin’s work – claimed that the philosopher and sociologist might be considered as ‘the most self-referential thinker in French since Montaigne’ (1996: 2). It is true that Morin’s *oeuvre* contains a series of highly autobiographical texts, ranging from *Autocritique* (1959; an account of the evolution of his personal relationship to communism, and in particular of his *déconversion* from it) to *Mon Paris, ma mémoire* (2014; a reflection on the political and intellectual resonance for him of various *quartiers* in the French capital). In 2017, he also published a semi-autobiographical novel, *L’Ile de Luna*, based around the events of his childhood and written almost seventy years previously. Other works, such as the *Journal de Californie* (1970), openly deploy the diary form to narrate a recent experience (in this case, his stay at the Salk Institute in San Diego in 1969), and 2012 saw the publication in two substantial volumes of Morin’s *journaux*, covering the periods 1962-1987 (including the time in Plozévet) as well as 1992-2010. It is as a result difficult to make any claim – to return to the terms explored at the opening of this article – that Morin’s writings systematically conceal any sort of ‘hidden self’. *Commune en France*, despite the highly personal aspects of the methodology underpinning the work, nevertheless reflects more openly the mechanisms of partial concealment that much academic writing requires.

In the final stages of *Journal de Plozévet*, Morin notes the full effect this Breton period had had on him:

Je ne saurais comment dire le contentement pour moi de cette enquête à Plo, à la fois exercice de style sociologique, enquête en France, voyage dans la vie quotidienne, plongée dans la condition humaine… (2001: 335)

Reflecting a commitment to openly including spontaneous traces of this impact, Morin’s initial intention was to publish alongside his monograph some of the diaries produced in the field. This is evident in the author’s suggestions in *Journal de Plozévet* about the book that would emerge from the project: he considers the nature of the monograph required of him (355); outlines the provisional structure of the volume (356); suggests a possible title (‘enquête en France’ [357]); and then concludes with an approach to publishing in two volumes that would combine the ‘[j]ournaux d’enquête’ with the ‘rapport’. *Commune de France* appeared without this underpinning data in 1967. When the diary – which hitherto appears only to have been circulated among the closed circle of Morin’s project team – was eventually published over thirty-five years later, it became part of a tradition of field journals that exist in a contrapuntal and at times contradictory relationship to more monographic treatments of the ethnography they underpin. This is epitomized perhaps by the (at the time) controversial publication of Bronislaw Malinowski’s Diary in the Strict Sense of the Term (1967), a private text written in Polish during the final phase of fieldwork in the Trobriand Islands of eastern New Guinea that is now read alongside formal writings produced in this context including Argonauts of the Western Pacific (1922). Whilst not containing material of the intimate and controversial nature of Malinowski’s diary, *Journal de Plozévet* operates as the second panel of a diptych of which *Commune en France* was, for three decades, the only available part; and the appearance of Morin’s diary was similarly not without controversy, most notably in Plozévet itself where the initial sociological study had already itself triggered what the author himself dubbed ‘un petit procès de Moscou’ (cited in Lemieux, 2009: 442), not least (as noted above) at the hands of Pierre-Jakez Hélias, whose own father was from Plozévet, and who felt himself that he had been marginalized by the *enquête* and that much local detail had been ignored as a result of the inability of the majority of researchers to speak Breton. Morin notes that the publication of the diary triggered ‘un certain nombre de remous parce que telles ou telles phrases avaient été très mal jugées par des personnes que j’avais citées’ (Morin, 2010: 123), suggesting not only that the passage of time had not reduced his reputation in certain quarters for being a ‘fouille-merde’ (1984b: 403), but also that the de-anonymization inherent in the appearance of the *journal* had even exacerbated this situation.

It is in the diary that the ‘double “je” de l’enquêteur’ – as well as the dilemmas, personal and professional, that this doubling implies – becomes apparent (Morin, 1984b: 403). In literary terms, the *journal* fulfils in part a ‘genetic’ function, providing, for instance, the sources for elements of Morin’s monograph that would prove controversial, such as the comment he reports in response to a discussion about the young people’s need for a subsidy to support their planned activity: ‘ils n’ont qu’à ramasser les goémon, les petits pois, la vieille ferraille’ (1984b: 216). In the same vein, the diary gives an indication of the extent to which Morin – as he recognizes openly in the acknowledgements that open his monograph – drew on the work of his wider team to complement his own observations.[[11]](#endnote-11) Most importantly, however, reading in counterpoint the two texts – the one providing spontaneous reflections in the field, the other their processing in the immediate aftermath of the *enquête* – is part of a revelation of the ‘hidden selves’ of the researcher embedded in this well-known monograph, gesturing towards the ways in which we may read works such as *Commune en France* as a form of *autobiographie involontaire*.[[12]](#endnote-12)

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2. See, most notably, Kaplan, 1993. On this text, see Rao, 2016. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. This is the text of an inaugural lecture delivered at the University of Hull on 17 January 1994. See also Kelly, 2014. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. I quote in the current article from a subsequent and retitled paperback edition, *La Métamorphose de Plozevet: commune en France* (Morin, 1984b). Morin notes in this later edition: ‘Plodémet était le pseudonyme que je me croyais tenu d’utiliser alors’ (1), although he claimed that the publication of André Burguière’s *Bretons de Plozévet* (1977) meant that such an approach was no longer necessary. There is some disagreement – as is occasionally the case with Breton proper names – over the accent on the first ‘e’ of Plozévet. I have respected common usage and retained the accent in the body of the article but followed the alternative when necessary in quotations and titles. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Morin’s work was translated into English (Morin, 1970), and has subsequently been recognized as a classic sociological study. Its Japanese translation has also had a significant influence (Ogino, 2010). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. André Burguière, a historian involved in the project who produced in *Bretons de Plozévet* its definitive overview, described the *enquête* as ‘une configuration intellectuelle largement révolue’ dependent on ‘une mystique volontariste du développement scientifique des sciences humaines par le pouvoir gaulliste qui cherche à l’époque à asseoir une ambition nationale et à prolonger la forte croissance économique’ (cited in Lemieux, 2009: 432). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Morin explains the designation elsewhere in his monograph: ‘ainsi surnommé pour ma barbe d’alors et ma casquette de marin’ (1984b: 197). [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. *Journal de Plozévet* is the centrepiece of a range of new material on Morin’s project that has appeared over the past twenty years. In addition to Lemieux’s biography (2009) and the collection of essays entitled *En France rurale* (Paillard, Simon and Le Gall, 2010), I note also Plozarch, the research project developed by Bernard Paillard in collaboration with inhabitants of Plozévet. Conducted between 2010 and 2013, this was co-funded by the CNRS and the Conseil régional de Bretagne and aimed to produce an online archive of material linked to the wider interdisciplinary project. Limited materials and an account of the project are available at: https://plozevet.hypotheses.org/. Although they have not been used for this particular article, Morin has recently deposited four boxes of archives relating to his work and that of his team at the Institut Mémoires de l’Edition Contemporaine (IMEC) in Caen. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. On Jakobi’s role in the project, see Burguière, 2005. Jakobi persists in his desire to read the *journal* (**Morin, 2001:** 230), but Morin again delays this ‘jusqu’à l’achèvement de l’enquête proprement dite’. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. There is a recurrent interest in cars throughout the *journal* (see, e.g. a discussion of the relative merits of the 2 CV and 4 CV in an interview with an informant on 23 April [**Morin, 2001:** 65]; the association of inhabitants with the vehicles – a Simca 1000 and R 8 – they drive [209]; a reflection on the Ami 6, seen as a ‘2 CV embourgeoisée’ [236]). This reflects a similar focus in Morin’s monograph itself on the impact of ‘l’ère des voitures de tourisme [qui] commence en 1953 (surtout 2 CV, 4 CV, puis R 4, Ami 6). See Morin, 1984b: 99 and 376-8, for a discussion of the car as a symbol of ‘autonomie-circulation’ as well as of ‘la nouvelle appropriation jouisseuse de l’espace’. See also Ross, 1995. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. This is an important dimension as Gessain and others were critical of Morin when *Commune en France* was published, accusing him of ‘plagiat’ and ‘vol d’informations’ (Paillard, 2001: 14). [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. The term was coined by Georges Balandier (cited in Rigby, 1999: 243). [↑](#endnote-ref-12)