SUICIDES OF DEMOCRACIES*

THE DEBATES about interdisciplinarity in Academia offer an endless and repetitive story. Everybody seems to agree that it is a very desirable objective while at the same time acknowledging that it is a very difficult if not impossible task. At the end of the day truly interdisciplinary works are rare, and often confirm the suspicion that interdisciplinarity research does not match the standards of the well-defined disciplines. So when one happens to read a fascinating investigation at the crossroads between history and sociology, one can only rejoice. Finally, one has in hand the proof that interdisciplinarity might be indeed a challenging and daunting task but, when successful, remarkably rewarding. This is the feeling of the reader when closing *Ruling Oneself Out: A Theory of Collective Abdications* by Ivan Ermakoff. The book deals with two emblematic cases: the death of democracy through a vote by a democratically elected assembly in Germany on 23 March 1933 and in France on 17 June 1940 when the Parliament abdicated its powers into Petain's hands.

The two cases chosen for analysis are exceptional, not only because of the way they unfold, but also because of their consequences for democratic regimes and institutions. From the outset Ermakoff draws a distinction between abdication and surrender, and states in his preface ''History is punctuated with critical decisions, decisions that engage one's fate and the fate of others, decisions that people make in a mist of darkness, the darkness of their own motivations, the darkness of those who confront and challenge them and the darkness of what the future has in store''. Actors have very little light to guide their choices and actions.

Ermakoff dismisses fear as a too easy and conventional explanation of the actors' behaviour and rather insists on two crucial factors: the role of peers when the members of a given group are lost and look for solutions and support from their fellow companions; the situation of uncertainty whereby individuals do not know which choice should be made and ignore what will be the choice of their peers.

From this point of view the chosen cases are particularly crucial: there are a limited number actors (a parliament). They know each other and are organized around groups, parties and structured by fixed

* About Ivan ERMAKOFF, *Ruling Oneself Out: A Theory of Collective Abdications* (Durham, Duke University Press, 2008).

Yves MÉNY, European University Institute, Florence [Yves.Meny@eui.eu].
Arch.europ.sociol., L, 3 (2009), pp. 511–513—0003-9756/09/0000-900$07.50per art + $0.10 per page

rules. In both cases abdication is formalized through a vote. Most of the action is recorded formally on the spot and complemented by ex-post narratives or interpretations by the actors themselves. In short, two crucial historical moments are tightly contained in a limited space, during a short period of time and unfold according to predictable rules of the game. The external environment instead maximises uncertainty.

The attractiveness of studying these two situations is quite understandable. Few historical events produce such Sartrean ''Huis Clos'' with such dramatic consequences, as those analyzed by Ermakoff. However, the selection of these two cases is not without ambivalence. On one hand their very characteristics allow for a detailed and deep analysis/interpretation close to an ideal-type situation. On the other hand, the exclusion of similar situations of collective abdication but with different political outcomes (such as, for instance, the Fourth Republic abdication in 1958) obfuscates some dimensions that would have been interesting to explore. Ermakoff makes a strong point when he shows that the three possible explanations of such aberrant abdications (coercion, miscalculation, collusion) are not convincing enough and that uncertainty is a key element in understanding the behaviour of actors. But he does not pay enough attention to the fact that in such situations where groups and individual actors fail to identify proper solutions to the problem with which they are confronted, the ''easy'' way out is to give in to a charismatic leader. The incapacity to frame credible solutions or coalitions creates, the pre-conditions for abandoning competencies and prerogatives to one well-identified leader. Collective abdication is possible because a leader is ready and available to take over. This leader proposes a new vision of the future at a time when groups and actors are or feel unable to propose a better alternative. This lack of interest in leadership issues does not affect the interest and depth of the Ermakoff fine analysis but it puts in shadow what is, I believe, a critical dimension not only in situations as dramatic as those of 1933 or 1940, but also in less critical junctures. Abdication becomes the preferred option (rather than using the normal processes of change or alternation or option for a pacific or violent revolution) because the only plausible alternative is outside the normal institution framework. The tragic episodes of 1933 and 1940 are cases in point, but their dramatic character should not disguise the fact that the structure of collective abdication is not the exclusive territory of exceptional cases.

This is probably the limit of the interdisciplinarity venture mentioned earlier. The combination of historiography and game theory or other sociological theories is possible and feasible thanks to the careful

choice of already well-documented cases. It might be difficult, not to say impossible, to apply the same methodology when the number of cases is larger or less contained within a limited set of rules and institutions.

That being said, one can only hope that other initiatives of this type will follow in the footsteps of Ivan Ermakoff's book. History and sociology can only benefit from this cross-fertilisation.

YVES MÉNY

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003975609990336 Published online by Cambridge University Press