

A SOCIOLOGICAL WORKSHOP IN ACTION

This text was first published in: Kritzman, L. D. (ed.) (2000) The Columbia History of Twentieth-Century French Thought. New York: Columbia University Press.

Loïc Wacquant

Launched in 1975 with the blessing and support of Fernand Braudel, the director of the *Maison des sciences de l'homme* where it remained based for some twenty years, the journal *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales* (hereafter ARSS) has established itself as one of the world's premier social science publications, yet one that remains highly singular for its format, tone, and mission. It has fueled the development of a distinctive sociological perspective, inspired by the scientific and civic vision of Pierre Bourdieu, that both extends and breaks with the long lineage of the French school of sociology. It has fostered the internationalization of social science in a Parisian milieu whose predilection for intellectual autarky is beyond dispute. And it has sought to

bring the most advanced products of social research to impinge on collective consciousness and public discussion in France and beyond.

ARSS bears the unmistakable mark of its founder and editor-in-chief, sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, whose indefatigable stewardship has propelled the journal across three decades and whose prodigious scientific output has profoundly shaped its contents. But it is the result of the joint activity of a wide network of scholars anchored by the *Centre de sociologie européenne* of the *Collège de France* and its foreign associates and affiliates, as testified by the diverse origins, styles, and theoretical inclinations of its contributors.

Unlike *Esprit* or *Les Temps modernes*, ARSS is a *scientific* rather than an intellectual journal, so that methodological validity and empirical adequacy retain priority over literary elegance and political rectitude. In contrast with *L'homme* or *Annales: économies, sociétés, civilisations*, however, it is both doggedly transdisciplinary and attuned to current sociopolitical issues: the mouthpiece of an activist science of society whose audience is primarily but not exclusively composed of academics. Yet, contrary to *Le débat*, its ambition is not to echo but to question intellectual and political fashion, based on the notion that a self-critical social science can and must function as a “public service” by relentlessly challenging accepted ideas

and established ways of thinking. Indeed, much as the *Année sociologique* served as focal point of the scholarly exchanges and vehicle for the sublimated republicanism of the Durkheimian school earlier in the century, ARSS was designed as springboard for a transdisciplinary sociology marrying scientific rigor, methodological reflexivity, and socio-political pertinence.

The longish and rather awkward title says it: *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales* aims at exposing both sociological objects and the “research acts” necessary to bring them to light or, better, to *construct* them as such. For the implicit epistemological charter of the journal (rooted in the philosophy of the concept of Gaston Bachelard and Georges Canguilhem) stipulates that social facts are not given ready-made in reality: they must be conquered against ordinary perceptions and scholarly common sense. Bucking the normalization of social science reporting, which tends to hide the “dirty work” carried out in the sociological kitchen, ARSS “must not only demonstrate but also display.” For the distinctive goal of this sociological laboratory-in-action is precisely “to unmask the social forms and formalisms” in which reality cloaks itself (untitled editorial introduction to the inaugural issue). Thus its infatuation with “transversal” themes, cut out in counter-intuitive ways that overturn accepted conceptions and typically elevate “lowly”

objects while lowering “lofty” ones (it is not by happenstance that the very first article of the first issue dealt with “The Scientific Method and the Social Hierarchy of Objects”).

To achieve rigor and relevance without subservience to doctrinal precepts and to make sociology come alive to its readers, ARSS has multiplied formal experimentations and stylistic innovations. First it publishes not only standard scholarly articles but also shorter reviews, polemical pieces, reading notes, telling documents, and closely edited, self-reflexive, field or experiential accounts (see, e.g., Yvette Delsaut's “Notebooks for a Socioanalysis” and Philippe Bourgois's “A Night in a Shooting Gallery,” in the February 1986 and September 1992 issues). Second, the archetypal *Actes* article weaves text with photographs, fac-similes of exhibits, and excerpts of interviews or raw observational data in boxes and sidebars running alongside the text. It also plays with different fonts and types, and mixes direct and indirect styles, all in an effort to wed analytical precision with experiential acuity.

The journal has actively sought to *denationalize social research* by opening a wide window onto foreign scholarship, connecting developments in gallic sociocultural inquiry to trends and breakthroughs abroad and vice-versa. Next to *Annales*, it is the most internationally-oriented social science pe-

riodical based in Paris. Indeed, the list of non-French authors published in ARSS reads like a veritable “Who’s Who” of world social science: Michael Baxandall and Howard Becker, Michael Burawoy and Aaron Cicourel, Nils Christie and Robert Darnton, Norbert Elias and Carlo Ginsburg, Johan Goudsblom and Eric Hobsbawm, Jürgen Kocka and William Labov, Wolf Lepenies and Eleanor Maccoby, Nancy Scheper-Hughes and Gerschom Sholem, Joan Scott and Carl Schorske, Amartya Sen and Theda Skocpol, Ivan Szelenyi and Jenő Szűcs, Raymond Williams, Paul Willis, and Viviana Zelizer. Many renowned French authors also saw print in the journal before they had earned international acclaim, from Maurice Agulhon and Jacques Bouveresse to Robert Linhart and Bruno Latour. Yet through the years ARSS has pursued a concerted policy of scouting and broadcasting the work of younger scholars, in tandem with little-known texts by classic authors (E.C. Hughes, Mauss, Goffman, Weber and Wittgenstein). Alongside with foreigners and younger researchers, ARSS has also published more women than most if not all social science journals of comparable stature and reach.

While ceding nothing to political fads and newsy items, the journal strives to keep a pulse on society and to *contribute to ongoing sociopolitical debates* from a rigorous scientific standpoint. It thereby pursues the civic mission of social

science: to strive for autonomy, yet to reinject the knowledge made possible by such autonomy into the public sphere (Bourdieu, 1989). For example, in the fall of 1980, as Soviet tanks were rolling towards Kabul, ARSS featured an issue entitled: “And What About Afghanistan?” In 1988, on the eve of the presidential face-off between Mitterrand and Chirac, a series of articles by leading politologists, sociologists, and legal scholars took to “Rethinking the political.” In the early nineties, new forms of social inequality and marginality surged which eluded traditional instruments of collective voice. In response, ARSS published a series of biographically-based studies depicting the social roots and implications of such “social suffering” (these studies were later expanded into the best-selling, thousand-page, socioanalysis of contemporary France entitled *La Misère du monde*, (Bourdieu (ed.), 1993)). Coming on the heels of the massive December 1995 street demonstrations against social insecurity, the November 1996 issue on “New Forms of Domination at Work” featured an organizational analysis of overwork in the trucking industry just when truck drivers were paralyzing the country with roadblocks. In 1997, as the debate around “globalization” and its ills mounted, the journal gathered a set of in-depth, international, inquiries into “Economists and the Economy.”

Under another angle, ARSS may be characterized by its privileged objects and recurrent themes. Chief among them is the *economy of cultural goods*. Literature and popular imagery, painting and publishing, music and museums, fashion and taste, religion and schooling, myth and science (as well as their intersection, scientific myths, beliefs, and rites): the production, circulation, and consumption of these goods obey peculiar laws that are best uncovered via comparative and analogical analysis in a variety of settings. A second favorite subject-matter is the logic of *social classification and the fabrication of social collectives*. Studies in the making (or unmaking) of class, gender, ethnicity, age, region, nation, and empire converge to show that alternate principles of social vision and division constitute tools and stakes in the symbolic struggles whereby social reality is at once endowed with facticity and revealed as a brittle edifice. This concern for deconstructing ready-made social entities extends to such familiar “containers” of social life as the family, the firm, the party, and the state. The correlative concern to document the social necessity at work behind extreme social realities encompasses such seemingly exotic institutions as folk singing, soccer, concentration camps, and the ghetto.

A third thematic node centers on social strategies of *domination, distinction, and reproduction*: among them figure studies

of households, schooling and consumption, work and labor, the bases and effects of public policy, the intersection of economy and morality, and the role of politics and the law. Last but not least, ARSS has continually scrutinized *intellectual practices, predicaments, and powers*. Such thematic issues as “The Categories of Professorial Understanding,” “Science and Current Affairs,” “Research on Research,” “The Social History of the Social Sciences,” and “The Cunning of Imperialist Reason” (September 1975, February 1986, September 1988, June and September 1995, and February 1998) attest to the need to put scholars under their own microscope in order to uncover – and hopefully better control – the social determinants of social thought. Among classic articles on the sociology of intellectuals, one may single out Pierre Bourdieu’s “Political Ontology of Martin Heidegger,” Michael Pollak’s “Paul Lazarsfeld, Founder of a Scientific Multinational,” Roland Lardinois’s “Louis Dumont and Native Science,” Gisèle Sapiro’s dissection of François Mauriac’s literary trajectory, and Louis Pinto’s incisive pieces on the “parodic intellectuals” of *Tel Quel* and related Parisian coteries (November 1975, February 1979, June 1995, February 1996).

All told, the driving impulse behind the varied investigations published in ARSS is to denaturalize social categories, facts, and institutions, while providing the means to recapitulate and assess the

different steps of the demonstration at hand. This formula has proven appealing: with a regular readership approaching ten thousand, ARSS enjoys a broad public extending well beyond academia (there are only about a thousand sociologists in France). The latter includes not only researchers but schoolteachers and university students, social workers and activists, cultural intermediaries as well as other educated strata interested in social inquiry and questions (several issues have sold upwards of 20,000 copies). With “sister journals” in Sweden, Japan, and Brazil that reprint key articles in translation, its international audience reaches far outside of the French-speaking ambit. Since 1989, ARSS has been flanked by a supplement, *Liber: revue internationale des livres*, published simultaneously in nine European countries and languages, whose aim is to further circumvent national strictures and accelerate the continental circulation of innovative and engaged works in the arts, humanities, and social sciences.

Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales remains a largely artisanal operation, with a small staff and limited institutional support, quite disproportionate with its national impact and international following. Success inevitably tends to dilute the original formula that yielded it; as the pool of both authors and readers expands, the distinctive scientific and civic spirit of the journal becomes harder to sustain. ARSS can be expected to

evolve in response to shifting intellectual currents and constraints while remaining true to its initial vocation: to promote rigorous, transdisciplinary, social science from around the globe that fuses research and theory while remaining alert to the political and ethical implications of social inquiry. In so doing, it renews the scientific militancy and internationalism of the French school of sociology. And, as with Durkheim and the *Année sociologique*, its biggest challenge will be to survive the eventual passing of the scholarly generation that created and nurtured it. Reading *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales* in years to come thus promises to offer an intriguing experiment in the routinization of intellectual charisma.

References and further readings

- (1990) *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, Special anniversary issue, 100.
- Bourdieu, P. (1989) “The corporatism of the Universal: The Role of Intellectuals in the Modern World”, *Telos*, 81, pp. 99-110.
- Bourdieu, P. (ed.) (1993) *La Misère du monde*. Paris: Seuil. English translation: (1999) *The Weight of the World. Social Suffering in Contemporary Society*. Cambridge: Polity Press.