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Field Philosophy as a Disruptive Practice: Between Philosophical Legitimacy and Methodological Divergence

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Abstract

Philosophy is increasingly confronted with demands for social relevance that challenge its traditional modes of intervention. This article critically examines field philosophy as a situated and dialogical practice developed with non-academic actors. Drawing on Frodeman, Vollaire, Despret, and Stengers, it argues that field philosophy is not merely an applied extension of philosophy nor a transposition of social science methods. Rather, it reconfigures philosophical practice at methodological and epistemic levels. While it shares an attention to concrete situations with empirical inquiry, it differs through its reflexive stance, its normative orientation, and its commitment to co-construction rather than explanation. By foregrounding post-research follow-up and the empowerment of actors, the article proposes recognizing field philosophy as a disruptive yet legitimate practice that reshapes the public and epistemic responsibilities of philosophy.

Keywords: Field philosophy; interdisciplinarity; philosophical legitimacy; co-construction of knowledge; social relevance

Introduction

In the current context, marked by increasing demands to demonstrate the impact of publicly funded research, scientific work is increasingly required to account not only for its scientific value but also for its social and political reach (Reale et al., 2018). This evolution of the academic landscape has led many disciplines within the arts and humanities to reconfigure their practices

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in order to contribute to the construction of public intelligence (Stengers, 2013) and to foster a form of civic education attentive to global challenges (Nussbaum, 2010). Philosophy has not escaped this process of redefinition. Although traditionally rooted in speculative forms, it is now increasingly challenged by calls for greater engagement with concrete social realities. From this perspective, the issue of knowledge transfer work takes on renewed importance. Similarly, an empirical turn can be observed within the humanities, characterized by openness to situated, experimental, and co-constructed approaches. Buchanan (2018) notes that these methodologies draw on a broad range of references from philosophy, the arts, environmental studies, gender studies, and Indigenous sciences.

It is within this broader movement that a still marginal but increasingly discussed practice has emerged: field philosophy. Field philosophy should be distinguished from two neighboring practices with which it might be confused. Unlike applied ethics, which mobilizes pre-established philosophical principles to evaluate specific situations, field philosophy does not begin from normative frameworks but constructs its questions in dialogue with actors in situ. Unlike public philosophy, which addresses a broad audience through accessible formats, field philosophy involves sustained immersion and co-construction of knowledge with non-academic partners in concrete settings. This approach seeks to redeploy philosophical inquiry beyond traditional academic frameworks by anchoring it in concrete situations and engaging in dialogue with social actors, both human and non-human. However, this form of engaged, situated, and often interdisciplinary philosophy generates tensions. It is sometimes perceived as a distortion of the discipline, or even as a threat to the ideal of universality to which academic philosophy continues to refer (Bastian, 2018; Stengers, 2019). It therefore appears legitimate to question the conditions of possibility, the forms of legitimacy, and the epistemological specificities of this emerging practice. Through a cross-reading of authors such as Frodeman, Vollaire, Buchanan, Bastian, and Despret, this paper proposes to examine two complementary dimensions: to what extent can field philosophy be recognized as a legitimate, albeit marginal, form of contemporary philosophical practice? And in what ways, despite certain points of contact with empirical social sciences, does it distinguish itself through its aims, methodological posture, and epistemological grounding?

By articulating these two axes, the objective is not to definitively resolve the validity or invalidity of field philosophy, but rather to explore the conditions of its emergence, the tensions it crystallizes, and the conceptual shifts it produces within contemporary philosophy. The present reflection is based on an interpretative approach grounded in a cross-reading of philosophical and epistemological texts. Without claiming exhaustiveness,

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this analysis mobilizes a selection of authors who have contributed to defining, defending, or questioning field philosophy, in order to explore its conceptual foundations, issues of legitimation, and methodological particularities. The selection of authors follows two criteria: centrality in the field philosophy debate (Frodeman, Vollaire, Buchanan, Bastian) and relevance to the epistemological question of the relationship between philosophy and empirical inquiry (Despret, Stengers, Savransky). These authors have been retained because they represent the main theoretical positions structuring current discussions, from institutional legitimation to methodological singularity. Situated at the intersection of practical philosophy and interdisciplinary studies, this approach aims to interrogate the possibility of an anchored philosophy while maintaining a reflexive stance toward traditional epistemic frameworks.

1. The place of field philosophy in the contemporary landscape of philosophy

In this first section, we propose to examine the nature and place of field philosophy within contemporary philosophical practice. More specifically, the aim is to shed light on the various representations associated with this practice, the epistemological issues it raises, as well as the tensions it generates in its process of insertion into the institutional frameworks of academic philosophy. To do so, we will first consider field philosophy as a new philosophical imaginary, carrying the possibility of a reconfiguration of the philosopher's modes of inquiry and intervention. We will then address the resistances and mechanisms of exclusion that accompany its marginalization within the disciplinary field. Finally, we will explore the structuring effects that this approach could exert on philosophical practices, as a force of displacement or internal disruption.

1.1. Field philosophy: a new imaginary of philosophical practice

From the first stirrings of logos in the Socratic era to the contemporary period, philosophers have, in diverse ways, sought to think in, about, and with the world. Socratic maieutics, understood as an art of questioning aimed at bringing forth in the interlocutor an implicit form of knowledge, provides a paradigmatic illustration. In this perspective, the philosopher no longer appears as a figure detached from the world, but as an actor fully engaged in processes of explanation, understanding, and co-construction of reality. This active posture, which breaks with the figure of the withdrawn thinker, already seems to sketch a form of empirical engagement. Frodeman (2010) takes up a remark by Knobe to argue that philosophers would benefit from leaving a purely speculative posture in order to move toward concrete situations.

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Extending this critique, Frodeman (2010) maintains that any attempt to take philosophy out of the study and bring it into the heart of the world constitutes a significant advance. The figure of the philosopher, historically associated with an essentially textual or introspective interpretation of knowledge, is thus transformed into an active agent embedded in social dynamics. This posture, found notably among post-pragmatist or post-structuralist authors, feeds into a redefinition of the philosophical field. Paltrinieri (2020) identifies this movement as a defining feature of field philosophy. By mobilizing this notion, we seek to highlight a methodological rupture within the philosophical tradition itself. Field philosophy, as made explicit by Vollaire (2017), aims to break with an idealist and strictly academic representation of the discipline. It seeks to strengthen the link between philosophy and empiricism, by proposing to rethink the modalities of philosophical discourse outside its usual normative frameworks (Lacroix and Marchildon, 2020). This pragmatic inflection calls for a philosophy more engaged with the problems of its time, in a manner similar to what can be observed in other scientific fields.

As Lacroix and Marchildon (2020) note, since the first and second scientific revolutions, the sciences have been durably inscribed in the public sphere, assuming an active role in identifying, analyzing, and resolving social problems. In this context, philosophy has sometimes been relegated to concerns perceived as abstract or exclusively existential. Field philosophy seeks to respond to this marginalization by reactivating a critical and pragmatic function, notably through the use of empirical data and dialogue with other practitioners. It thus presents itself as a form of collaborative experience, in which philosophical competencies are mobilized in order to address, in a situated manner, concrete issues. The work of Frodeman and Briggle (2010, 2012, 2016, 2020) has played a central role in the formalization and dissemination of this approach. These authors argue for a redefinition of philosophical practice, which they hold should be articulated more closely with the knowledge and practices of scientists, engineers, or public decision makers. Buchanan et al. (2018) suggest that this philosophy beyond books, conducted in the field, makes the discipline more relevant, more collaborative, and more directly engaged with contemporary challenges, whether societal or environmental.

In this perspective, field philosophy invites us to shift our gaze. Rather than seeking abstract universal principles, it encourages us to approach public problems as opportunities to extract a situated philosophical dimension. The image of the philosopher leaving the cave, in the sense of the Platonic myth, finds a contemporary resonance here: it is no longer only a matter of seeing the light, but of going down into the field, of rooting oneself in a ground, of confronting a concrete reality. This methodological shift is also a process of

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conquest: not in the sense of theoretical imperialism, but as a willingness to gain ground on the unknown, to take a position within a space that had until then been marginalized by traditional philosophy. Vollaire (2017) recalls that « faire un terrain » entails an assumed exile from the intellectual condition toward the empirical condition, with a view to transforming the very territory of knowledge. Our contribution here aims to emphasize that this posture, while it opens new paths for philosophical practice, remains only weakly recognized institutionally. Field philosophy, as a non-conventional approach, continues to provoke reticence, particularly among those who defend a more theoretical or textual philosophy. It is sometimes accused of threatening the supposed purity of the discipline by blurring the boundaries between speculation and intervention, between conceptual rigor and practical engagement.

1.2. Field philosophy: a discriminated philosophical practice?

We pursue our reflection here by examining the obstacles to the institutional recognition of field philosophy. This analysis is based on the hypothesis that the difficulties faced by this approach are partly rooted in the internal tensions that run through the philosophical field, particularly around the question of disciplinary legitimacy. Philosophy, as a concept, remains difficult to delimit. It lends itself to multiple, often divergent definitions, with each author or tradition projecting onto it their own conception, as Lacroix (2014) has noted. From its emergence in ancient Greece to modernity, it has taken shape in a plurality of discourses, making any attempt at a single definition both incomplete and contestable. Some approaches adopt an idealist perspective, others a more realist posture; none, however, seems able to claim absolute conceptual neutrality. Philosophy can thus be conceived sometimes as a rational inquiry into truth, sometimes as a rigorous method of searching for meaning. In this plural context, several ways of entering philosophy coexist. Some are rooted in the history of ideas, others in the lived world. It is within this latter path that field philosophy is situated, seeking to nourish reflection through concrete experience. Goubet (2002) argues that experience constitutes both the ground and the point of culmination of an empirical philosophical enterprise. From this perspective, field philosophy pays particular attention to the experiences of actors, to forms of local, contextual, and embodied morality. This posture leads, according to Dekeuwer (2019), field philosophers to no longer delegate to other disciplines, notably the human and social sciences, the task of doing fieldwork, which they would then merely comment on from the outside.

This approach, however, comes into tension with a certain dominant vision of academic philosophy. Philosophical institutions have historically valued a form of internal coherence among ideas, projects, and pedagogical practices, which tends to exclude what departs from it. Although a space of

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freedom persists within the discipline, it is often framed by strong normative expectations. Bastian (2018) recalls that academic routine still too often consists in discrediting practices that depart from established canons, to the point that some philosophers come to regard their colleagues as "non-philosophers". It is in this climate that field philosophy faces explicit or implicit forms of marginalization. Stengers and Despret (2018) denounce discriminatory practices within philosophical institutions toward approaches that depart from traditional formats. More generally, Buchanan et al. (2018) note that philosophy has not yet recognized fieldwork as a philosophical modality in its own right, nor even produced an in-depth reflection on what it would mean to « penser sur le terrain » as a full-fledged intellectual exercise. Our analysis highlights that this lack of recognition can have profound consequences. It leads some scholars to move away from academic circles in order to develop their practices in more open or transdisciplinary spaces. According to Buchanan et al. (2018), citing Dotson and Salamon, the constant requirement to justify one's approach in light of dominant norms leads many practitioners to leave the discipline in search of intellectual freedom. In this context, Frodeman (2010) characterizes field philosophy as a « philosophie non liée », even a "dedisciplined" philosophy.

Institutional resistance is often accompanied by symbolic suspicion. Bastian (2018) evokes the provocative image of the field philosopher likened to a « chat mangeur de piment », a troubling figure that arouses mistrust. Unable to legitimate themselves according to standard criteria, such philosophers remain in a gray zone of disciplinary recognition. Stengers (2019) suggests that field philosophers must learn to « trahir » the demands of the testators, that is, the guardians of traditional philosophy. She sees in this an ontological displacement. It is no longer a matter of asking "what can we know," but "what do we know". Bastian (2018) calls this process "disruption". We consider that this disruption should be examined not as a threat but as a heuristic opportunity to rethink the epistemic frameworks of philosophy. In this respect, the marginalization of field philosophy constitutes a revealing symptom of the dynamics of power and normalization at work within the disciplinary field, while also opening critical perspectives on the conditions of possibility of a truly situated philosophy.

1.3. Field philosophy as disruption

Philosophy, writes Dekeuwer (2019), is a reflection for which any foreign matter is good, and for which any good matter must be foreign. From this perspective, the integration of field philosophy within the philosophical field should, in theory, pose no difficulty. Its openness to otherness, to empirical realities, and to other disciplines could appear as a logical extension of the philosophical spirit. Yet the tensions it provokes reveal a persistent

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contradiction between this unconventional posture and the demands of academic philosophy. Field philosophy seeks to restore to the philosopher a freedom of movement by partially emancipating itself from the systematic reaffirmation of a supposed universality of philosophical knowledge. In this respect, it is part of a dynamic of pluralizing anchors, which Dekeuwer (2019) interprets as an invitation to « varier sa culture matérielle ». Such openness, however, is sometimes perceived by the philosophical tradition as a transgression. Field philosophers would be atypical, even disruptive figures, seeking to express, outside their "proper domain," forms of invention or creation deemed of limited legitimacy.

Faced with these critical perceptions, part of the work of field philosophers consists, first, in building bridges with other disciplines. Bastian (2018) observes that this positioning necessarily involves engagements with people, places, and problems external to traditional philosophy departments. By adopting this posture, these philosophers inevitably move away from dominant disciplinary norms, while anchoring themselves in hybrid communities where responsibilities and loyalties are redefined. They struggle to fit into classical academic molds precisely because they question ideals of knowledge and truth taken to be universal. Thus, undertaking a field philosophy approach amounts, according to Bastian, to confronting the disruption that it generates. This practice gradually leads researchers to develop their own criteria for evaluating what counts as valid philosophical work. The task is then to replace the ideal of disciplinary purity with an affirmed recognition of diversity. In this respect, field philosophy presents itself as a space of tension, a zone of epistemological friction within the discipline.

Frodeman and Briggle (2019) define field philosophy as a practice aimed at intervening concretely in real-world problems faced by non-philosophers—and, we might add, by non-humans, in the sense of Latour (2007) and Stengers (2013). In this sense, the approach oscillates between inclusion and marginality. It is both philosophy and non-philosophy insofar as it redefines the boundaries of the discipline. Buchanan et al. (2018) view field philosophy as a development parallel to institutionalized philosophy rather than a radical break. Frodeman, Briggle, and Holbrook (2019) see it as a form of inter- and transdisciplinary practice in which humans and non-humans interact in situated contexts. Field philosophers begin from problems encountered in non-academic environments and offer a reflexive contribution through dialogical norms drawn from various disciplines. This conception of philosophical practice is largely inspired by pragmatism while remaining distinct from it. It avoids two pitfalls: on the one hand, overly theoretical discourses with limited concrete effects; on the other, models of applied

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philosophy which, while seeking usefulness, often remain addressed to other philosophers through predefined conceptual tools (Buchanan et al., 2019).

Two concrete examples illustrate what this practice looks like in action. First, Vollaire's work in conflict zones, notably in Lebanon and Kosovo, where she engaged in sustained dialogue with displaced populations and humanitarian workers to co-construct philosophical categories of dignity and livability under extreme conditions (Vollaire, 2017). The philosopher here does not arrive with pre-formed concepts but allows the encounter with situated experience to reshape the very terms of inquiry. Second, Despret's fieldwork alongside farmers and animals, in which prolonged presence and attentive listening generated a philosophical inquiry into the boundaries between knowledge, care, and cohabitation (Despret, 2018). In both cases, the philosopher operates not as an external observer extracting data, but as a reflexive partner whose thinking is transformed by the encounter.

In this logic, field philosophy is conceived as a renewed pragmatic experience grounded in collaboration with practitioners from different contexts. It involves researchers in embodied forms of learning that unfold through contact with the field. It is no longer simply a matter of thinking about the environment from the conceptual safety of a classroom, but of interacting with more humans, within a perspective of education rooted in places and shared experiences. Our analysis allows for a double observation. On the one hand, field philosophy is continuous with certain classical intuitions, notably Socratic maieutics. On the other hand, it constitutes a rupture with respect to the abstract and disembodied idealization that still dominates a significant part of institutional philosophy (Vollaire, 2017). In this sense, it retains a polemical value. It calls into question not only the canonical forms of philosophical discourse but also the academic devices that ensure their reproduction. This posture raises, rightly, questions regarding the true place that field philosophy occupies—or can occupy—within the philosophical arena. The testimony reported by Bastian (2018), in which the author acknowledges having to « devenir un peu indisciplinée » to respond to the questions that interest her, illustrates the tension between fidelity to a tradition and the necessity of bifurcation.

In sum, this first part has enabled us to better grasp field philosophy as an emerging practice that is situated, disruptive, and in tension with established norms of academic philosophy. We have shown that, although it is rooted in an ancient reflexive tradition, notably Socratic, it profoundly challenges criteria of legitimacy, disciplinary boundaries, and the conditions for the institutionalization of contemporary philosophy. This posture, both critical and pragmatic, seems to open new avenues of intervention for philosophy, yet it remains in search of recognition. In light of these observations, it becomes relevant to examine the extent to which field

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philosophy shares certain methodological traits with empirical social sciences while maintaining its own distinctive aim. It is to this comparative exploration that the second section of this paper will be devoted.

2. Methodological proximities and epistemic singularities: field philosophy in relation to empirical social sciences

The second section of our analysis focuses on exploring the methodological relationships between field philosophy and empirical approaches in the social sciences. The first step is to identify the general characteristics of field-based approaches as practiced in the social sciences, in order to clarify their epistemological foundations and objectives. The second step consists in a comparative perspective, examining the convergences, differences, and tensions that emerge between the aims, objects, and modes of intervention specific to each of these practices. This approach seeks to better situate the specificity or permeability of field philosophy within the contemporary landscape of empirical research.

2.1. Methodological approach to the field in the social sciences

Since their foundation in the nineteenth century, the human sciences have asserted an explicit intention to draw closer to empirical data in order to better grasp the dynamics of the social world and the realities that traverse it. This theoretical ambition gradually gave way to a growing interest in the notion of the field as both method and anchoring issue. The field constitutes an investigative device enabling researchers to interact with social actors and to explore configurations of meaning within specific contexts. Within the social sciences, the field is generally approached through established methods, notably qualitative inquiry or structured interviews. This latter approach, which we describe here as epistemologically oriented toward the search for causality, seeks to go beyond the surface of lived experience in order to access an underlying order of facts. The aim is to identify explanatory mechanisms, often concealed, that only a process of scientific deciphering can render accessible. Savransky (2018) describes this orientation as an "ethics of alienation," insofar as it relies on a bifurcation between immediate experience and supposedly objective knowledge.

In this configuration, the researcher occupies a position of epistemic dominance, seeking to reveal what actors cannot or do not necessarily wish to articulate. Despret (2018) highlights a significant limitation: social science investigators rarely question the actual interest of interviewees in the questions being asked, which can generate a relational asymmetry. The quest for objectivity, central to positivist epistemology, also translates into practices such as the systematic anonymization of interviews. Despret (2018) observes that anonymity, while aiming at protection, implicitly redistributes expertise

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and can reinforce mistrust, leading some participants to self-censor. Despret (2018) argues for an ethical reconsideration: it would be desirable to allow interlocutors to choose whether or not to be named, by actively engaging them in reflection on their own anonymity. This position invites a rethinking of certain standard practices, especially in sensitive or situated contexts. Field philosophy can offer a critical inflection here, by questioning not only the ends of research but also the modalities of the relationship between researcher and field. Among the major empirical approaches, the sociology of public problems deserves particular attention. Lacroix and Marchildon (2020) recall that the resolution of public problems now involves a plurality of actors (civil society, researchers, media, etc.) and no longer falls exclusively under the purview of state institutions. From this perspective, the sociology of public problems seeks to offer both a diagnosis of social realities and a contribution to their transformation. It presents itself as reflexive, normative, and participatory. It aims to define what deserves attention and which values might guide collective regulation. Empirically grounded, it nonetheless remains normative, relying on pre-existing analytical frameworks. The field thus becomes a site that is both concrete and traversed by axiological tensions, a possible point of encounter, but also of differentiation, with field philosophy.

2.2. Stakes, objectives, and comparative analysis of field philosophy and social science field approaches

The concept of the field, as mobilized by Vollaire (2017), designates an essential component of the human sciences that has long been perceived as foreign to philosophy. Like the distinction between experimental science and pure science, the field-based approach presupposes observing, interacting, and acting in situ. Going into the field means confronting the test of social reality and engaging in a reflexive, existential, and epistemological process. Dekeuwer (2020) emphasizes that the experience of the field inevitably confronts researchers with tensions between hypotheses and practices, between methodological ideals and the constraints of reality. In contrast to an academic philosophy attached to the ideal of universal and decontextualized knowledge, field philosophy proposes a different regime of thought. It shifts the aim from universality toward situated knowledge. Stengers (2019) interprets this shift as a break with the hegemony of disembodied knowledge and as an engagement of the philosopher with and among others. From this perspective, we argue that field philosophy cannot be understood as a simple back-and-forth between office and field. It rests on a collaborative practice with actors, in which the philosopher adopts the posture of a reflexive partner. It is no longer a matter of collecting data to later interpret them from a position of dominance, but of recognizing and valuing knowledge arising from practice settings through the active co-construction of shared reference points.

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This methodological and ethical shift implies, as we emphasize, sustained attention to post-research follow-up. The durability of mobilized knowledge must be questioned: do the produced forms of knowledge truly enable practitioners to act autonomously within their environments? Do they foster the lasting integration of competencies, attitudes, or transferable tools? In other words, does knowledge transfer result in effective appropriation and a renewed capacity to act and think? This constitutes a specific contribution that we associate with the relevance of field philosophy. In line with this posture, field philosophy also distinguishes itself through the ambition to follow dynamics of influence among actors (philosophers, decision makers, practitioners) and the circulation of ideas across time and contexts (academic, political, social, and educational). Inspired by Dewey and extended by Despret (2018), philosophical inquiry emphasizes transformation and creation rather than the stabilization of facts. It transforms both the investigator and those encountered. Vollaire (2017) speaks of a philosopher as a "questeur" or "quémandeur," who assumes incompleteness and accepts being displaced by interlocutors.

This posture is embodied in a distinctive use of the interview. Far removed from strictly structured protocols aimed at objectifiable data, the philosophical interview privileges attentive listening, egalitarian dialogue, and shared reflexivity. Interlocutors are considered partners in thought. The goal is not to extract answers but to open a shared space of questioning within complex situations. Despite certain methodological analogies with the social sciences, field philosophy differs through its ethic of creation, dialogue, and self-displacement. It thus constitutes an autonomous philosophical practice, albeit a marginal one within the current academy. In sum, while field philosophy shares with the social sciences an interest in situated experience and engagement with the field, it distinguishes itself through its reflexive posture, its aim of co-construction, and its renewed philosophical grounding. By highlighting dynamics of influence, conditions of appropriation, and the necessity of post-research follow-up, we contribute to recognizing it as an autonomous, engaged, and generative practice, a form of research conceived as a relational and transformational process rather than as the mere production of results.

Conclusion

In conclusion, our analysis sought to explicate the methodological, epistemological, and ethical specificities of field philosophy by confronting them with empirical approaches in the social sciences. While analogies do exist, particularly attention to situated experience, immersion, and interaction with practice environments, field philosophy distinguishes itself through a reflexive posture, an aim of co-construction, and an explicit anchoring in a

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renewed philosophical tradition. We have argued that it cannot be reduced to an alternation between theory and episodic immersion, but rests instead on an epistemic collaboration in which the philosopher becomes a partner in thought. This posture overturns classical hierarchies of knowledge and values situated knowledge, local experiences, and co-produced intelligibilities. We have also emphasized the importance of post-research follow-up as a key indicator for assessing the durability, appropriability, and impact of the knowledge produced. This follow-up raises questions about the capacity of such knowledge to foster the empowerment of practitioners, to support concrete transformations, and to generate collective dynamics of meaning. Finally, although field philosophy remains marginal within dominant institutions and encounters resistance, it nonetheless constitutes a legitimate and historically situated expression of the philosophical gesture, extending Socratic intuitions while reinvesting the public sphere. It opens the way toward a renewal of the discipline's aims: anchoring, shared transformation, and the social responsibility of knowledge.

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