

"HOW DOES ONE end an autobiography?" asks Renée Fox in the "Envoi" of her book *In the Field. A Sociologist's Journey*. A perhaps even more interesting question to apprehend the specific genre of the storytelling of one's life might be: how does one begin an autobiography? Social scientists who have ventured on this demanding intellectual voyage have commonly taken two distinct paths. The first adopts a chronological progression, *à la* Victor Hugo ("Ce siècle avait deux ans"). The second follows a thematic approach, *à la* Marcel Proust ("Toute ma vie je me suis couché de bonne heure"). The choice of one option or the other is not innocent: it often reveals the general orientation of the autobiography and suggests what the reader should expect. By famously opening *Tristes Tropiques* with the phrase "I hate travelling and explorers", Claude Lévi-Strauss borrowed the transversal line as an invitation to an anthropological reflexion. In her memoir, Renée Fox takes the longitudinal thread, starting with the literal reproduction of her birth certificate as a key to what appears to be a form of ethnographic (re)collection. And this is indeed how she defines her intention: writing "an ethnography of the life of a sociologist" (p. 3).

Student of Talcott Parsons, the precursor of the sociological study of medicine, Renée Fox is viewed as one of the founders of the field of medical sociology, of which she has investigated various dimensions, from health professions to bioethical issues to humanitarian organizations. She began her pioneering work at a time when US sociology was vibrant with debates, in particular between structural functionalism and symbolic interactionism, the study of medicine being one of their intellectual battlefields. Interestingly, Renée Fox situates her first book, based on her doctoral dissertation in the renowned Department of Social Relations at Harvard, in parallel with Erving Goffman's *Asylums*, published two years later, proudly adding: "For quite a while, *Experiment Perilous* remained one of the only medical sociological works in the literature that explored a social and cultural world within a hospital that cared primarily for patients who were physically, rather than mentally, ill" (p. 92). Similarly, she mentions that her second study, conducted for the Bureau of Applied Social Research at Columbia under the mentorship of Robert Merton, was part of a collective survey on medical

* About Renée Fox, *In the Field. A Sociologist's Journey* (New Brunswick/London, Transactions Publishers, 2011).

students, titled *The Student Physician*, which took place at the same time as the investigation on *Boys in White*, by Howard Becker and his colleagues, and she evokes the fact that “Becker *et al* forthrightly rejected Merton’s notion of ‘anticipatory socialization’” (p. 98). Indeed, at the time, the Harvard-Columbia network and the Chicago school were developing innovative research on the experience of medical institutions by patients and doctors and on medical training as a way to generate professional identity, but with very different theoretical and methodological premises, yielding sometimes opposite results. Yet, although she provides her audience with the setting of this foundational confrontation, Renée Fox does not propose a real discussion of the issues at stake.

This example is illustrative of the style and intent of her autobiography. It is a faithful, scrupulous and punctilious narrative leading the reader step by step through her life: “Origins and Beginnings”, “Growing up on West End Avenue”, “Freshman Year (1944-1945) at Smith College, and the Summer of 1945”; and later, “Deciding to Leave Barnard”, “Return to Harvard (1967-1969)”, “Professor at the University of Pennsylvania (1969-)”, etc. All along this journey, punctuated by the various academic positions she has occupied, are portrayed some of the great figures of US sociology and anthropology, and many anecdotes drawn from this scholarly world are recounted. The contrast between Parsons, “a highly accessible, attentive teacher of extraordinary intellect who was generously responsive to his students” (p. 104), thus giving them a sense of freedom propitious to innovation, and Merton, a distant and demanding professor whose notes on the manuscripts of his students “were so detailed and ostentatiously brilliant that they often have the effect of overwhelming and discouraging” them (p. 103), is not only an interesting contribution to the sociology of sociologists, but also a helpful warning for all those engaged in pedagogic activities. The hostile reaction of the psychiatrist who had recruited her to study his ward when he discovers the results of her fieldwork is exemplary of the delegitimizing opposition encountered by ethnographers in the restitution of their research, especially when it concerns people who have a high moral idea of what they do. Beyond these portraits and anecdotes, history is present through almost incidental observations: Richard Nixon, a local hero at Whittier College over whose student body he had presided and where Renée Fox spent one year, is elected to the California House of Representatives thanks to a false denunciation of the Communist sympathy of his opponent, which evokes the years of the McCarthyism (p. 54); Dr. Wang, a Chinese medical doctor who demonstrates his embarrassment as he receives a gift

from his guests, thus reveals the surveillance exerted by the members of the Party in his department and the everyday presence of Maoist totalitarianism (p. 307).

Yet, one would have appreciated a sometimes more penetrating perspective on the various enthralling subjects Renée Fox tackles, especially when they concern topics on which she has not produced substantial writings, such as humanitarianism, which she refers to as “the most ambitious I have ever conducted” but to which she devotes only a few pages, descriptive rather than analytical. Considering the promising but rather eulogistic preliminary paper on *Médecins sans frontières* and *Médecins du monde* she published in *Social Science and Medicine* in 1995, it would have been interesting to have her retrospectively discuss questions such as the distinctive and occasionally opposed policies of the two organizations, the relations between human rights and humanitarianism, which she seems to assimilate in spite of the fact that they have different genealogies and are clearly distinguished by her interlocutors, the necessity to go beyond dilemmas as they are articulated by the actors and to analyze the moral issues and ethical questions as they are practically posed but also frequently ignored in the course of everyday work – in other words, to associate the findings of the ethnography and the reflexion of the sociologist in a more distanced approach. But this would have probably been beyond the scope of her intellectual project.

La vie est un roman: thus went the title of one of Alain Resnais’s most peculiar films (the English translation, *Life is a Bed of Roses*, does not do justice to the original, which means literally: life is a novel). After having read Renée Fox’s memoir, one is convinced that her life is definitely a novel, which takes the reader from her Russian grandparents immigrating to America to her study of the action of Doctors Without Borders in Moscow, from her New York public school years to her endowed professorship at the University of Pennsylvania, from her survey of students at Cornell Medical School to her study of organ replacement in the Harvard Program on Technology and Society, from her experience of polio as an adolescent to the discovery of her breast cancer as an adult, from Belgium to Congo, and from China to South Africa. Her life covers most of the twentieth century and spreads over four continents. Her role in the making of medical sociology is valuable and influential. She has been a pioneer in the study of bioethics as a cofounder of what would become the Hastings Center, as well as one of the first women to chair a department at a university of the Ivy League. She has known some of the luminaries

of North American social science and West European medicine. She has been awarded numerous prizes and distinctions in various countries. Of this remarkable life, Renée Fox gives the most meticulous account: she provides the list of the authors she studied in college as well as the enumeration and presentation of all the members of the American Association for the Advancement of Science who participated in the 1968 mission to Beijing, letters from her physical therapist as well as excerpts of public or private texts in homage to her contribution to sociology.

This accumulation, which often follows the linear progression of a narrative and sometimes adopts the form of the pieces of a puzzle, produces a rich documentation of Renée Fox's exceptional professional trajectory in the US academic world. It bears witness to her eclectic curiosity, her commitment to the social sciences, her moral engagement in her time. In the end, it is what she has announced in the introduction: an ethnography, in the classical sense of a collection of significant elements which constitute a social universe, whether it is a village or, in the present case, a discipline. The task will fall to others to mine this candid account in order to write a history of medical sociology and an anthropology of the intellectual life in the social sciences.

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