

DUBET François (ed.), 2016, *Léguer, hériter* [Bequeathing, inheriting], Paris, La Découverte, Recherches, 160 p.

This work, written for a general readership, brings together a dozen studies on the subject of inheritance.<sup>(1)</sup> The role that inheritance [in the broadest sense of the term here, similar to heritage] plays in reproducing the social structure, notably through intergenerational transmission of upbringing, culture and an entire set of social properties, has already been widely studied in the social sciences. Studying inheritance is also a way of examining the family and its practices, particularly through analysis of intergenerational relations.<sup>(2)</sup> This book takes a different approach, however, as it discusses only the transmission of material wealth, though it does not neglect the legal and symbolic aspects, studied here by jurists, historians, sociologists, economists and anthropologists, each taking up the question with their own disciplinary tools and problematics.<sup>(3)</sup>

The result is by nature heterogeneous, but does offer ways of thinking about how this type of transmission functions and the effects of recent changes in it. Part I recalls that inheritance cannot be understood without taking into account the social context in which it is practiced. Elie Haddad analyses how the role of material wealth in the construction of the nobility weakened over time, disappearing entirely in the early eighteenth century in favour of kinship-based transmission, which in turn enabled this social group to maintain its identity and to some degree its isolation. But context is also relevant in studying the very poor, as shown by Emilia Schijman in her analysis of practical kinship in contemporary Argentina and France. In Argentina, older persons who have been abandoned by an enfeebled, ineffective welfare state have to “swap” the promise of an inheritance for assistance from a young person who may or may not be a member of their family. Schijman likens these practices to those of impoverished housing estate tenants in the northern suburbs of Paris: in both cases they bring to light “the informal inheritance strategies poor people rely on to ensure they will receive the assistance they need” (p. 55) when state or family can no longer support them.

But transmission is also a question of law, which specifies what can be transmitted, how and to whom. Part II directly discusses these questions across such varied topics as transmitting a company (SCIs or *sociétés civiles immobilières*, involving real estate revenues, is the best-known case in France), bequests to cultural institutions (in this case, the Louvre), life annuity arrangements, and the conditions under which a donor can take back a gift (the “return clause” for

(1) Every year the Fondation pour les Sciences Sociales awards a scholarship to twelve researchers for grant proposals on a particular topic. The work reviewed here brings together the studies of 2015's laureates. See the presentation of the Fondation project at <http://fondation-sciences-sociales.org/le-projet-2/> (consulted Oct. 24, 2017).

(2) See, for example, André Masson, 2009, *Des liens et des transferts entre generations*, Paris, Éditions de l'École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, 464 p.

(3) For a list of participating researcher-authors and the videos they have produced, see <http://fondation-sciences-sociales.org/category/chercheurs-2015/> (consulted Oct. 24, 2017).

donations). What these practices have in common is the existence of social or legal mechanisms that may be activated to control not only inheritance processes but also the heirs: all reflect concern that extends beyond the thing transmitted to the situation of those who receive it.

This is even more relevant for Part III, which discusses the role of inheritance in wealth inequalities. Fabrice Boudjaaba shows that in the period immediately following the instatement of France's Civil Code, wills tended to play two roles: protecting the surviving spouse and reintroducing a degree of equity when he or she was threatened by the strict equality that code established. His findings relativize the notion of an earlier peasant world where the aim was to ensure that the family wealth remained undivided at any cost.

The book's studies highlight how diverse the functions of inheritance and the roles of transmission are, as well as the flexibility of practices underlying them. It also exposes the tensions running through them, between the egalitarian ideal and the desire to preserve the family wealth, between individual autonomy and family obligations. On the whole, the work effectively attains its stated objective of providing an overview of current research on a major social question. It is regrettable, however, that there is so little communication between the authors and between their chapters; the reader finds little of the interdisciplinary dialogue touted at several points in the book.

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