

LAFERTÉ G., PASQUALI P., RENAHY, N. (eds.), 2018, *Le laboratoire des sciences sociales: histoires d'enquêtes et revisites* [The social science laboratory: Histories of research studies and revisits], Paris, Raisons d'agir, 304 pages.

Critical examination of research practices has become a norm across the social sciences, internalized by each discipline. Each, in accordance with its objects, gives some attention to 'the social interests and uses hiding behind the apparent neutrality of their categories, codes, techniques, and data' (p. 11). Paradoxically, however, this critical work tends to mask each discipline's constructions and assumptions as a whole (p. 12). That is what this book sets out to show, by looking back at the 'large-scale' research studies (*grandes enquêtes*; a better definition of this term would have been appreciated) in the social sciences from the 1950s to the 1980s. It underlines, notably, a risk that the reflexivity emphasized within the social sciences could prove to be an illusion if it remains confined to the present, failing to take into account practices and knowledge inherited (whether consciously or not) from the disciplinary past.

Importantly, the 'laboratory' referred to in the title is not the sanitized space of the natural sciences, nor the laptop that the anthropologist carries around from place to place, nor the historian's dusty archives, but a larger whole that encompasses both physical spaces and ways of working, material and symbolic. 'More than the physical, fixed, concrete, and lasting place that we spontaneously think of, the "social science laboratory" designates all of the historically contingent, socially located, concrete practices and processes involved in the social construction of scholarly knowledge. These are as likely to play out in the "field" or an archive as they are by way of a questionnaire or a statistical database' (p. 11).

It is *this* laboratory, this set of social and historical constructions, that this book sets out to examine, contributing to the 'social history of research studies (*enquêtes*) in the social sciences'. It must be emphasized that undertaking a history of research studies is not mere exercise but a way of raising various important questions about contemporary research practice.

The book presents six cases that revisit earlier research studies, each of which illustrates the forms that this social history can, or should, take. None of the six is a 'revisit' in the sense defined by Michael Burawoy: repeating the same study, on the same questions, at the same site, at two different times. But all contribute to highlighting the challenges and importance of the work of historicizing the social sciences. One of the book's merits is precisely its illustration of the plurality of approaches to this work, which respond to diverse objectives and adopt different points of view.⁽¹⁾

Some contributions, very personal, emphasize historical continuity in the social sciences, both between studies and across generations of researchers. Chapter 2 (by Michel Bozon) resituates the large-scale national survey on couple formation in France (1983–1984) in the context of half a century of research on

(1) BURAWOY M., 2003, Revisits: An outline of a theory of reflexive ethnography, *American Sociological Review*, 68(5), 645–679. See also the discussion of this article in the work here under review, pp. 30–37.

intimate relationships in the country. Highlighting both change and stability, continuation and innovation, he explores how studies are transmitted, in the academic world and beyond, in the media and to students. It is not enough to carry out a 'beautiful' study: it must also be made known. Chapter 5 (by Benoît Trépied) is undoubtedly the closest to a Burawoyian revisit in the strict sense. Trépied looks back at the research of his thesis director, Alban Bensa, on New Caledonia, illustrating how proximity, place, and the role of respondents influence ethnographic research. Half tribute, half critical reflection, this chapter perfectly illustrates the potential contribution of revisits and shows that the work of reflection and reflexivity is never complete.

Other chapters focus on how research is conducted, in order to reveal power structures in the scientific field and their effects on research practices. The first chapter (by Françoise Zonabend) is based on the division of labour, in the second part of the 20th century, between anthropology (the masculine, prestigious study of distant societies) and the ethnography of France (the feminine, devalued study of the nearby and the local). It highlights 'the gender of research'. Chapter 3 (by Gwenaële Rot and François Vatin) analyses three studies in the sociology of work in the 1950s which had the shared particularity of being directed from a distance. Each involved the relationship between a faraway supervisor and an investigator, generally a more junior researcher, in the field. The advantage of these studies is that they left multiple traces, particularly correspondence. The authors carefully analyse these documents, retracing the protagonists' trajectories and highlighting the hierarchies hidden or omitted from research practices.

Finally, a third group of contributions analyses in detail how context beyond the academic world influences research work and, ultimately, the knowledge that it produces. The social sciences, as they show, are often or always 'in contact or in opposition to other types of authorized discourse on the social world—literature, journalism, philosophy, law, economics, psychoanalysis, etc.' (p. 29). Chapter 4 (by Laure Pitti) deals with a major study of the working-class world conducted in 1984–1986 at Renault, in collaboration with the CNRS. It shows how this project, at the intersection of research on immigration and on the world of labour, divided and opposed not only researchers, politicians, and industrialists to each other but the researchers amongst themselves, with their divisions on the question of immigrant workers. Chapter 6 (by Paul Pasquali) looks back at the attempt, at the Centre de sociologie européenne, to transpose the Chicago school's methodology and philosophy into a French context, in Antony. The project failed and in the end quickly ceased to be referenced.

This book demonstrates that returning to previous empirical studies in the social sciences is a fruitful undertaking, which can illuminate the actions and practices of these disciplines by bringing to light various processes that often escape observation. These include material and institutional constraints as well as hierarchical relationships within research teams, or between them and other actors and components of the social world. At the same time, it offers observations

and insights on what was actually done, what remains debatable, and what is established. The same process also allows each researcher to question research practices themselves—their own and those of others. Above all, at a time when ideas such as big data and machine learning are dominating the news, a book that reminds us of the essential role of empirical research in the social sciences, but also of its difficulty and complexity, is more than welcome.

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Translated by Paul Reeve