

BOOK REVIEW

Vannier: La sociologie en toutes lettres

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Vannier, Patricia (Ed.) (2019) *La sociologie en toutes lettres: L'histoire de la discipline à travers les correspondances*. Toulouse: Presses Universitaires du Midi

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Private correspondence has largely been ignored by sociologists and historians alike as research material, with the exception of Thomas and Znaniecki's *Polish Peasant In Europe and America*, which drew extensively on this source material. This book offers to deal with this issue and brings new insights and methodological tools to sociologists and more specifically to historians of the discipline.

The book (whose title translates into English as “*Sociology in full letters: the history of the discipline through correspondences*”) stems from a conference in 2014 organised by Prof. Patricia Vannier, from the University of Toulouse, and is published by Presses Universitaires du Midi. It is divided into 13 chapters. Let me state first of all that this book is a solid contribution to the field: Most of the chapters use original material and, at times, new methodology. There are minor aspects which could have been improved, which I will discuss below with but above all this book gives us food for thought regarding:

- 1) the problems that occur when historians of sociology use correspondences;
- 2) the added value of letters to “debunk” myths concerning prominent sociological figures;
- 3) the usefulness of letters to help write about the real, concrete working conditions of sociologists “in the field”;
- 4) the novelty of emails that poses a threat to the “traditional” letter use by historians of “classical” sociology.

All of these dimensions make it a useful and stimulating book that will be a trailblazer in the methodological aspects of the history of sociology, a subgenre that has rarely attracted attention before.

The book is an intelligent mix of various research currently happening within the field of the history of sociology in France and in French-speaking countries. The initial conference was organised under the aegis of the ‘*Association Internationale des Sociologues de Langue Française*’ (AISLF), the international association of French-speaking sociologists, which is the ISA counterpart and comprises 1500 members spread across 59 countries.

It is thus interesting to note that many chapters are not France-oriented and that some of the contributors are from abroad. This gives the book a rather balanced content: You can find your usual chapter on Durkheim (Chap. 7 by Matthieu Béra) or on the Durkheimian school (Chap. 5 by Sébastien Mosbah-Natanson), but also some on less well-known figures such as Georges Vacher de Lapouge, a eugenicist, in Toulouse (Chap. 8 by Jean-Paul Laurens), René Lourau, the founder of “counter-sociology” in the 1970s (Chap. 9 by Antoine Savoye), and Raymond Ledrut, President of the AISLF in the early 1980s (Chap. 4 by Patricia Vannier). More surprisingly, Sylvain Wagnon (Chap. 2) tells us the story of Belgian sociologist Emile Waxweiler and his “*Institut Solvay*” while Frédéric Parent (Chap. 6) gives us a proud example of the underexplored French-speaking Canadian sociology with Léon Gérin in the late 19th century. Finally, a chunk of the book is dedicated to the inevitable American sociologists, either seen through French eyes (Georges Gurvitch in Chap. 10 by Suzie Guth and Michel Crozier in Chap. 11 by Gwenaële Rot) or documented through American archives (two articles deal with Robert Merton: Chap. 3 by Michel Dubois and Chap. 13 by Arnaud Saint-Martin), which show how rich the archival material on the subject remains.

The book is more an attempt to derive precise methodological rules when using letters through a selection of historical figures than a volume in the history of sociology that would bring more and more “facts” to the fore. The book’s scope as initially presented by Patricia Vannier in the introduction is theoretical. This does not prevent it from shedding new light on some little-known parts of the private histories of sociologists. For instance, we learn about Durkheim’s student experience in Bordeaux (Matthieu Béra), René Lourau’s correspondence with Antoine Savoye, who married his sister-in-law in the 1970s, or Michel Crozier’s initial experience as a sociologist-traveller in the U.S. when he was 26 in 1948 (Gwenaëlle Rot) before he found the French sociology of organizations.

Patricia Vannier (Introduction), Jean-Michel Chapoulie (Chap. 1), and Alexandre Gofman (Chap. 12) put forward methodological rules about correspondence and explain that they are “private documents that are not initially intended to be published” (Vannier, p. 18), that they are “seldom cited in research reports on the history of the social sciences” (Chapoulie, p. 32), or that they “often perform not only a communication function but tend to keep a secret limited to its intended recipient” (Gofman, p. 234).

The most interesting aspects of the book is that, through case studies of well-known figures in the history of sociology, they teach us much more theory than these theoretical *exposés* themselves. It is not only stimulating to read about the private lives of these public figures, but we can also easily derive implicit methodological rules from the way their authors deal with the material and write the chapter. It is thus an endearing dive into the background of “official” histories of sociology, especially classical sociology.

Despite this, the book still contains details that could hinder the reader from getting the most of the publication.

First of all, footnotes and references are questionably inserted into the text. The book uses the Chicago style within footnotes (e.g. Note 1: Bourdieu, 1989) and ultimately does not include a comprehensive bibliography but rather offers single ones by chapters, which makes the citations hard to follow. Since we are dealing with history, it would have been easier to stick with the Chicago style with a full bibliography at the end or to use Modern historical research footnotes, which state the source directly and in full at the bottom of the page.

Secondly, this book was admittedly published after a conference by the AISLF organised by French-speaking authors; so why are French translations not provided systematically when quoting English letters (Dubois' chapter is full of these kinds of examples, especially p. 70), or English words used in French as such ("*possiblement*", p. 94; "*séminale*", p. 102; "serendipity", p. 246)? French readers definitely deserve better, and so do AISLF members.

More importantly, most of the chapters use "traditional" methodologies and theories in their treatment of correspondence. The book thus somewhat smacks (perhaps too much) of "classical sociology" to be fully enticing to non-historians of sociology. Parent (on Léon Gérin), Dubois (on Merton) and Wagnon (on Waxweiler) nonetheless provide new techniques (lexicometry, network analysis) or theories (an ethnography of the practice of scholars) that open new horizons to the dusty field of the history of classical sociology.

However, what adds to this impression is that not one of the sociological figures tackled in the book are women. There is almost nothing in terms of gender perspective, except an occasional footnote that recalls that women did play a role in the birth of these theories because "they deal concretely with social relations, while men think these same relations theoretically" (Parent, p. 133); meanwhile "one still waits for a light thrown on the role of Louise Durkheim in the work of her husband [Emile Durkheim]" (Savoie, p. 190).

Ultimately, there are aspects that the contributors recognise are still invisible despite the centrality and role of private correspondence in their work. Some decisions are made orally, without documentation which prevents the authors from reconstituting the past (Vannier, p. 5); sociologists' students and the public at the university are sidelined nearly all the time, although they played a great role in the rise of popularity of these figures (Béra, p. 135); the institutional supports which could account for their eventual success in history (Laurens, p. 161) or writing practices and what they mean for creating the content (Saint-Martin, p. 254) are largely ignored.

The purpose of the book, as mentioned earlier, is theoretical: It tries to draw conclusions regarding the use of correspondence among historians of sociology to write the history of big figures. Therefore, it poses several problems that are tackled in the chapters.

First of all, there seems to be general agreement that letters can (surprisingly) be an obstacle, not an asset, to the historian. Vannier (p. 18) explains in the introduction that correspondences are "private and are not meant to be published" not least because "their publication may transform the meaning and the scope of the written material". Letters offer a different outlook on figures of sociology because they usually are private documents and do not necessarily provide information in the way one expects (or wishes): Private correspondence can lead researchers in unexpected directions in the history of sociology. And that is a good thing.

Nonetheless that fear is voiced on several occasions: Wagnon (p. 38) explains that Waxweiler's correspondence is "very partial in its elements and his multiple activities", Vannier reiterates that "facing the profusion and richness of the archives [...] the sociologist is always convinced he is going to unveil secrets, revelations [...] but this is unfortunately not reality" (p. 78) and Chapoulie (p. 32) specifies that "correspondence is sometimes not often cited' but 'stays in the background" of research reports because it is far from the concepts and theories that these great figures are known for or because they deal with "tiny details". Several of these authors therefore seem biased into thinking that the material is "dubious" because it is "private", "rich" or "partial" when it should be taken as more exciting. Indeed, because letters question the "official histories" and draw us far away from the

classical History (with a capital H) of concepts, they are all the more useful. What we can discover from them will be all the more “secret” or held secret in the process of the elaboration of science, and thus valuable.

Vannier suggests that there is another bias in the study of correspondence in the history of sociology. Indeed, she writes that “the popularity and the centrality of the sociologist (a founder, the leader of a school, the representative of a particular theoretical branch) may constitute a sufficient criterion for analysing or merely publishing their correspondence” (p. 12), thus indicating that the average sociologist would not see their letters used in the history of the field. “Only winners write history”, and so it is in the history of sociology. More work is needed from sociologists to use everyday material from ordinary sociologists, or even personal documents (Savoie uses his own correspondence with René Lourau to shed light on the “counter sociology” movement in France in the 1970s) to explain in more details the history of the discipline.

In spite of this selection of correspondence from more prominent figures, they still represent an advancement in the process of “debunking” the surrounding myths. As Wagnon maintains, “the study of their correspondences, even if scattered, is a possible entry into this history” of sociology which “tends to mythify them and which forbids one to understand their characteristics and specificities” (p. 51). The use of private letters allows one to make these figures (Durkheim, Gurvitch, Merton, etc.) more human and to put a finger on the real conditions of their work and on the constraints of their research. These show through their correspondence and reveal that they are not “wants” or “obstacles” that letters put in the way of science; they are everyday sociology put into practice.

In his chapter on the Kuhn-Merton controversy, Dubois specifically explains that the “opposition between Kuhn and Merton” appears to be a fiction thanks to their correspondence because “none of them really participated in it” (p. 55). What seemed like a “mystery” (Wagnon, p. 36) or “enigmatic” (Dubois, p. 68) in the history of sociology is now enlightened by the study of the correspondence between Emile Waxweiler and Robert Merton. However, Dubois underlines one caveat when studying their correspondence (p. 56). He writes: “The material must be crossed with other kinds” because “the acting sociologist is not [always] sincere in a personal document”. Indeed, letters are social objects: As Gofman (p. 235) reminds us, correspondences have a “communication function” as well as a “secret one”. When a famous sociologist such as Robert Merton wrote a letter to a colleague or a student, he was acting and staging himself in a role, implicitly hoping or assuming that other people would read the letter. One must remain careful of what is intended, personally or socially, in the correspondence to interpret it. Letters are supposed to be private objects unveiling “a hidden reality” (however inglorious it may be), whereas they often were simple social acts drawing attention to the actor rather than the persona.

Through the use of these correspondences, these contributors strive to achieve two goals: First, they try to write a story which is “closer to [historical] ethnography than to the exclusively internal study of ideas”, to “make ‘an ethnography of the practices of scholars’” (Parent, p. 116-117). This means that they are starting to take into account new dimensions of the scientific activity such as “family, economics, politics, religion, etc.” (Parent, p. 117), as well as gender relations which render this “masculine” activity possible in history.

Second, they mean to show that “sociology does not only result from a scientific or professional work in specific institutions, on the fringes of social life, but supposes on the contrary a complete social organisation, especially ‘private’ or domestic, that it is possible to reconstruct, partially at least, by resorting to correspondences and in particular family letters” (Parent, p. 117). Therefore, historians

of sociology become sociologists in the truest sense of the word when they want to show that “analyzing a disciplinary past moves to analysing the general state of social relationships not exclusively professional in a particular society and period”. (Parent, pp. 117-118)

There is no other way to study these private aspects of sociologists’ lives than to resort to this private material. Without this, “the space of sociology” appeared as if it were “withdrawn from social life [...] as if sociological theories were built in a non-place” (Parent, p. 115). Studying correspondences means giving back life to sociological research, such as teaching activities, as Béra underlines. He writes that “posterity remembers the writings of scholars to the detriment of the teachings of the lecturers that they also were” (p. 135). Crozier’s letters to his parents in 1948 from the US also unearth the “concrete conditions of work on [his thesis] [which otherwise] entails a rather poor representation of it really” (Rot, p. 220).

Historians of sociology therefore deal with the past when using these letters. But what can the future foretell for us? Indeed, one dimension that is sidelined in the book is that letters are (and will increasingly be) used less and less as a medium, replaced by fax, emails, texts messages, etc. which will make our job as historians more and more difficult. To what extent does the volume address this topic?

Gofman (p. 233) first mentions the fact that, if “the author [according to Roland Barthes] is dead”, writers and readers of letters are not, and therefore “thanks to the present diffusion of emails, turn them rather quickly into ‘users’”, because they are able to communicate reciprocally through emails. This phenomenon completely alters the relationship of Merton, for example, to his letters and writings, which he used to consider works of art (Saint-Martin, p. 255). Now, writing an email is almost meaningless: Sociologists, and everyone for that matter, write more and more to say less and less. The future generations of historians of sociology will probably have to dig up piles of spam emails from broken hard disks before they find anything interesting to write about. This change in the quality and quantity of exchanges is not specifically dealt with, but calls into question our “traditional” way of dealing with the archival material: Future methodologies will, in all probability, mean more lexicometry and network analysis.

However, the use of emails does not prevent specific items from being used, which reveals relationships of power between readers and writers. For instance; Merton wrote 475 boxes or letters, and Dubois and Saint-Martin complain about this fact. Vannier suggests that, somehow, “the medium is the message” (to quote Marshall McLuhan). Thus, the medium and formulae used in the letters can tell us a lot about who is speaking and to whom (for instance, Raymond Ledrut increasingly uses typing instead of manuscript letters, even with his friends, which seems to induce that he is more and more “taken” into the job of President of the AISLF and gives less importance to personal links, as Vannier suggests, p. 81).

Vannier concludes on the future use of letters that “habits change with media, style changes one does not write today as we used to over the past century. The next project will be to put our efforts on conserving and accessing this private correspondence” (p. 19). The switch from letters to emails will probably mean more work for historians of sociology as well as a call for new skills in increasingly using computing facilities.

La sociologie en toutes lettres (Sociology in full letters) is a stimulating contribution to the history of sociology, offering practitioners interesting tools and promising methodology for using



correspondence in the course of our research. The case studies of well-known sociological figures are almost more enlightening than the theoretical chapters themselves, which can be abstract at times.

But if the reader is trying to learn more about the private lives of sociological figures, the reader might be disappointed because this is an essay *on* correspondence rather than a full study *of* correspondences. There are good studies of the private correspondences of Max Weber, Emile Durkheim, and Georges Gurvitch. This book could be a first step towards discovering the “hidden face” of classical sociology.

As for historians of sociology, the next step could be to look at these personal documents that prove so helpful in advancing the course of their discipline, to think about collecting personal data (such as emails), and to attend a course on lexicometry or social network analysis.