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- 1 *The Early Days of Survey Research* presents some of the papers discussed during an international conference held in Vienna in the summer of 2010. These papers establish a relationship between a historical perspective and the possibility we have to investigate the world around us. Besides, they show how the possibility of investigating the history of empirical social research using the tools provided by history and by the sociology of science is up-to-date ; how a systematic history of empirical social research made with scientific rather than intuitive or narrative tools can have a crucial role with regard to the cumulativeness and progressiveness of science, and the contribution to the aim of constructing theories capable of explaining the complexity of social phenomena. This perspective considers survey research as a style of reasoning characterised by a scientific rather than an expressive or literary approach. The papers in the book, then, reconstruct with detailed and circumstantial examples, methods, subject matter of research, institutional innovations ; they individuate and reconstruct the genesis of the language of empirical social research analysing it from the inside, and considering matters from the point of view of the pioneers of this approach.
- 2 The book is organized in five sections – “Paul Lazarsfeld and His Contributions to the Development of Survey Research” ; “The American Pioneers” ; “The History of Survey Research in Different Countries” ; “The Creativity of the Pioneers” ; “What We Can Learn from the Experience of the Pioneers” – and concerns people, stories of researches, national ways of developing survey research. Paul Lazarsfeld, Robert Merton, Hadley Cantril, George Gallup are some of the main characters of this book. As

Vienna is the background against which the international conference was held, and as the Faculty of Social Sciences which organized it hosts the Paul F. Lazarsfeld archive, Lazarsfeld plays a main role in these pages. As for him the building blocks of empirical research are organization and funding, research institutions (the “machinery”) and market research (the “commerce”), his experience puts in evidence that the birth of empirical social research, and its institutionalization within academic institutions have been made possible by the creation of new institutional models. From the *Forschungsstelle* of Vienna to the Office for Radio Research to the Bureau of Applied Social Research, research organization means above all the development of a rigorous training program which concerns research itself, its various phases, the true methodological and theoretical aspects that can be developed starting from research itself.

- 3 Lazarsfeld's case is emblematic also with regard to the role that marginal men or outsiders play in the complex process of innovation and construction of new disciplinary fields. This is a well-known figure, crucial in the analysis of constituent processes or of scientific discoveries, which the history of sciences has long stressed. Nevertheless, the success of these figures depends on their capability of connecting to knowledge and expertise networks, of interdisciplinary nature, so that their effort (and their success) can be thought of as the product of a community in the sociological meaning of the word. In this sense, research institutions make it possible to create a community which deliberately defines itself as such. Forgotten outsiders, as Gottlieb Schnapper-Arndt or Adolf Levenstein, speak exactly about the incapability of connecting to those intellectual environments which could have promoted their talent and creativity. In other words, they remained isolated. This means that creativity is recognized, and expresses itself, within social conditions that make it possible, in creative environments which recognize and promote it, as the history of science largely shows.
- 4 If then knowledge is a collective enterprise, its institutionalization is the constitutive moment for every further development. Lazarsfeld, Cantril, Gallup, Merton himself, are united in this same capability : establish institutionalization processes – of research institutions and methodology (Lazarsfeld), of public opinion and polling research (Cantril and Gallup), of sociology of science (Merton). Therefore, a classic is not only an exemplary interpreter of his time, an author whose books are always up-to-date, and that the new generations always read over and over again in order to confront with the conceptual problems posed by their modernity. He is above all an explorer who has opened new paths and established new connections, who has been able to establish a new scientific discipline where before there were only intellectual curiosity and amateurism.
- 5 The classicality of these authors can be found in the fact that they have been able to impose empirical social research and public opinion research as important and necessary aspects for the study and the practice of academic sociology. Therefore, they contributed to the construction of all those elements that, taken together, form a scientific community : from the object under investigation to the more appropriate techniques to study it ; from the recruitment and training of individual talent to the organization of the research ; from the creation of journals and scientific societies to the availability of funds.

- 6 Nonetheless, we must not identify the history of a discipline with the personality, charisma, the individual capability of establishing relationships or communication channels, or with the “inner” characteristics of its development. In this case also we can speak of a real Lazarsfeld-model to stress the necessity of establishing a bridge between the inner and an external history of a discipline, *i.e.* the social-historic conditions that make it possible. Lazarsfeld’s personal belief that without “machinery” empirical social research could not be possible, is a necessary but not sufficient condition for analysing the great success the so-called Columbia-model has had and its diffusion in sociology all over the world. With the creation of the Bureau of Applied Social Research, integrated into the academic department of Sociology at the Columbia University, Lazarsfeld realizes the model of research institution he had vainly pursued until then. The reason is easily said : New York was the centre and the beating heart of the emerging industry of mass communications, as well as the headquarters of the most important commercial companies of the United States. Lazarsfeld capability, and his greatest intuition as an institutional entrepreneur, was that of putting together the practical exigencies of these new realities of American society, and of having as a goal the study of the characteristics and consequences on people of the new mass society and mass culture which were taking shape at the beginning of the 1940’s. So, the Columbia-model took the place of the Chicago-model. The passage from ethnographic and qualitative techniques to survey research and to the combination of quantitative and qualitative techniques was, therefore, inevitable.
- 7 It still remains one point : do we need a history of empirical social research ? Of course, but remembering Lazarsfeld’s words : “Only at its peril does a social science forget its history. But it is even more dangerous to have left such a lopsided history at that which sociology has written” (Foreword, in Anthony Obershall, ed., 1972, *The Establishment of Empirical Sociology*, p. xv). *The Early Days of Survey Research* is an important step in the right direction.

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