

Making *Sociologically-Grounded* Fictions. A Review of the *Sociorama* Collection Experience*

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Abstract

As members of the scientific committee of a collection of sociological comic strips, we offer feedback here on our experience of translating qualitative sociological research into graphic fictions. Through the presentation of main editorial choices and the organization of the adaptation work, we explain and discuss the effects produced by this type of adaptation on sociological discourse. We present a “lesson learned” from this adaptation process that disrupted and challenged the inherent assumptions of academic sociological writing. This review of *Sociorama* albums highlights some advantages and successes, as well as some limitations and obstacles introduced by this comic-ization.

Keywords: Graphic Novels; Comic-ization; Popularization; Communicating Social Sciences; Sociological Writing.

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“Surely, Sociology would not be worth an hour of effort if its sole aim were to discover the strings that move the actors it observes [...] if it did not assign itself the task of restoring to those people the meaning of their actions”

– Bourdieu, 1962, p. 102.¹

“The *Sociorama* collection is where comics and sociology meet. [...] This yields fiction anchored in the realities of the field. Not every resemblance will be pure coincidence”

– *Sociorama*, Presentation of the collection featured in the albums.

Since the very beginnings of sociology as a scientific discipline in the late nineteenth century, sociologists have engaged in unending reflection on how it should take its place in public discourse. Going beyond a purely speculative interest (Durkheim, 1893), articulating the relationship between the academic and political realms (Weber, 1919), as well as revealing to social agents the recurrences that structure their actions (Bourdieu, 1962), are among the ways that sociologists have used to disseminate sociology in public debate (Castel, 2000; Burawoy, 2005). The *Sociorama* collection was created with this same ambition: to adapt sociological works in the form of fictional narratives in order to reach a much wider readership and to disseminate sociological knowledge beyond its ordinary audience. Between 2016 and 2020, the collection published twelve albums and two special issues that can be bought to the shelves of both generalist booksellers and bookstores specializing in comics.²

In *Sociorama* albums, cartoonists (sometimes together with sociologists) imagine *sociologically grounded* graphic fictions: a whole story and fictional characters inspired by sociological descriptions and scientific results. As such, *Sociorama* addresses very different questions than those raised by the use of drawing during fieldwork for anthropologists and sociologists (Ingold, 2011; Nocerino, 2016; Morton, 2018; Tondeur, 2018) and more generally in “comics-based research” (Kuttner, Weaver-Hightower & Sousanis, 2020). Firstly, in *Sociorama*, drawing is strictly used *a posteriori*: artists do not go with sociologists during fieldwork, and sociologists are no longer on the field during the *Sociorama*'s process of comic-ization.³ Then, drawings in *Sociorama* are not a medium to illustrate fieldwork stories or to communicate main results in a more educational or pleasant way. The inquiry process, theoretical and methodological background, and research issues are not represented at all. As a consequence, sociological knowledge, conditions of investigation, ethnographic materials, and their analysis and interpretations are blended together into the form of a fiction. However, the creative process that results into a comic book is not a simple adaptation of sociological documents, freely illustrated by cartoonists. It is a subject of scrutiny by sociologists (both authors of the original researches and

1. The quotation is also a nod to Denis Colombi's blog, which offers a perspective on sociology meant for a broad audience. The blog entry he posted about *Sociorama* at the launch of the collection gave us a lot of food for thought. Source: <http://uneheuredepeine.blogspot.com/2016/08/la-sociologie-comme-elle-se-lit.html> [The translation here comes from the translation by Richard Nice in Bourdieu (2007)].

2. For a presentation of each album, see the publisher's website: <https://www.casterman.com/Bande-dessinee/Collections-series/sociorama>. In September 2019, the collection totalled approximately 36,700 album sales, ranging from 1,000 to 5,600 copies per book. The best sellers at that date were *Les Nouvelles de la Jungle* (published in January 2017, with 5,626 copies sold), *La Fabrique pornographique, Chantier interdit au public* (February 2016, 5,336 and 4,731 copies sold), and *La banlieue du 20 heures* (September 2016, 4,454 copies sold). By comparison, Jérôme Berthaut's sociological work *La banlieue du 20 heures* sold 1,478 copies.

3. The situation is different for the album *Turbulences* and the two special issues of the collection (named *Sociorama Terrain*). We will discuss this point further.

the scientific board of the collection). The aim of such scrutiny was to ensure that the script respected enough and was grounded enough on the social reality observed and analyzed by sociologists — both in methodological and theoretical terms.⁴ Here, a first dilemma arises: what is *enough*?

In this article, we propose to examine and discuss some effects of the “comic-ization” (the process we follow to adapt sociological books into sociologically grounded graphic fictions) from the perspective of those who conducted and monitored it.⁵ *In a way, our intention is to contribute to the reflection on comics-based research by sharing a “lesson learned” from within, taking into consideration criticisms advanced at the beginning of our venture by colleagues interested in scientific popularization.*⁶ On this point, some important clarifications are needed. Neither of us is a specialist in literature, graphic narrativity, or graphic anthropology. We were (and are) not engaged in research about the educational use of comic books or in comics literacy. Some of the issues discussed here cropped up during the *Sociorama* experiment itself. The following presentation is mainly based on our memories of oral collective discussions within the scientific committee and on personal written notes about synopses and storyboards, as well as discussions between comic artists, sociologists, and a collection’s directors during the production process. Our reflection is also informed by conversations with the various sociologists and comic book authors involved in this adventure and by feedbacks received from different sources. This retrospective review is not an exhaustive analysis of the collection’s contributions and operations. In particular, it does not include comic artists’ point of view and the ways in which they experienced their work with sociologists in light of their training and professional background.

To set the stage of the collection and make the adaptation process clear, the first section of this article presents the origin of *Sociorama*: context, editorial line, and the division of adaptation work among the key players — that is, sociologists/authors, cartoonists, and the scientific board of the collection. All of these aspects shed light on the choice initially made that has shaped the collection and its contents around the choice of fictionalization of sociological surveys. In this first section, we will also explain the main criteria that guided us in the identification and then in the choice of the surveys that we finally adapted. Then, the second section examines transformations induced by the comic-ization on sociological writing routines: turning thematical analysis into a chronological character-centered plot; reusing fieldwork data set aside to offer a richer graphic representation of social reality; and enhancing sociological contextualization through graphic inventions. At last, the third section analyzes how the adaptation interferes with the sociological reasoning and requires sociologists to compromise with the standards they usually apply in their writings. This section underlines the limits of the attempt to create *sociologically grounded fictions* in *Sociorama*: the disappearances of the sociologists’ fieldwork and of the sociological theoretical background potentially blur the status of the albums’ content for the readership.

4. For this reason, *Sociorama* presents a different challenge compared to other types of adaptations, e.g., novels into comic or screen versions (see Roche, Mitaine & Schmitt, 2015).

5. We have contributed in several capacities, either as a cofounder of the collection (Mathias Thura), a sociologist who worked alongside comic artists to adapt their work (Jérôme Berthaut and Jennifer Bidet), or a member of the “scientific committee” (as all of this article’s authors were). This committee was a name given to the team of sociologists in charge of monitoring the adaptation process so as to affirm the scientific basis of the collection.

6. Denis Colombi published on his blog a very accurate review of *Sociorama*’s strength and weakness after the release of the first two albums. A part of the issues discussed here are closely related to his review: <http://uneheuredepeine.blogspot.com/2016/08/la-sociologie-comme-elle-se-lit.html>

1 Genesis of the Collection and Organization of Adaptation Work

Sociorama albums are meant to fill an original position in the social field of realistic graphic novels. Defining its editorial line, cartoonists and sociologists involved in the creation of the collection tried to imagine a specific cultural object, different from other experiences of sociological comic books: creating fictional stories that are under the supervision of a scientific committee. When comic book authors brought to the collection their creative and narrative skills, sociologists shared their knowledge of sociological research, as well as its promising recent studies and innovative results.

1.1 The Context of *Sociorama*'s Creation

The project for the *Sociorama* collection was born in 2013 when four young sociologists, all of whom trained in ethnography and interested in comics (Marianne Blanchard, Yasmine Bouagga, Julien Gros and Mathias Thura),⁷ met with an experienced comic book author who had already published several comic books and integrated documentary approaches into her own work (Lisa Mandel).⁸ They pooled their respective resources (e.g., artistic legitimacy and knowledge of the world of comic book publishing, scientific legitimacy and skills, knowledge of recent works and surveys, networks of researchers and comic artists) to pitch the project for the *Sociorama* collection to a major comic book publisher, Casterman, with which Lisa Mandel was already in contact.

The editorial context was ripe for such a project. Several collections associating comics with science had been launched in France in the 2010s,⁹ following a wave of graphic novels and a diversification of albums and magazines featuring reporting, journalism, and documentary comics.¹⁰ In view of this rapid development of popular science comics, we chose to position our project from a different perspective to works that were already available. We did not want to make illustrated manuals in which drawings would be featured only in service of the text and alongside it or would include theoretical explanations. We did not want to illustrate “scientific adventures” featuring sociologists or anthropologists during their fieldwork or in the daily life of laboratories and faculties. Nor did we adopt the same approach as comic book authors turned investigators, such as Joe Sacco or Etienne Davodeau, who tell the stories of their investigations in graphic novels. As we sought an alternative format, encouraged to do so by Casterman who had an interest in positioning their product on a specific segment of the

7. Jennifer Bidet and Jérôme Berthaut joined the team committee in 2018 after their own works were adapted. Except Marianne Blanchard, who runs a sketching blog, no one in the team had drawing skills or any comic book-editing activity.

8. This meeting took place within the framework of the “Sociologie et bande dessinée” seminar organized at the social sciences department of the École Normale Supérieure in Paris, which focused on the field of comic book production and the ways in which comic book authors represent the social world in their albums.

9. As Tondeur notes, we are witnessing a “graphic boom” in anthropology, both as a reinvention of the observation method and as a means of communicating knowledge (Tondeur, 2018). History is ahead of other disciplines in this regard, as its links with comics date back to the 1970s (Mitterrand & Ciment, 1993).

10. France featured the following examples: the magazine *XXI* in 2008 (53 issues until now); the comics series *Tu mourras moins bête* by Marion Montaigne and *La planète des sages* by Jul, both launched in 2011 and adapted in television; the best-seller *Economix*, published in France in 2012; the adaptation of the sociological work of Pinçon-Charlot (*Riche, pourquoi pas toi ?*) by Marion Montaigne in 2013, the creation of *La Revue Dessinée* the same year (30 issues); the collection *La petite bédéthèque des savoirs* in 2016 (29 albums); and the collection *Histoire dessinée de la France* in 2017 (by *La Revue Dessinée* and *La Découverte*).

documentary comics market, we decided to adapt sociological research in the form of realistic fiction.¹¹

Our goal was for the albums to read “like stories” in order to offer readers a deep dive into a social world and enable them to discover it from the inside by immersion, while simultaneously doing our best to avoid a didactic or professorial tone. The aim was for the narrative to stand alone as a representation of a reality that had already been objectivized and analyzed in sociological works. The characters and situations depicted in the albums are objects of fiction rather than real situations or people that have been observed; they are inventions, albeit ones that are informed by knowledge obtained through field surveys, as they would be in a naturalistic novel (Giraud, 2013).

1.2 Adaptation Work Supervised by Sociologists

The division of tasks was quickly decided for the oversight of the adaptation work. Editorial responsibility for the collection was divided between Lisa Mandel, who was in charge of the artistic aspects (proposals for and selection of artists, support and consultancy for artists along the creative process), and Yasmine Bouagga, who coordinated the activities of the “scientific committee” of the collection, composed of four sociologists. This committee was responsible for identifying adaptable surveys and submitting them to artists and then for the monitoring of different steps of the adaptation process. The comic authors whom Lisa Mandel had selected to join the project chose a study among those proposed and read it before they started adapting it. From this point on, their creative process was screened several times based on a charter submitted both to them and to the sociologist who had authored the survey at the beginning of the adaptation process.

A conversation then began with the sociologist who had carried out the survey so as to draft the first scenario (or a *synopsis*) with its narrative framework, characters, and twists and turns. In the first albums, published in 2016, the sociologists who carried out the surveys largely gave the artists free range. As the adaptations progressed, cooperation often went deeper, and some scripts were even written in full collaboration (for instance, *Turbulences*, because the investigation was still ongoing and unpublished). Apart from their academic writings, the sociologists who wrote the surveys gave their field data (excerpts from field journals, interviews, and photographs) to the comic artists to help them represent this context graphically.

Once the scenario was validated, the artist moved on to sketch out the storyboard or “layout” (i.e., a drawn version of the scenario), which is a first draft of the final comic book. This enabled the author of the comic to test the development of the narrative framework and to start fleshing out the characters. The collection’s scientific committee then proofread and commented on this storyboard to verify the accuracy of the adaptation. They would check whether the general argument was rendered well; whether the originality of the sociological work’s perspective was well represented; whether its main results were salient; and whether the characters were sociologically plausible. Comic co-director Lisa Mandel focused on the narration to see whether the characters were endearing and the story compelling and whether a little humor could be added in a particular scene to enhance the argument. At this point, accuracy with regard to the sociological subject matter and narrative concerns sometimes clashed — often

11. The collection has deviated from this editorial line twice in special editions. In these two albums (*Les nouvelles de la jungle, Prézidentielles*), which are compilations of comic chronicles first published on the website of the daily *Le Monde*, the investigation itself is the narrative thread: the sociologist and the comic book author are the main characters of the album, and the story follows them through their research.

where the intention to make the plot lively ran counter to the intention to show the ordinariness of certain events. However, the boundary between sociology and creativity also proved to be porous on many occasions. The sociologists on the scientific committee were likely to comment on the rhythm of the narration, and, from time to time, Lisa Mandel proposed a more head-on approach to certain social issues. Once the storyboard was validated, the comic author produced a final version that was proofread and amended by the team and then submitted for publication.

The production process for an album took about a year. The first version of the synopsis for *Vacances au bled* was discussed in February 2017 by the artist, the sociologist who authored the survey, and the collection's directors. Extensive discussions led to validation of the fifth version of the synopsis in May 2017 (Figure 1). This synopsis was in full storyboard form by the end of August. At that stage, the scientific committee added its own reading to that of the sociologist author and the directors. A second version of the layout was then discussed in late November, the first final pages were completed in January 2018, and the album was finished at the end of April and released on 7 June 2018.

This type of ongoing feedback loop brings together two professional worlds with distinct operating logics and time scales. On the one hand, the world of academic sociology, which is familiar with peer reviews and several successive draft versions of the same text, as well as with the extended timelines of field research and scientific writing, and reliant on government research funding and job contracts (temporary or tenure) and underpinned by the rules of scientific rationality. On the other hand, the world of comics, where creative processes and individual originality are precious, and above all subject to the constraints of freelance labor funded through successive individual projects. Misunderstandings as to each stakeholder's role and room to maneuver were inevitable. In particular, artists could perceive the scientific committee as an unknown group of reviewers who directly interfered in the creative process with abundant criticism. The committee sometimes asked for significant rearrangements between two versions of the same storyboard, thus delaying the artists' progress and disrupting their distribution of time between the projects they work on simultaneously to make a decent living.¹²

1.3 Which Surveys to Adapt?

The intention to create sociologically grounded fictions directly influenced the type of sociological research selected by the scientific team. The first criterion was conformity to the editorial line adopted with Casterman: surveys should be led in France and already exist in book form or at least in the manuscript of a defended thesis (a line from which we strayed only once, with *Turbulences*). The second level of selection seems to be linked to an effect of the committee's academic and scientific habitus (Bourdieu, 1976). Having all undergone training that values the same type of ethnography practice,¹³ committee members targeted works that shared a conception close to field research and often drew ideas for adaptation from the catalogue of publishers that value the same type of research (La Découverte, Agone). The authors of selected surveys came from a relatively select institutional and scientific background. While they were mostly

12. For a *Sociorama* album, comic artists were paid 9,000 euros (in advance on royalties), of which they had to pay a percentage in social contributions (which varies depending on their legal status). Therefore, they could not work full time on this project alone for a whole year and had to take on other projects in parallel.

13. The members of the first scientific committee were trained in the same social sciences department of the Ecole Normale Supérieure, the same postgraduate school of the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales in Paris, and the same laboratory, the Centre Maurice Halbwachs.

VACANCES AU BLEND V5

FRANCE
LYON

À l'hôpital
Férouze finit sa journée d'infirmière dans un hôpital public, elle est crevée mais contente, elle se change en parlant avec une collègue qui part aussi voir de la famille en Bretagne. Férouze, ultra enthousiaste parle de son prochain séjour en Algérie. Ce sera sans son copain, la famille est pas trop au courant, du coup elle y va en solo en mode retour aux sources, alors qu'elle n'y est pas allée depuis 15 ans. Soudain, leur conversation est coupée par les voix de deux infirmiers - Kamel et Eric - qui commentent vivement le match de foot France - Algérie qu'ils regardent sur le portable de l'un deux. Kamel : < putain, si on gagne contre l'Allemagne on est champion du monde, c'est un truc de fou !!! >
- Eric : calme toi, c'est que les 1/8^e de finale là ! et d'ailleurs, t'es français ou t'es algérien toi ? t'es un peu ce qui t'arrange quand ça t'arrange nan (en le charriant) ?!
- Kamel : et toi, quand tu soutiens le Barca, t'es français ou espagnol, bouffon ! (la aussi, ton de la blague)

Utilisateur de M... a supprimé: Vacances au bled. 1 ↓

Utilisateur de M... a supprimé: 4

Utilisateur de M... Pour info : je sais qu'on fait de la fiction | jennifer bidet

Utilisateur de M... a mis en forme ↓

Utilisateur de M... a mis en forme ↓

Utilisateur de Microsoft Office 15 mai 2017
En fait, si on fait pas commenter le match, ça a pas bcp d'intérêt d'en parler, le lecteur va pas deviner tout seul ce qu'il faut en tirer >>> poser clairement le truc « choisis ton camp camarade ! »

Figure 1: Vacances au bled, Bidet/Singeon ©CASTERMAN

The author produces three versions of the adapted story, that the adapted sociologist, the scientific committee and the collection directors commented on and validated: the synopsis (above), a draft of the storyboard (left), and the final version (right). Working materials taken from Vacances au bled (2020).

“young researchers” who did not necessarily hold a position in research and higher education at the time their studies were adapted, they did benefit from greater institutional integration, and therefore more extensive professional networks, than most young researchers in sociology.

The choice of ethnographically rich research was not solely informed by scientific affinities. Committee members felt that the process of transforming research into fictional yet credible stories also made it necessary to use detailed qualitative data. As ethnographic surveys are carried out through a process of immersion in a particular social world, the scientific committee considered they were better suited for creating characters (by drawing inspiration from respondents encountered in the field), settings (by drawing inspiration from descriptions of the places in which the survey took place), and situations. The team has also estimated that transforming a statistical survey into fiction would entail more effort to translate sociological results and reconstruct characters. Supposing that we were to adapt the major surveys conducted on the sexual practices of French people, what should the story’s setting be? How characters should be created, and based on which statistical distributions? A survey based on qualitative interviews with respondents with whom the researcher had not been in contact in their daily lives, and who were not likely to meet each other in real life, would also be more difficult to adapt. Scientific committee members deemed it easier, and especially more prudent, to use data that already combined observations of practices with interviews, as well as to invent characters and stories in a more controlled way.

Another criterion according to which works were selected for adaptation was political. The goal behind the idea of adapting recent surveys was twofold: to deal with themes that could resonate with current events and to contribute to debates on political and social issues. Certain subjects were sufficiently prominent in political current affairs and warranted an issue in the collection. The publisher also sought to have “catchy,” “popular,” or “fun” subjects, but the collection has always preserved the analytical perspective proposed by sociologists. In the face of recurrent controversies in France surrounding so-called “gender theory,” which intensified when the law on same-sex couples’ marriage was passed in 2013, several albums dealing directly and openly with the social construction of gender differences and inequalities were published. From wage and career inequalities between porn actors and actresses (*La fabrique pornographique*), as well as between airline staff (*Turbulences*) or between surgeons (*Sous la blouse*), to differentiated representations of masculinity and femininity in flirting (*Séducteurs de rue*) or in couples’ relationships (*Au tribunal des couples*), all of these situations highlight the gender issues in social relations. Issues of racism and immigration, which are also prevalent in public debate, are addressed in several albums, from the point of view of the construction of racist stereotypes in the workplace (*Chantier interdit au public*) or on television (*La banlieue du 20h*), and from that of the experience of racial ascriptions and racialized people’s forms of agency in the face of these ascriptions (*La petite mosquée dans la cité, Vacances au bled*). Many of the albums adopt the angle of sociology of work, making hierarchical relationships visible in very different worlds, from mass retail (*Encaisser*) or professional football (*L’amour du maillot*) to the production of a mainstream television series (*Plus belle la série*) (Table 1).

Table 1: List of Published Albums

Albums	Comics authors	Sociologist authors	Original book/Ph. D. thesis
<i>Chantier interdit au public</i> (2016)	Claire Braud	Nicolas Jounin	<i>Chantier interdit au public. Enquête parmi les travailleurs du bâtiment.</i> Éditions La Découverte (2008)
<i>La fabrique pornographique</i> (2016)	Lisa Mandel	Matthieu Trachman	<i>Le travail pornographique, enquête sur la production des fantasmes.</i> Éditions La Découverte (2013)
<i>Turbulences</i> (2016)	Baptiste Virot and Anne Lambert	Anne Lambert	Unpublished work
<i>Séducteurs de rue</i> (2016)	Léon Maret	Mélanie Gourarier	<i>Séduire les femmes pour s'apprécier entre hommes : une socio-anthropologie des sociabilités masculines hétérosexuelles au sein de la Communauté de la séduction en France.</i> PhD, EHESS (2012)
<i>La banlieue du 20 heures</i> (2016)	Helkerava	Jérôme Berthaut	<i>La banlieue du « 20 heures ». Ethnographie de la production d'un lieu commun journalistique.</i> Éditions Agone (2013)
<i>Encaisser!</i> (2016)	Anne Simon	Marlène Benquet	<i>Encaisser! Enquête en immersion dans la grande distribution.</i> Éditions La Découverte (2013)
<i>Sous la blouse</i> (2017)	Marion Mousse	Emmanuelle Zolesio	<i>Chirurgiens au féminin. Des femmes dans un métier d'hommes.</i> Presses universitaires de Rennes (2012)
<i>Plus belle la série</i> (2017)	Émilie Harel et Paul-André Landes	Muriel Mille	<i>Produire des fictions à la chaîne : sociologie du travail de fabrication d'un feuilleton télévisé.</i> PhD, EHESS (2013)
<i>La petite mosquée dans la cité</i> (2018)	Kim Consigny	Solenne Jouanneau	<i>Les imams en France. Une autorité religieuse sous contrôle.</i> Éditions Agone (2013)
<i>Vacances au bled</i> (2018)	Singeon	Jennifer Bidet	<i>Les vacances au bled de descendants d'immigrés algériens : Trajectoires, pratiques, appartenance.</i> PhD, Université Lyon 2 (2013)
<i>L'amour du maillot. Une saison en ligue 2</i> (2020)	Hélène Georges	Frédéric Rasera	<i>Des footballeurs au travail. Au cœur d'un club professionnel.</i> Éditions Agone (2016)
<i>Au tribunal des couples</i> (2020)	Baptiste Virot	Collectif Onze	<i>Au tribunal des couples : Enquête sur des affaires familiales.</i> Éditions Odile Jacob (2013)

2 Transposing Sociological Books into Comics: Imagining a New Way of Representing Social Facts

Adaptation implies significant transformations in sociological writing. It also sheds light on some of the modes of description and demonstration that we routinely adopt as sociologists.

Its rhetorical logic and usual structure must be reconstructed in order to be translated in fiction conventions and in a graphic language. The shift from scientific results (with academic standards in the administration of evidence) to *Sociorama* graphic fiction (addressed to a large readership) provides new resources for sociological writing but also places new constraints on it (for examples see Nocerino, 2016).

2.1 From Analytical Writing to Character-Centered Plot

First, the adaptation in fiction imposes to turn the analytical content of sociological writings into a plot centered on a few characters. In scientific publications, academics usually present their results thematically through chapters in which they respond to the hypotheses articulated in the introduction and highlight the main aspects and contributions of their investigations. These works link up a variety of approaches and materials (contributions from existing literature; socio-genesis of an institution or of practices; reflexivity on field research practices). Assembling data and formats is thus especially useful in putting the collected material into perspective. However, the transition to graphic fiction has often appeared to be incompatible with any detailed presentation of the general past or present context of the social world under investigation or of the social structure within which the characters exist.

The comic artists of the *Sociorama* collection faced the challenge of rendering the study's outcomes through a coherent and relatively long story (164 pages in manga-type formats). Their proposals for plots and storyboard were based on elementary scriptwriting conventions: the stories follow a chronological thread and feature one or two main characters, surrounded by a small number of secondary characters. The presentation of the protagonists' lived experiences and personal reflections had to enable readers to grasp the social logics that the survey had brought to light. By putting research into fiction, sociological analysis was presented in a story that had to match the rhythms of the respondents' lives. This is a second major effect: the plot must recreate social temporality (not just linear) where scientific publications may go through different times and moment in the same chapter.

Even sociologists on the scientific committee considered that several page-long sequences in the storyboards, which left out the main characters or broke with the chronological thread, were digressions and, as such, detrimental to the story's clarity. Even the use of flashbacks as narrative devices was generally avoided, with the exception of an account of the supermarket chain's creation in *Encaisser*. Creating plots entirely turned toward characters' temporality made it impossible to render the historicity of configurations and of the makeup of social groups represented in these stories, along with explanatory logics regarding protagonists' long-term trajectories. Dialogues, especially between juniors and seniors, were used as devices to provide a lot of the information, and certain analyses were transposed by writing in interviewees' reflexivity. However, these dialogues need to be handled with care as they can weigh plot development down, and authors might write them in the form of unlikely conversations that make it easier for readers to understand the issues at stake — as they put the sociologist's explanations in the mouths of characters — but that would never actually take place in the observed reality.

In most of these comics, sequences of the story align with the beat of daily life in order to relate the typical day of a cashier, for instance, or a construction worker, from the moment they are hired by a temporary employment agency in the morning, to the time they leave work in the evening. Throughout the pages, the stories also unfold in such a way as to reflect the experience of weeks, months, or even years passing by and to enable the script to show, for example,

the upward or downward mobility of characters within an organization (the ways in which journalists are promoted in a television newsroom or a footballer is gradually downgraded at the end of his career in a professional team). Sociological processes thus inform the narrative framework, but the use of fiction implies presenting them *at the level of characters*, from the point of view and positions of the protagonists embodied in the social universe represented.

This led to a pitfall that sociologists of the collection had to avoid: the temptation to draw opportunistically from the material of the investigation so as to feed the narrative and the presentation of characters by choosing the funniest or most surprising anecdotes and episodes, rather than more sociologically relevant situations and features. There is a tension between the triviality of the social world, its routines and repetitions, and the usual structuration of the hero's journey in fiction, with its revelations, challenges, twists, and so on. The main difficulty in adaptation lies in transposing the sociological enigma (the research question), which must reveal a social fact, into a creatively relevant narrative feature. Without consulting one another, the authors of the *Sociorama* collection have often ended up opting for the same scriptwriting approach: to write a *bildungsroman* about a novice entering a new world or confronting a social experience that is new to them. These “newbies” — and, along with them, readers — discover the backstage of social scenes, the spatial division of tasks, an organization of labor, routines, and so on. Their dialogues with insider characters are an opportunity to render the meaning given to actions and articulate various categories of respondents' vernacular representations, norms, values, and so on. The plot thus sheds light on a socialization process, which is often professional as several of the adapted surveys examined workplaces.¹⁴ Some albums are based on a “change of scenery” effect, which is sometimes quite literal, as in the case of *Vacances au bled*, which recounts the experience of a young French-born woman's first trip to visit her Algerian immigrant father's country of birth and family.

Occasionally, the narrative device that makes social routines explicit is an extraordinary event that disrupts behaviors and the ordering of social activities. For example, in *La petite mosquée dans la cité*, the imam's position is both highlighted and simultaneously threatened after the announcement that local authorities plan to shut down his prayer room — an announcement that actuates internal conflicts among the group of faithful and external struggles with local authorities; or a family court judge retiring and being replaced by a young magistrate reveals, through the differences in the assessment of divorce cases, how justice contributes to reproducing an unequal social order (*Au tribunal des couples*).

2.2 Enhancing the Description of Social Worlds with Unexploited Data

For comic artists, focusing the story on everyday life means portraying the protagonists in the various social scenes of their lives (with family, colleagues, friends, etc.) and, more generally, in everyday situations and interactions (getting up in the morning, moving around, shopping, taking care of children, etc.), which are seldom observed and rarely discussed in any depth in sociological work. Comic artists' concern with presenting complete characters from a narrative point of view prompted the sociologists to draw on material that is usually excluded from their scientific articles and books. Due to the logic of specialization into thematic areas, resulting from the subdivision of teaching and laboratories, they very often disregard large parts of their data that fall outside the direct scope of their main research questions. Putting characters' daily lives into pictures helps to decompartmentalize the objects of research and to reintegrate the

14. Unsurprisingly, this account, based on the process of socialization of the main character in a new social world, also mimics the process of socialization of the sociologist itself during the fieldwork.

activities and social relations observed into the general sociological perspective of studies on social structures.

For example, the authors of monographs on workplaces may deliberately exclude data pertaining to people's "private life" (marital life and family, social circles, and lifestyle) but that are useful to give characters substance. Researchers' lack of sensitivity to certain aspects of their respondents' social experience, or difficulties in accessing this data in the field, have sometimes prevented them from providing comic artists with satisfactory answers — to the extent that parts of the characters' lives had to be invented in ways that seemed likely to the sociologists. This is the important limit of this attempt at the sociological reconstruction of reality. Moreover, as indicated in the first section, this is in line with the prudential choice to select only ethnographic surveys for adaptation in order to avoid completely uncontrollable reconstruction effects as much as possible.

In practical terms, the graphic illustration also shows the layout of places and protagonists' physical features, all of which can be used as fine indicators, for example, of the belonging to a social class, as in *Plus belle la série*, where the lifestyles of the scriptwriters of the mainstream television series appear to be out of touch with those of their audience (which is presumed to be mostly working class). To validate the artist's work, the sociologist's gaze must not only focus on the representation of a broader range of spaces and activities than are mentioned in the academic accounts but also scrutinize and confirm the features attributed to the characters and which thus highlight social characteristics (Figure 2). Drawings reinforce the attention paid to *hexis*, the details in clothing, and the expression of emotions, especially since these dimensions are more difficult to represent in the textual form of a sociological analysis. For instance, the frustration of a novice imam when he is referred back to his position as an assistant to the main imam, who takes over the direction of prayer in the mosque, is conclusively rendered in two boxes and a few pencil strokes — where it takes several pages of ethnographic description of the principles of imams' legitimacy in France to render verbally.

2.3 Graphic Innovations in Service of Contextualization

With Lisa Mandel's help, comic artists sought to come up with graphic solutions relevant to the story and that could render essential elements of analysis. The bubbles drawn above characters illustrate their ulterior motives and thus the conventions and forms of self-censorship that weigh on social subjects in certain interactions — for example, within their family or at work. Dreamworld sequences and illustrations of the characters' dreams depict social realities far removed from their everyday lives. For instance, the nightmares of a supermarket chain's human resources manager are haunted by monsters who represent the chain's shareholders, defining employees' working conditions and fates without ever having met them (Figure 3). This narrative device shows how domination can be wielded from a distance far beyond the interactions that sociologists could record.

Finally, comics as a medium afford new writing devices for sociology. Graphic transposition brings new demonstrative resources to scientific argumentation: the composition of the boxes and their juxtaposition on the pages; the range of frame types (much like close-ups or panoramic shots in photographs); and the possibility of creating repetition effects through drawing and of guiding readers' attention to particular points. It is an apt medium to capture and show the repetitive daily routine of court hearings and football team training sessions, the pace of work at the supermarket checkout, the frenzy of a newsroom just before a show is aired, or the parallel lives of different categories of airline personnel (Figure 4, above). It



Figure 2: La fabrique pornographique, Trachman/Mandel ©CASTERMAN (above left); Plus belle la série, Mille/Landes/Harel ©CASTERMAN (above right); L'amour du Maillot, Rasera/Georges ©CASTERMAN (below)

Three examples of reconstruction of the life styles of the protagonists: the daily routine and the apartment of a single security guard (above left, La fabrique pornographique, 2016, p. 8), the interior and materialization of the cultural capital of a young screenwriter (above right, Plus belle la série, 2017, p. 38), and the comparison of two Christmas scenes in soccer-players families to depict social differentiation in a same professional group (below, L'amour du maillot, 2020, pp. 80–81).



Figure 3: Encaisser, Benquet/Simon ©CASTERMAN (above left)

Graphic imagination allows to show how domination can be wielded from a distance: the nightmares of a supermarket chain's human resources manager are haunted by the chain's shareholders (Encaisser, 2016, pp. 66–67).

also allows the use of analogies or metaphorical evocations through drawing, which would not be conceivable in social science writing — for instance, by representing an angry construction site foreman in the guise of an elephant, which could signify his ascendancy over the workers (Figure 4, below).

Text is not the only way of rendering academic research. Diagrams, graphs, and tables are all modes of presentation of data (especially statistical data) that support the understanding of research results. Written argumentation is based on distinctions between different levels of reading (dividing the text into parts; referencing back to boxed texts, footnotes, and appendices; setting excerpts from interviews and field diaries aside from the main text), which make it possible to identify and prioritize the data presented. Taking care not to break the narrative thread, the comic artists often chose to insert explanatory boxes here and there, which featured similarly to what they would in sociological writings (Figure 5, right). In *La Banlieue du 20 heures*, each character that drives the plot and is central in rendering the investigation is presented upon their first appearance in a still frame, as they would be in a TV series' opening credits (Figure 5, left). These presentations feature a descriptive sheet with both humorous anecdotes invented by the artist and a list of social specifications deemed relevant to the character. The process is similar to how sociologists can summarize the main characteristics of their interviewees.

It is often necessary to insert detailed charts explaining statuses, positions in the organization or during a career (within the health care system, for example), and regulations so as to signify the weight of protagonists' relationships, constraints, and struggles, both in sociological writing and in graphic fictions. However, comics as a medium also afford the freedom to use even lighter explanatory snippets in the form of annotations and arrows inserted directly in drawings. In some instances, the difficulty of transposing these complex and overly space-



Figure 4: Turbulences, Lambert/Virot ©CASTERMAN (above); Chantier interdit au public, Jounin/Braud ©CASTERMAN (below)

Graphic transposition brings new illustrative resources to scientific argumentation such as the possibility of creating repetition effects to show the parallel and repetitive daily routine (above, Turbulences, 2016, pp. 15–16) or the ascendancy over the workers (below, Chantier interdit au public, 2016, pp. 76–77).

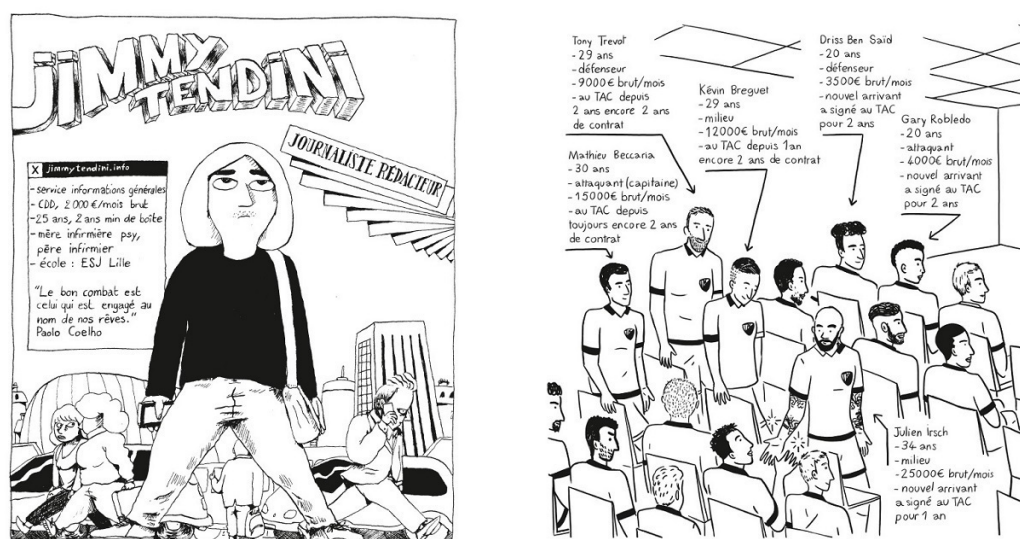


Figure 5: La banlieue du 20 heures, Berthaut/Helkarava ©CASTERMAN (left); L'amour du Maillot, Rasera/Georges ©CASTERMAN (right)

The comic artists often chose to insert social specifications into boxes that featured similarly to what they would in sociological writings (left, *La Banlieue du 20 heures*, 2016, p. 6), or explanatory snippets and annotations inserted directly in drawings (right, *L'amour du maillot*, 2020, pp. 10–11).

consuming contextual elements into comics led artists to resort to written passages (Figure 6). This is the case, for instance, of *L'amour du maillot*, where the football championship's operations are explained through a text supported by a few illustrations, or in *Seducteurs de rue*, with several pages organized as glossaries. Although Sociorama tries to make the traces of academic writing disappear as much as possible in its adaptations, these graphic solutions are ultimately the most obvious signs of the sociological frameworks hidden under the stories.

3 Distortions Inducted by Fictionalization on Sociological Discourse

Graphic inventions enriched the representation of social worlds and sociological processes and aimed at widening the audience of sociological analysis. However, drawing sociologically grounded fictions also led to creating important distortions on sociological discourses and misunderstandings in the readership. First, turning sociological surveys into fiction by imagining realistic characters raised the problem of dealing with stereotypes and clichés. Secondly, making the sociologist fieldwork and conceptual architecture disappear, in order to leave the reader to immerse him- or herself in the story, risks undermining the sociological intentions of the original survey. When investigations are transposed into drawn fictions, sociological knowledge and reasoning may be altered.

3.1 Creating Characters: From Ideal Type to Stereotype

One of the main difficulties in the transition from sociological text to drawn fiction emerged in the process of inventing the fiction's characters. The comic artists and sociologists sought to create characters that embodied a social world as well as possible. However, they had to feature

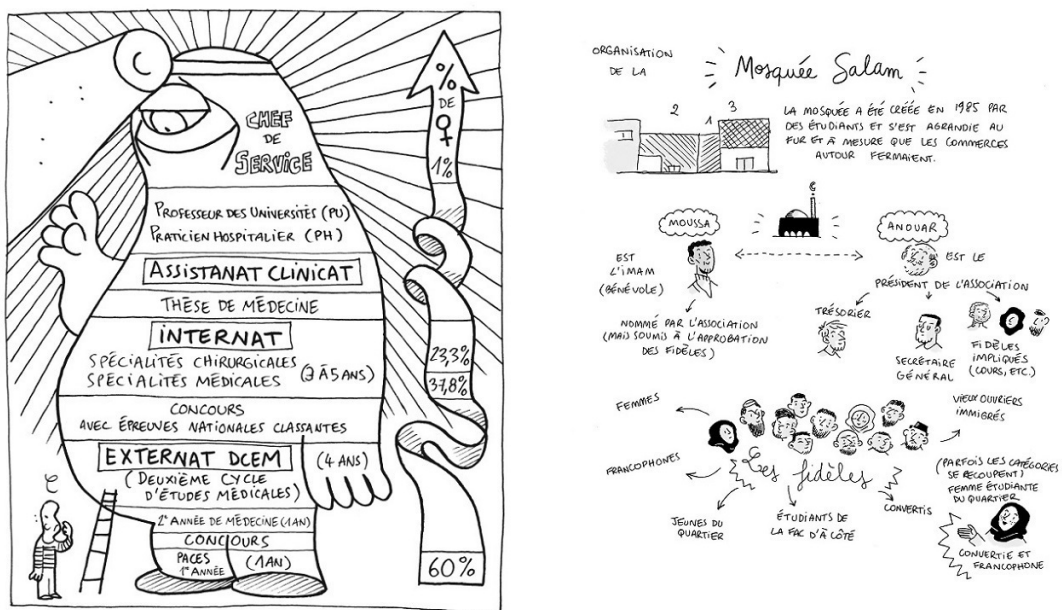


Figure 6: Sous la blouse, Zolesio/Mousse ©CASTERMAN (left); L'amour du Maillot, Rasera/Georges ©CASTERMAN (right)

The difficulty of transposing complex and overly space-consuming contextual elements into comics led artists to resort to written passages. In instance to sum up steps in medical careers (left, *Sous la blouse*, 2017, p. 5), or the organizational structure of a mosque (right, *La petite mosquée dans la cité*, 2018, p. 23).

in rather small numbers to fit the needs of narration, which entails boiling the complex trajectories and positions that one encounters in a sociological survey down to simpler representations.

In some respects, comics create a space to design characters that embody sociologists' ideal types; in other words, sociological constructs emphasize certain features of social reality and differentiate behavior or categories of people based on a limited number of criteria, without claiming to fully encompass real-world complexity. Numerous comic artists do not necessarily seek to create physically or behaviorally realistic characters. For instance, in *Sociorama*, they endeavor to draw characters that are easily recognizable, either by a physical feature (such as the big-eared foreman in *Chantier interdit au public*) or by a precise social characteristic that is relevant in context (like the supermarket manager's suit and briefcase in *Encaisser*). If the sociologist aims to show how workplace hierarchy is articulated to race relations, the characters must be distinguished accordingly (using their surname or skin color, for example).

Precisely, from sociologists' point of view, ideal types never occur as such in reality; they are an intellectual construct, an abstraction designed to serve analysis. Transposing them into characters therefore leads to many translation problems. The reality effect produced by narrativization transforms an ideal type into an archetype, which means that the character of the foreman, for instance, can then be perceived as representing foremen *in general*. Whereas sociology relies on tendency or probability (there are more stewardesses than stewards), drawn fiction requires characters to feature in small numbers ("we need a main character who is a stewardess") and therefore requires probabilistic tendencies to be shrunk into a single, necessarily reductive embodiment. The challenge then lies in defining characters in such a way that they correspond to likely social characteristics, without stereotyping them in an oversimplified way.

Any realistic fiction is bound to raise this type of question: should characters be designed as typical of a more general population? Also, what does *typical* mean? Should they embody the characteristics of the statistical majority? What is a character's representativeness? What part of reality are they meant to embody? For example, as women are in the minority among airline pilots, if we stick to probabilities, it may seem evident that the main character, a pilot, should be a man. However, what about all the other social characteristics that define the character? What about his physical appearance (e.g., skin color, type of clothing or hair style, body shape) or the attributes of his lifestyle? Does he travel by motorbike, car, or public transport? Is he a married father or single? These questions also arise in sociological writing: when referring to a respondent, one may provide their age, gender, level of education, profession, marital and family status, social origins, type of housing, and so on. However, sociologists select whichever characteristics are directly useful to the analysis: they cannot and *should not* provide a description of the person that encompasses all of their social details. Similarly, the medium of comics requires authors to select visible characteristics that seem important and significant and to let go of features that are not central to the analysis.

The aforementioned tension between sociological verisimilitude and the reproduction of stereotypes also appears in the representation of characters' bodies and the artistic choices that it involves. Sociologists are well aware that the shape of bodies, clothing, and physical attitudes are not random or unrelated to individuals' social characteristics. However, to what extent should realism in drawn representations be valued over the artist's style and creative freedom? Upon reading the storyboard for *Vacances au bled*, Jennifer Bidet reacted to the way Singeon had represented a secondary character, Selim's mother. This woman was represented with a body similar to those of other female characters in the book: young and slim. What the sociologist had in mind was the image of the actual mother of the young respondent who had inspired Selim's character and who was older and plumper. In the ensuing conversation, Singeon

explained that it was an unchallenged assumption he had picked up during his training at the school of fine arts: while students were taught to represent a contrasted range of bodies, they were never encouraged to correlate body types with social characteristics (Figure 7). Here, two professional cultures — two types of viewpoint — are brought face to face: on the one hand, the search for a personal artistic style, which is both unencumbered by concerns about realism and curtailed by unchallenged assumptions imparted by artistic training and the aesthetic canons of art; and on the other hand, an attachment to realism and a concern with highlighting forms of differentiation and social inequalities, along with careful attention to ethnocentrism and the relativity of aesthetic criteria. How should one decide? Singeon welcomed the remark as legitimate and amended the character’s design for the final version. However, once this was said and done, the question remained unanswered: once again, how is a sociologist legitimate in this kind of intervention? What does this amendment bring to the book’s plot development and sociological argument? On the one hand, the issues at stake are not only sociological but also political and feminist, as it is a matter of not reducing all female characters to a single mode of representation under a single body model. Conversely, this intervention could also result in reducing the representation of Algerian immigrant mothers to a single model of femininity, one that differs from French standards of beauty.

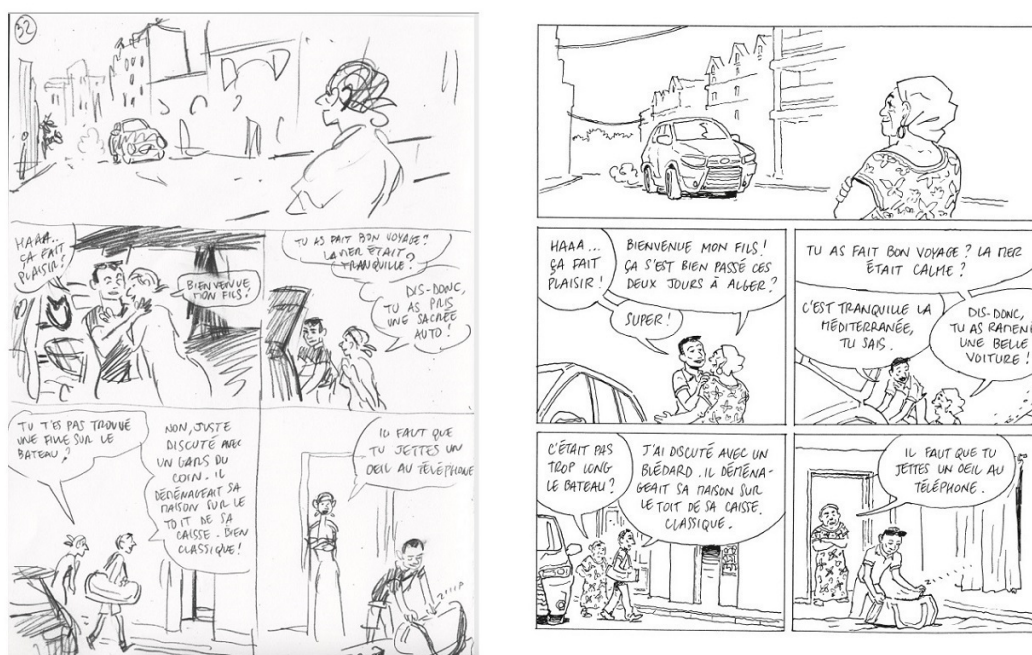


Figure 7: Vacances au bled, Bidet/Singeon ©CASTERMAN

To what extent should realism in drawn representations be valued over the artist’s creative freedom? When the author of the comic represents a female body similar to the aesthetic canons of art, the sociologist could be concerned with highlighting forms of differentiation and social inequalities (Comparison between first synopsis and final version; Vacances au bled, 2020, p. 50).

In writing *Sous la blouse*, an exploration of the place of women in the medical profession, comic artist Marion Mousse met with resistance from the collection’s sociologists on the topic of a female doctor’s personal life, when he pitched the idea that a plumber could be the doctor’s one-night stand. His aim was precisely to move away from homogamy, which he saw as a cliché,

and have some fun with the parallels between the jobs of surgeons and plumbers. Deeming it an unlikely choice of sexual partner, due to his occupation, the sociologists elected to edit it out of the script. While this reaction may seem self-evident at first glance, it does raise questions in retrospect. How important is the occupation of a character's one-night stand? Are we not being overly rigid about probabilistic tendencies toward homogamy, to which exceptions do exist — as with any probabilistic tendency? To what extent is it detrimental to slip seemingly unlikely details into the narrative? Certainly, portraying couples of doctors makes possible to address the question of social reproduction and to draw parallels between inequalities in the workplace and at home. However, this was not the issue in these scenes: the one-night stand was above all a pretext for the main character to make the tensions she was experiencing in the professional sphere explicit.

This tension also shows up in settings design. Here again, should faithful representations be the goal, or should room be made for the artists to build their worlds? In *La banlieue du 20e*, the sociologist's challenge was to show how a negative image of working-class neighborhoods is manufactured by the media. Just like the original survey, the comic book focuses on the work of journalists and not on the reality of social relations within these neighborhoods. However, it was necessary to depict these neighborhoods in order to represent the work of journalists. As an artist, Helkarava often portrays urban spaces as dirty and scary places, without ever claiming that these representations are realistic. Jérôme Berthaut, the sociologist who authored the survey, argues that this visual representation runs the risk of reinforcing the same broad-stroked and degrading representations of the “*banlieues*” that his work tends to deconstruct. Sociologists have all the more concerns about adapting their work as the balance between fiction and sociological realism in the reading contract is ambiguous.

In some of the comics, characters were largely inspired by actual respondents and thus reflected a type of writing oriented toward case analysis rather than ideal type construction. In sociological writing, analyzing a sufficiently contrasted array of individual cases allows authors to account for the differences observed within a population. Case-based writing in sociology also involves making certain choices and therefore does not claim to describe the infinite diversity of real populations. However, these choices are more generally justified and reintegrated into a wider realm of possibilities: cases are only put forward because they are representative of a general circumstance or emblematic of a population.¹⁵ Conversely, sociologists sometimes choose to analyze the most sociologically improbable cases in detail because they also reveal social mechanisms,¹⁶ and it is the sociologist's duty to situate these cases within a broader context.

In *Sociorama*, it is a matter of creating a character that combines the characteristics, opinions, and situations of several real people. Where the original research shows, for instance, heterogeneity in the paths that lead one to become a scriptwriter for a soap opera, the comic book portrays a scriptwriter in whom all the important information about scriptwriters in general is concentrated — at the risk of turning her into *the* scriptwriter (i.e., into a sort of archetype, a typical scriptwriter). Also, the chosen guidelines for this character's design pose a very real risk of sliding off into a stereotype: from the choice of a case integrating the characteristics of a whole group, to a caricature representing an entire population.

15. For example, in Beaud (2018), Stéphane Beaud studies a family of Algerian origin, which he presents as “ordinary” because it presents characteristics that are shared by a majority of families of Algerian descent in France.

16. In Weber (2005), Florence Weber uses “borderline cases” to understand the general workings of kinship in contemporary France.

3.2 Invisibilization of Sociologists and Blurring of Sociological Conceptual Background

The collection's choice to lean into fiction meant that it could both avoid a didactic approach and enable the reader, free of the researcher's mediation, to be immersed directly in the social world described. This meant excluding the figure of the sociologist. However, reflexivity is a core imperative in the sociological approach. In writing sociological literature and delivering evidence, passages discussing the conditions of investigation and analyzing the relationships built in the field are both mandatory and codified. Doing away with the figure of the sociologist means above all that the conditions of data collection cannot be articulated. When the figure of the sociologist is sidelined, sociological analysis and its underlying concepts are erased along with it.

The collection was based on a choice to show aspects of the social sphere without mediating them with explanations. While we did find ways to integrate the depicted interactions within broader structures, these details pertained to historical and statistical contextualization rather than sociological analysis per se. At no point in the albums are concepts defined or explanatory theory articulated. The approach is therefore in some respects similar to direct cinema,¹⁷ which presents images without commentary, and leaves it to viewers to interpret them. Also, much like documentaries, the making of *Sociorama's* comics involved many tradeoffs when it came to selecting sociological investigations, choosing subjects, finding an angle of approach, framing and editing,¹⁸ designing fictional characters, and inventing the situations in which they find themselves. In both cases, the authors offer neither a specific discourse nor any direct analysis to their audience. At no point are the concepts of gender or structural racism defined: gender inequalities are embodied by characters in the pornographic film industry or hospital hierarchies, and racial ascriptions are made visible in the organization of work on building sites or the conditions under which news coverage of working-class neighborhoods is produced. Similarly, while the socialization process of the particular type of masculinity promoted by dating coaches is shown, the term itself is never used. To point out how unlikely this kind of protest is, the cashiers' strike in one supermarket is not compared to other strikes in other labor contexts. As the sociologists refrain from providing analyses and commentary on the scenes represented and the fragments of social reality they show, armed with the discipline's concepts and theories, readers are left to their own devices to decipher the comics' sociological subtext.

In the first *Sociorama* special edition *Les nouvelles de la jungle*, Lisa Mandel's narration provides an account of sociologist Yasmine Bouagga's random encounters with individual volunteers or refugees by following her through her survey of Calais's refugee camps. These people were therefore not portrayed as *the* typical volunteer or migrant but rather as part of a larger group of people, whom the sociologist was able to interview through a series of steps and encounters. In the same way, in the second *Sociorama* special edition *Prézidentielles*, the pages entitled "Les éclairages de la docteure Pagis" ("Dr. Pagis elucidates") allow the sociologist Julie Pagis to deliver her sociological interpretation of scenes of children commenting on political news, as drawn by Lisa Mandel. These two special issues are an enlightening counterexample from the rest of the collection. Here, the division of labor between comic artist and sociologist, as well as between fiction and science, is clearer: sociology's place in the script is more clearly delineated because it is explicit.¹⁹

17. For example, see Frederick Wiseman's documentary films.

18. On the link between photography and truth in sociology, see Becker (2007).

19. As in *Riche pourquoi pas moi* (Dargaud), rather than drawing a rendition of an investigative approach by representing sociologists in their field, comic artist Marion Moutagne cast Monique Pinçon-Charlot and

In *Sociorama*, the sociologists do not communicate their message directly as characters who speak. They may therefore seek to intervene on the entirety of what is represented and thus rein in comic artists' creativity. As the albums are presented as an adaptation of their survey, they may wish to exercise control over the entire comic book. Actually, all of the sociologists involved in the process have sought to edit the sociological discourse of the albums, especially what they perceive as sociological inconsistencies, as all of them are concerned with preserving their discipline's reputation. Because the comic-ization process in *Sociorama* involves a reconstruction of reality (through the creation of characters and their lifestyle, or relations not directly consigned by sociologists during fieldwork), there is a recurring question that is raised in the discussions between sociologist authors, artists, and members of the scientific committee throughout the adaptation process: could this scene have taken place in this way in my field?

To respond to the desire for authenticity, the temptation to try to introduce signifying details in each box of the comic is strong. However, how far can realism go in a comic book of *Sociorama*'s format? The search for absolute realism can lead authors to produce an illusion of reality that remains largely implicit. As a coauthor of the comic book, the sociologist who led the survey could have realistic references inserted in each panel, or even each box, as a veiled reference to their survey. Any given setting, dialogue, or body shape could reflect elements that they had observed in the field and, in their eyes at least, contribute to the realism of the drawn representation. However, can readers actually grasp these reality effects? Also, how would it help them to understand a sociological argument that remains implicit in the album?

The stereo-typification effects evoked above can lead to misunderstandings, as emerged in the following comment about *Chantier interdit au public*, by two young readers in the context of an economic and social sciences course in a high school, in Bordeaux:

“Here is a comic book which, once again, generalizes immigration by showing the daily lives of only two men. [...] *Chantier interdit au public* caricatures immigrants not only through the life that it attributes to them but also by through the way in which it represents them: Black men, with big white eyes and big white teeth” [our translation].

When these two young readers read this comic as a caricatured and racist portrayal of migrants, the authors' aim is actually to highlight how the construction industry is organized by (racist) rules that prevent Black workers from escaping subaltern jobs. The two main characters, both Black men, are not meant to encompass the variety of migrant stories, but they have been created to point discriminations on work sites.

While knowing that the story is a fiction, how would readers distinguish sociological realism from the artist's creative fancy? At a presentation of her comic book in a high school, a student repeatedly asked Jennifer Bidet, “Do the characters in the comic book exist or not?” However, she was not content with the sociologist's answer about compromises between fiction and realism. Her insistence shows that her entire reading of the album was dominated by this issue (real or fictional?), which overrode any other content the book seeks to communicate.

However, we have attended to several presentations made by first-year sociology students about the albums of the collection. These presentations took place in a methodology class and reveal how the sociological content of the collection can be understood by apprentice sociologists. In these cases, the balance between fiction and *sociologically based* content does not

Michel Pinçon as comical characters in a story that is deliberately treated as nonrealistic. The sociologists' characters contribute here and there to the story in ways that are both eccentric and scholarly so as to present major concepts at play in descriptions of the *grande bourgeoisie*.

seem to be as problematic for these readers. Several factors can explain this: certainly the academic context (specifically a sociology course at the university), the training received during the semester (a little but sufficient sociological knowledge), and the texts read and commented in class (in socioeconomics and sociology of work). Unlike the high school students mentioned before, some of them were able to link scenes from the comic strip with basic notions and concepts but also to their personal work experiences: some of them were cashiers in a supermarket to finance their student life and were able to discuss cashiers' working conditions reported in *Encaisser!*. However, one student explicitly admits that the tutorial content helps her see and understand sociological discourse in *Sociorama* comics and take a step back from fiction. Educational support ultimately seems necessary (at a minimum) to unravel what the comic-ization has blurred.

Another level of reception and criticism came finally from our colleagues through the scientific recensions published in the academic field.²⁰ If colleagues always pay tribute to the intent of popularizing sociological works, they share the same criticism about the lack of sociological explicit references in the albums. Some of them would have to appreciate a complementary bibliography at the end of the albums in order to guide the reader in his/her interest in going into the questions raised in depth.²¹ Other ones are not convinced by the idea that the reader is supposed to rebuild the sociological discourse from information disseminated in the albums.²² Some went further in the criticism: to them, the blurring of the theoretical frame but also the comical mood of some adaptations led to the loss of the critical discourse originally present in the sociological survey adapted.²³

4 Conclusion

By choosing to tell sociologically grounded graphic stories, the *Sociorama* series has sought to invite a broader audience than the usual readership of sociology publications into social worlds as diverse as professional football, family justice, or a television series' production crew. Adaptation work disrupted and challenged the inherent assumptions of academic sociological writing. As narration requires the materiality of social agents' relationship to time to be rendered, this caused the authors to decompartmentalize thematic specialties and spheres of social life — for example, between work and private life. However, describing social workings from the bottom up, through the lens of each individual's life and face-to-face interactions, does not mean that the social structures underpinning them should disappear. The comic artists therefore applied their graphic skills to integrate elements of sociological contextualization into the narrative.

While its ability to immerse readers in the social worlds described was a strong point, drawn fiction as presented in the collection also has its drawbacks. Inventing characters who bring to-

20. *Lectures* is an OpenEdition journal that publishes recensions of recent sociological books. The journal published recensions of 5 (out of 12) albums of the *Sociorama* collection.

21. Kevin Diter, "Baptiste Virot, Anne Lambert, *Turbulences*", *Lectures*, Les comptes rendus, 20 juillet 2016. <https://doi.org/10.4000/lectures.21166>. Available at: <http://journals.openedition.org/lectures/21166>

22. Michael Perret, "Helkarava, *La banlieue du 20 heures*", *Lectures*, Les comptes rendus, 18 novembre 2016. <https://doi.org/10.4000/lectures.21748>. Available at: <http://journals.openedition.org/lectures/21748>

23. Alexandra Roux, "Léon Maret, Mélanie Gourarier, *Séducteurs de rue*", *Lectures*, Les comptes rendus, 24 mai 2016. <https://doi.org/10.4000/lectures.20862>. Available at: <http://journals.openedition.org/lectures/20862>; Anne-Charlotte Millepied, "Lisa Mandel, Mathieu Trachman, *La fabrique pornographique*", *Lectures*, Les comptes rendus, 03 mars 2016. <https://doi.org/10.4000/lectures.2027>. Available at: <http://journals.openedition.org/lectures/2027>

gether a whole set of sociologically significant characteristics entails a risk of producing stereotypes or representations of the social worlds depicted that are ultimately predictable caricatures. Moreover, erasing the figure of the sociologist as an investigator also means removing it as the conveyor of an analytical discourse on the world described. In direct documentary cinema, the absence of voiceovers is compensated for by the implicit documentary contract, according to which everything that is filmed has actually happened in reality. In fiction, even if the book is presented as a “sociological comic story,”²⁴ the reading contract is not quite as clear. If everything is made up, what is to be believed? What is to be understood? How should these stories be read?

From these reflections stems the understanding that these comic books have not entirely fulfilled their dual objective of scientific dissemination and editorial success. In 2019, given the collection’s sales figures, Casterman decided to drop both *Sociorama* and the production process based on scientific committee supervision. On the other hand, the albums have been well received in schools and universities,²⁵ which goes to show this medium’s potential when it comes to diversifying pathways to sociological knowledge and reasoning (Guillaud & Mengneau, 2019). However, in these settings, readers are guided in their discovery of the albums by teaching devices that afford them a better understanding of the sociological discourse presented. The collection’s success in educational contexts thus demonstrates the need for mediation and support in reading so as to highlight the sociological dimension of the — often underlying — arguments conveyed by the albums. While this is an important lesson for the collection’s sociologists to take away, these endeavors were never meant to be ends rather than means. They were not intended to replace a more academic literature but simply to arouse enough curiosity in readers that they might one day read “real” sociology books.

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24. This phrasing was used on the covers of the last four albums: “Un récit sociologique en BD”.

25. This is evidenced by the numerous invitations the authors of *Sociorama* comics have received from high schools and the significant number of university libraries that have acquired the albums.

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