**Searching for the Origins of Empirical Social Research in Europe**

**Hledání počátků empirického sociálního výzkumu v Evropě**

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**Abstrakt:**

Paul F. Lazarsfeld, spoluzakladatel slavné Kolumbijské školy, hledal v šedesátých letech podporu pro svou novou metodologii. Článek analyzuje tyto Lazarsfeldovy aktivity. Souborem statí se mu podařilo ukázat, že kořeny empirického výzkumu, jehož užitečnou metodologii vyvinul, je možno najít v dílech raných evropských badatelů. S představou, že kvantifikace nepotřebuje čísla, ukázal, že Hermann Conring a jeho ‘klasifikační statistika’ předešla ‘rodinné rozpočty’ Frédérica Le Playe a ‘pravděpodobnostní statistiku’ Adolpha Quételeta téměř o dvě staletí. V další stati objevil, že důležitou částí životního díla Maxe Webera byly jeho empirické studie zemědělských a průmyslových dělníků v Německu na přelomu 19. a 20. století. Jeho semináře na Kolumbijské univerzitě spolu s Robertem K. Mertonem a na Sorbonně s Raymondem Boudonem otevřely cestu transatlantické spolupráci v empirickém sociálním výzkumu mezi New Yorkem a Paříží v příštích desetiletích.

**Abstract:**

During the 1960s Paul F. Lazarsfeld, co-founder of the famous Columbia school, worked to promote a useful new research methodology he developed. This paper analyses these activities. In a series of papers, he demonstrated that the roots of empirical research, the useful methodology he developed, lie in the work of early European scholars. Building on his belief that quantification does not need numbers, he showed that Hermann Conring, with his ‘classificatory statistics’, had predated Frédéric Le Play and his ‘family budgets’ and Adolph Quételet and his ‘probability statistics’ by almost two centuries. In another paper he highlighted the importance of Max Weber’s empirical studies on agrarian and industrial workers within the frame of his life work. His seminars at Columbia University with Robert K. Merton and at the Sorbonne with Raymond Boudon opened up transatlantic cooperation on empirical research between New York and Paris for decades to come.

**Klíčová slova:** Univerzita Sorbonne; Kolumbijská univerzita; Paul Lazarsfeld; Max Weber, Adolphe Quételet

**Key words:** Sorbonne; Columbia University; Paul Lazarsfeld; Max Weber; Adolphe Quételet

1. **Introduction**

The[[2]](#footnote-2) year 2021 will mark 120 years since the birth of Paul F. Lazarsfeld and 45 years since his death. This presents a good opportunity to take a deeper look at the subject that Lazarsfeld worked on for 15 years of his life – namely, the history of social research from its earliest stages to the time when empirical social research became a standard part of the everyday work of sociology. Dozens of books and hundreds of articles have been written on the history of sociological and social thought, but little has been published on the history of empirical social research. If we consider just the literature written in English, there are four works that warrant mentioning: John Madge’s *The Origins of Scientific Sociology.[[3]](#footnote-3)*, Jean Converse’s *Survey Research in the United States: Roots and Emergence 1890-1960.[[4]](#footnote-4)*, Jennifer Platt’s *A History of Sociological Research Methods in America 1920-1960.[[5]](#footnote-5)*, and the comprehensive collective monograph edited by Craig Calhoun with contributions from multiple authors, *Sociology in America. A History.[[6]](#footnote-6)* The last three works mentioned here were published after Paul Lazarsfeld’s death. There are other texts that were the standard outcome of cooperation and discussion between Lazarsfeld, his colleagues, and scholarly peers and therefore do not need to be mentioned in the introduction. I have published a brief encyclopaedic entry on the history of empirical social research, but not in reference to P. F. Lazarsfeld.[[7]](#footnote-7) [Jerabek 2015] There are also histories of empirical sociology that have been written within different national arenas of sociology. I hope that readers will excuse the fact that we will not deal with these works here as it would be beyond the scope of this article to do so and they do not relate very directly to our subject.

In this article we will look at the history of empirical social research from the perspective of one of the top researchers ever to have systematically devoted thought to this subject. It is a history of empirical research as it relates to Paul F. Lazarsfeld, a researcher, a methodologist, and the founder of four research institutes – ultimately someone who does not really need an introduction.[[8]](#footnote-8) We will focus on his contributions to the subject of the history of research and on the role played by his many colleagues and followers between 1960 and 1973 in Europe, especially in France, at the Sorbonne in Paris, and in the Unites States, at Columbia University in New York.

Empirical social research was a lifelong part of Lazarsfeld’s work. He therefore also believed it was necessary to reflect on its past development and to examine the early stages of empirical research that was being conducted by social scientists at a time when sociology was still just starting to emerge. Lazarsfeld’s active interest in the history of empirical social research also led him to produce scholarly studies on the subject and to lecture and teach seminars on the history of research. He trained his many successors while he was teaching and lecturing at Columbia and the Sorbonne. He was also involved in extensive organised activities that helped to advance empirical social research in the field of sociology.

Lazarsfeld was not a lone scholar. All the topics he was focused on, he worked on together with his research fellows, usually with his doctoral students. This approach that Lazarsfeld had to doing sociology led to the creation of seminars on the history and methodology of empirical research at both Columbia University and the Sorbonne. Lazarsfeld explored the subject of the history of empirical social research together with many younger colleagues.

1. **Lazarsfeld’s ‘Notes on the History of Quantification in Sociology’**

Lazarsfeld opened up the history of social research as a topic in his report on a conference on the history of quantification that was held in 1959. He wrote about it in a retrospective article titled ‘Toward a History of Empirical Sociology’ in 1973: ‘In 1955 the U.S. National Academy of Sciences appointed a committee to explore topics common to the social and the natural sciences. … I was invited to represent sociology and my report was subsequently developed into a lengthy paper with the imaginative help of Anthony Oberschall.’[[9]](#footnote-9) This paper that Lazarsfeld wrote was published in the *International Journal of the History of Science* (*ISIS*) in 1961.[[10]](#footnote-10) In this paper, modestly titled ‘Notes on the History of Quantification in Sociology – Trends, Sources, and Problems’, Lazarsfeld described the trajectory of the development of empirical research efforts across several generations of researchers in the social field in various European countries from the 17th through to the 19th century. Until the end of the 1950s most researchers limited themselves to tracing the evolution of philosophical thought and to the development of the natural sciences. The social sciences were not included in this, with perhaps one notable exception.

In 1933, when Paul Lazarsfeld, Marie Jahoda, and Hans Zeisel published a study on an unemployed community in Austria, Hans Zeisel subtitled the afterword to the Marienthal study ‘Toward a History of Sociography’[[11]](#footnote-11) In this relatively short summary, Zeisel referred to the much earlier studies by William Petty and John Graunt and even mentioned their British successors in the second half of the 18th century, Arthur Young and David Davies. He highlighted the methodological advances made by Sir Frederic Morton Eden, who was the first to use an ‘interviewer’ in his research. An ‘interviewer as he defined it was someone who spent: ‘more than a year traveling from place to place … obtaining exact information … to a set of Queries …’[[12]](#footnote-12) In the second half of the 19th century the reports of the British Parliament were already drawing on ‘reports from special commissions’.[[13]](#footnote-13) Zeisel also offered a brief description of the work of Charles Booth, which he concluded with the words: ‘By dividing the population into socio-economic strata, beginning at the bottom with the “very poor,” the extent of poverty in London was shown with numerical and graphic precision, illustrated by a detailed set of maps and tables’.[[14]](#footnote-14) He devoted two pages to Adolph Quételet, which made up a substantial portion of this brief summary,[[15]](#footnote-15) and he assigned an equally significant place to the French social scientist Frédéric Le Play.[[16]](#footnote-16) The summary also offers basic information on the German Verein für Sozialpolitik (Association for Social Policy) and Max Weber’s empirical experiments and mentions the study on workers carried out by Adolph Levenstein.[[17]](#footnote-17) As a summary, Zeisel’s ‘afterword’ was very thorough, and it provided Paul Lazarsfeld with a solid starting point from which to proceed twenty-seven years later with his study on the history of quantification. Lazarsfeld commented on the importance of Zeisel’s afterword in a retrospective article: ‘The *ISIS* article owes a great deal to an earlier work on the history of sociography reported in 1933 in the appendix of *Marienthal*. Hans Zeisel played a large role in this effort.’[[18]](#footnote-18) For a full quarter of a century no other work was produced that could rival Zeisel’s study.

Understandably, there are still many details missing in Zeisel’s summary. In 1959 and 1960 Paul Lazarsfeld systematised this historical-methodological analysis. His study on the history of quantification is 83 pages long, so it is not an article-length work but a well-developed historical-sociological study that makes many references to work that was still little known at that time and to newly discovered sources, most of them from the 19th century. Lazarsfeld thus provided a ‘historical canvas’ onto which his students and followers could either project summary histories of the development of different scholars’ ideas or portray in depth the fates of entire scientific schools in this relatively long period. Lazarsfeld devoted the most space in his study to the work of Adolph Quételet and Max Weber. He also added more information on the extensive body of work of Charles Booth and dealt in depth with the work of Frédéric Le Play. However, he also paid some attention to the German history of social-scientific thought.

Lazarsfeld posed an unusual question in his study. Why did two distinct branches of statistics develop: ‘classificatory statistics’ and ‘probabilistic statistics’? He formulated the question directly in relation to Hermann Conring’s system. Lazarsfeld was probably the only researcher working on the history of empirical social research to focus in depth on Conring’s system, which could probably more accurately be called ‘classificatory statistics’. Lazarsfeld wrote: ‘The question can be raised why I consider the development of classificatory systems a legitimate part of the history of quantification in social sciences. I want to postpone my answer until I have described another effect of this kind by the Le Play school.’[[19]](#footnote-19) He then answered this question in the article’s conclusion.

Lazarsfeld’s ‘discovery’ of the figure of Hermann Conring (1606-1682) was something entirely new within the context of historical considerations of social-scientific thought and particularly in relation to empirical social research. He was also the first to situate the work of this 17th-century German thinker in the context of the development and conceptualisation of statistics. Hermann Conring was a contemporary of William Petty and John Graunt. However, he worked most of his life (45 years) at the University of Helmstedt, which was in Brunswick, one of Germany’s many traditional duchies, and he prepared his lectures in Latin, which at German universities remained the official language of learning for centuries. He began studying at Helmstedt at the age of 14 and after that (from the age of 19 to 25) he went on to study at Leiden (1625-1631), where in 1630 he defended his doctoral thesis.[[20]](#footnote-20) He was unable to obtain a position as professor in the Netherlands[[21]](#footnote-21), so he returned to Germany. He became a professor of ‘natural philosophy and rhetoric’ at the University of Helmstedt in 1832. He later also obtained doctorates in philosophy and medicine and in 1640 became a professor of medicine. He devoted considerable attention also to political philosophy and the law, and his most famous work is a history of German law.[[22]](#footnote-22) Shortly after he defended his doctorate in political sciences, in 1652 he also obtained a professorship in political science[[23]](#footnote-23). He continued to teach at the University of Helmstedt until 1676, when he was 70 years old.

Hermann Conring described the state as a unit of action. He distinguished four elements in its functioning, which he referred to as *causa finalis*, *causa materialis*, *causa formalis*, and *causa efficiens*. The ‘final cause’ *(causa finalis)* is the end goal of the workings of the state and the state system – which is the creation of a social order. The ‘material cause’ *(causa materialis)* consisted of the economic system that exists in a country along with the human resources that create it and guarantee its continuation. Conring used the term ‘formal cause’ *(causa formalis)* to refer to the constitution and laws, the legal order, the justice system, and the entire legislative system of a state. The ‘efficient cause’ (*causa efficiens*) ‘is its concrete administration and the activities of its elite. Under each of these main categories, Conring systematically makes further subdivisions. The causa efficiens, for example, describes the concrete ways by which the state is governed.’[[24]](#footnote-24)

Conring’s ideas were recorded by his students in Latin and preserved in a collection titled ‘Collegium Politicalstatiticum’, and through this resource his system continued to be taught up to the time of Bismarck’s unification of Germany. Lazarsfeld wrote: ‘By the beginning of the eighteenth century, the Conring system was taught all over Germany. It had the advantage of being eminently teachable even by minor men and gave an academic frame of reference to the training of civil servants, which remained a common problem to all the little German states up to the end of their existence in the Napoleonic era.’[[25]](#footnote-25) It was this ‘target group’ which is to say, students of law and students in a field that in the late 19th century was at German universities referred to as ‘Staatswissenschaft‘, was extremely important for the functioning of the state. Graduates of this field of study then became state bureaucrats and officials and thus managed the state, and in the case of the ‘Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation’, were in fact the administrators of many independent, larger and smaller states on the territory of what is now Germany. Lazarsfeld noticed this important function of Conring’s system and wrote: ‘Conring wants to bring order into the available knowledge about various countries. His purpose is explicitly threefold: he looks for a system which should make facts easier to remember, easier to teach, and easier to be used by men in the government.’[[26]](#footnote-26)

Gottfried Achenwall introduced the Conring system in German at the University of Göttingen in 1749. He tends to be referred to as the founder of the German classificatory branch of statistics, perhaps because he was the one who translated Conring’s ideas from Latin to German. He obtained the position of professor at the University of Göttingen, which had just been founded in 1737. The school’s modern concept, excellent new library, and the prestige of inheriting a methodological tradition, all this contributed to bringing fame to the ‘Göttingen School of Statistics’, which continued to work with Conring’s ideas.[[27]](#footnote-27) Lazarsfeld interpreted ‘classificatory statistics’ as occupying a parallel position alongside the ‘probability branch’ of statistics. This concept of statistics, based on Conring’s ideas, was taught at many German universities in the 17th and 18th centuries. Conversely, ‘probability statistics’ was used more at this time mainly in Britain and France.[[28]](#footnote-28)

In the closing part of his study on the history of quantification, Lazarsfeld compared Hermann Conring’s model with that of Frédéric Le Play. In what way did the two differ? Each of them responded to different needs in social-scientific research. Their perspectives also differed in terms of the historical circumstances in which each of them was responding to the ‘needs of the time’. In the 17th century Hermann Conring had to take into account the interests of the ruling dynasty that maintained the system of rule in the land and in order to do so needed educated officials who could learn and also understand what the entire structure of administration comprised and what all the functions of the state were in the historical circumstances of a disintegrated Germany. Frédéric Le Play (1806-1882) during his lifetime in the 19th century lived through three revolutions against the French system of rule (1830, 1848, and 1871).[[29]](#footnote-29) In his perspective, the primary role in holding society together was played by the family and morality.[[30]](#footnote-30) He therefore based his system on the central role of ‘family monographs’. Lazarsfeld explained in this connection what role families played in Le Play’s model: ‘Le Play is not concerned with the families for their own sake. He is convinced that his case studies are the best means of understanding the working of the whole social system.’[[31]](#footnote-31) To illustrate the key role that Le Play deemed was played by ‘family budgets’ he used an example that was cited by Lazarsfeld in English: ‘Often a single figure says much more than a long discourse. Thus, for instance, one cannot doubt the degradation of a Paris worker after one has learned from the study of his budget that each year he spends 12% of his income to get drunk, while he does not devote a cent for the moral education of his five children of ages 4-14.’[[32]](#footnote-32)

In the conclusion to his history of quantification Lazarsfeld once again brought up the two major figures dealt with in his study. He highlighted what was important in Hermann Conring’s approach: ‘The starting point for the Conring school was the state and the administrative tasks of the statesman. In a cameralistic system, he took it for granted that the welfare of the state depended upon the activities of the rulers. Their activities, therefore, were the starting point for the relevant categories: increase of population, defense against potential enemies, improvement of agriculture, monetary policy, and so on.’[[33]](#footnote-33) He then immediately noted what was important for Le Play: ‘The Le Play group took the reverse view. The welfare of the country depended upon the morality, the industry, and the submissiveness of the citizens at large and upon the sense of responsibility of the elite. These qualities were formed in the confines of the family. The system of categories, therefore, had to start out with a description of this primary group; …’[[34]](#footnote-34) He offered a very brief final comparison: ‘Le Play, so to say, saw society from within outward. Conring and his school looked at society as a large social system, the main characteristics of which they wanted to describe; they paid attention to the primary group only to the extent to which it would affect the actor on the big scene.’[[35]](#footnote-35) [ibid.: 165-166]

In this ‘Urtext’, to use Goethe’s symbolism, Lazarsfeld focused primarily on the social contexts in which individual scientific schools emerged in the past. Although he wrote on the ‘history of quantification’, he did not give one-sided priority to a quantitative focus. In the text we can find a rich and nuanced perspective and a wide point of view that takes in not just ‘numbers’ but also other, non-quantitative representations of the empirical social world as revealed through the sociology of Frédéric Le Play and Hermann Conring’s ‘classificatory statistics’.

1. **Lazarsfeld’s Comments and Critiques of Max Weber’s Empirical Sociology**

For his next publication, Lazarsfeld selected an important figure in the history of German sociology. He wrote an article for *American Sociological Review* together with Anthony Oberschal titled: ‘Max Weber and Empirical Social Research’.[[36]](#footnote-36) The article offers a detailed account and analysis of Max Weber’s involvement in empirical sociological research. Lazarsfeld and Oberschall describe Max Weber’s important contributions to the development of the empirical study of social phenomena in a time when the conditions were such that real empirical social research did not yet exist. The study of social phenomena in the German lands was mainly the responsibility of the Association for Social Policy (Verein für Sozialpolitik), which was founded by professors at German universities in 1872 as a counterweight to the growing strength of Marxism.

Around the year 1890 the Association for Social Policy began organising activities designed to explore the conditions of work in agriculture in Germany. The professors divided up the regions of Germany among themselves and each of them read through the responses landowners in their region provided in several dozen completed questionnaires. They then processed this empirical material into reports in the form of lengthy essays but with only a small number of descriptive tables. These were published in the association’s journal *Schriften des Vereins für Socialpolitik*. They were often hundreds of pages in length and they tended to be very descriptive. The journal was published almost from the time the association was founding, and volumes of the journal today fill the shelves of many German university libraries. Max Weber worked through the data for Eastern Prussia. At the association’s annual meeting in Berlin in 1893, instead of speaking about the ‘descriptive tabulations’ that he presented in his part of the 120-page published ‘Report’: ‘… Weber placed the political implications of his material in the foreground. He created a sensation by pointing out that, for economic reasons, East Prussian landowners imported Polish agricultural laborers, thereby endangering the German character and the national security of this frontier of the German Reich.’[[37]](#footnote-37) The second issue he raised was criticism of the content of the questionnaires, as he said that: ‘ …the *Verein* had put too much emphasis on the material condition of the laborers, whereas “the problem which the condition of the rural laborers presents lies predominantly in the subjective area”’.[[38]](#footnote-38)

The second study in which Max Weber was involved was: ‘another survey of rural laborers on behalf of the Evangelical-Social Congress.’[[39]](#footnote-39) In this case, Weber remained closely connected with the study. The respondents here were rural Protestant ministers. In a methodological note that Lazarsfeld and Obserschall directly draw attention to, Weber reflected whether researchers would be capable of processing around a thousand completed questionnaires, which is to say, a rather large amount of more or less standardised data. Lazarsfeld and Oberschall wrote: ‘… in 1893 he made a remark that might apply to all the surveys of this period (Max Weber wrote: “… nonetheless we face all this material as a puzzle, for we have not so far been able to find a way in which it is to be worked over….”)[[40]](#footnote-40) Max Weber presented the results of his work examining the conditions of agricultural labour at the World Congress of Arts and Sciences in 1906 in St Louis in the United States.

Several years later, when Max Weber was commenting on Adolf Levenstein’s research data, which was another project in which Max Weber was indirectly involved, in that he provided advice and recommendations, he adopted a much more positive stance on using numbers and on the quantitative processing of data. Lazarsfeld and Oberschal describe Weber’s methodology in very positive terms: ‘His thinking on the construction of empirical typologies was very modern…’ They demonstrate this using Weber’s own words: ‘… one must approach this problem on the basis of numbers, that is to say, investigate differences in the frequency of certain styles of expression and of thought-orientation by age, income, and place of origin of the respondents’.[[41]](#footnote-41)

Other contributions by Weber to empirical social research focused on industrial workers in Germany. Max Weber was involved in the work on an ambitious project being prepared by the Association ofr Social Policy to study workers at large German industrial factories. He concentrated intensively on thinking through the conceptualisation of this research. He also wrote up ‘a 60-page “methodological introduction” for the survey.[[42]](#footnote-42) Although he was extremely thorough in preparing the survey and the questionnaire for it, after the field work was completed, when the time came to report the results, Max Weber lost interest in the research. This attitude clearly contrasted with the optimistic advice that he was at the same time giving to Adolf Levenstein on a similar type of survey that he was conducting. Our question is: Why was this the case? It is possible to offer the following explanation. The research on German industrial workers that Max Weber had carefully prepared (in 1908-1909) ended in a fiasco during the data collection stage. Very few completed questionnaires were returned from the field. The ideas that went into preparing the research were good and it had a solid conceptualisation, the problem was the technical execution of it. While the scientific concept Adolf Levenstein developed for his research on workers was not as well thought out, he had an excellent team of people to informally collaborate with – the social democrats. And they enthusiastically organised the work of getting the questionnaires completed directly with factory workers in several industrial sectors. A large volume of data was collected and the data were essentially by contemporary standards. It was by then possible to process such a bulk of information, although only with the modest tools available at the time. In the research conducted by the Association for Social Policy (from 1908 to 1912), completed questionnaires were not returned or were returned without having been completely filled in, and thus they were only partly comparable. Weber consequently became disillusioned.

What experience and what lessons can we draw from Max Weber’s participation in this empirical study of German industrial workers organised by the Verein für Sozialpolitik? It is important to have a very good conceptualisation of the research problem, which Weber had. However, Max Weber was in the position of a ‘lone scholar’. In this context it is important to note that the university system in Germany and even the ‘Verein’ were not yet prepared to carry out large studies like this. Of crucial significance was that responsibility for the empirical field work was not defined in advance before the project started. And there was no experience with how to distribute and collect completed questionnaires. Nobody was trained in the role of an interviewer. There was no user’s guide or manual for very practical things like how to clean, control and process the collected empirical data. There was no system of statistical computation, even if the main statistical techniques were known by some specialists. In the beginning of the 20th century there was no technical equipment that could be used to help count, compute, sort, and tabulate data on a large scale. In sum, the technological conditions for survey research were lacking. Discussing Weber’s experience in the context of Paul Lazarsfeld’s long efforts to organise specialised training for staff and specialists at survey research organisations we have an excellent example of how the right organisational setting is necessary in order to successfully conduct empirical social surveys.

Lazarsfeld and Oberschal examined the advice that Weber gave to Adolf Levenstein and compared Levenstein’s solution(s) with Weber’s suggestions and criticisms. The discussion in the article dealt entirely with research on attitudes.[[43]](#footnote-43) Alongside other questions, they noticed Weber’s remarks on indicators and their probabilistic nature: ‘Weber, however, recognized the probabilistic nature of indicators…’[[44]](#footnote-44) According to Lazarsfeld and Oberschall, Weber ‘…specifically stresses that only in such probabilistic terms can the meaning of social relationships be caught. They cease to exist, he says, “whenever there is no longer a probability that certain kinds of meaningfully oriented social action will take place”.’[[45]](#footnote-45) Lazarsfeld and Oberschal introduced Max Weber to American sociologists as an empirical sociologist.

1. **Lazarsfeld’s Interpretation of Adolphe Quételet’s Probabilistic Sociology**

The second figure in the history of empirical research to whom Lazarsfeld devoted special paper was Adolph Quételet, a Belgian astronomer, natural scientist, and social scientist. Lazarsfeld accorded him the top position among the founders of empirical research, and even presented him as the founder of sociology. Lazarsfeld and David Landau together wrote a study on Adolph Quételet and published it in an international encyclopaedia edited by David Sills.[[46]](#footnote-46) [Landau and Lazarsfeld 1968]

Europe first became acquainted with Quételet in the middle of the 1820s and in the 1830s as a mathematician and an astronomer, and soon after he came to be known as an outstanding historian of science. At the age of 23, on the basis of the innovative dissertation he wrote in the field of analytical geometry, he was appointed the head of the department of elementary mathematics at the Athenaeum in Brussels, and soon after he was elected a member of the Académie Royale des Sciences et des Belles-Lettres de Bruxelles. The scientific elites from around Europe descended on Brussels to attend his lectures in geometry, probability theory, physics, astronomy, and later also the history of science at the museum in Brussels where he was based.[[47]](#footnote-47) From the start of the 1830s he began to turn his attention to social phenomena and shortly after published several small studies that he described as *statistique morale* (moral statistics). In 1835 he published his *Physique sociale*, in French, for the first time, in which he set out the basic ideas behind his concept for studying society.[[48]](#footnote-48) He claimed that similar laws apply to society as those that apply to physical nature, and he began to present these laws.

Lazarsfeld understood that Quételet’s epistemic principles and the discoveries he made using probability theory formed the foundation on which it then became possible to build the kind of empirical sociology that Lazarsfeld’s school later advanced. Sociology’s related discipline of demography ranked Quételet among its ‘founding fathers’. Historians and sociologists recognised Quételet’s instrumental role in organising census surveys and in their standardisation in Europe. His ‘social physics’ were what we would today call sociology.[[49]](#footnote-49)

What were the main ideas behind Quételet’s statistically based studies from the 1830s and later? Quételet set out from the following premises: 1. social phenomena are extremely regular; 2. empirical regularities can be uncovered using statistical techniques; 3. observed regularities have their causes, and thus, in addition to physical laws, there also exist social laws. Quételet looked for these causes in the different social conditions that exist in different times and in different places[[50]](#footnote-50) [Landau and Lazarsfeld 1968: 250].

Quételet soon after published two basic methodological principles in his studies:  
1. ‘Causes are proportional to the effects produced by them’[[51]](#footnote-51);  
2. ‘(…) large numbers are necessary in order to reach any reliable conclusions (…)’[[52]](#footnote-52)

Lazarsfeld and Landau wrote: ‘Quételet was greatly concerned that the methods he adopted for studying man in all his aspects be as “scientific” as those used in any of the physical sciences.’[[53]](#footnote-53) Compared to the ideas of his contemporary, Auguste Comte, ‘Quételet believed that the use of mathematics is not only the *sine qua non* of any exact science but the measure of its worth.’ ‘The more advanced the sciences have become’, he said, ‘the more they have tended to enter the domain of mathematics which is a sort of center toward which they converge’.[[54]](#footnote-54)

A central concept in Quételet’s ideas was that of the ‘average man’ (*homme moyen*). We find it in all his writings. In ‘A Treatise on Man …’, Quételet wrote that ‘he had developed the idea that the characteristics of the average man can be presented only by giving the mean and the upper and lower limits of variation from that mean’.[[55]](#footnote-55) [ibid.: 251] In ‘Letters Addressed to H. R. H. the Grand Duke of Saxe-Coburg and Gotha, on the Theory of Probabilities, as Applied to the Moral and Political Sciences’[[56]](#footnote-56) [Quételet 1849], which he wrote based on letters he sent at the request of the Belgian king, Leopold I, to the king’s nephews – who were Quételet’s private students – he explained that ‘regarding the height of men of one nation, the individual values group themselves symmetrically around the mean according to … the law of accidental causes’[[57]](#footnote-57), and added that ‘for a nation the average man is actually the *type* or the standard and that other men differ from him, by more or by less, only through the influence of accidental causes, whose effects become calculable when the number of trials is sufficiently large …’[[58]](#footnote-58)

Quételet formulated the ‘law of accidental causes’, which he claimed was ‘a general law, which applies to individuals as well as to peoples and which governs our moral and intellectual qualities just as it does our physical qualities. Thus, what is regarded as accidental causes to be so when observations are extended to a considerable number of cases’[[59]](#footnote-59) The relationship between the concept of the ‘average man’ and the law of accidental causes was primarily based on the repetition of mass phenomena, where it is possible to find a common average value. In the first of his writings on probability theory in 1831, as well as measuring the physical characteristics of man he predicted that it would be possible to observe similar averages and deviations in the moral and intellectual characteristics of man. The term ‘average man’ was used for the first time in a study devoted to a comparison of shares of criminal acts, and he also included this study in his first summary publication.[[60]](#footnote-60) This is also where he first described an average as a typical value, and the average representative of a nation as typical for that nation. In 1844 he stated for the first time that ‘his observations were symmetrically distributed about the mean…’[[61]](#footnote-61) and began to think about the likely possibility that a similar distribution could apply to all physical characteristics. Using probability theory, he was able to derive the distributions for height, weight, and chest circumference of different segments of the population, which strikingly corresponded with empirical data obtained for these diverse groups.

He first demonstrated the practical applicability of his theories when he estimated the number of conscripts that had avoided having to serve in the French army. He discovered a ‘discrepancy between the distribution of height of 100,000 French conscripts and his prediction (i.e. the theoretical distribution…)’ and ‘… he came to the conclusion that some 2,000 men had escaped service by somehow shortening themselves to just below the minimum height’[[62]](#footnote-62)

In his comments on the average man, Quételet limited himself ‘to calculating the means and distributions of only a few physical characteristics.’[[63]](#footnote-63) In 1848 Quételet formulated his ‘grand generalisation’ in the publication *Du système social ...*’[[64]](#footnote-64) Here he set himself the task of extending his theory to apply to people’s physical features, calling this concept ‘social physics’, and to apply to all moral and intellectual properties, calling this ‘moral statistics’. Quételet extended his concept to the point where he planned to apply it to all collectives, regardless of the size, ranging from small groups to all humankind. The term ‘law of accidental causes’ used by Quételet in this work is explained by the authors of the encyclopaedia entry as an indicator of his very modern outlook, similar to Lazarsfeld’s own approach: ‘the “law of accidental causes” … is simply the assertion that every human trait is normally distributed about a mean and that the larger the number of observations, the more closely the empirical distribution will coincide with the theoretical probability distribution….’[[65]](#footnote-65) Lazarsfeld also found Quételet’s conception of causality to be important, as well as the way he used multi-dimensional tables, a portent of the possibility of multi-dimensional analyses in the future.[[66]](#footnote-66) The authors of the encyclopaedia entry conclude by note that Quetelet’s ‘… basic idea was that certain social processes (corresponding to his interplay of causes) would explain the final distribution of certain observable data’.[[67]](#footnote-67)

1. **Lazarsfeld’s Sorbonne and Columbia Seminars on the History of Empirical Sociology**

In his article on Lazarsfeld and France, Bernard-Pierre Lécuyer wrote that from the start of 1960 seminars on the history of empirical research were occasionally organised at Columbia University.[[68]](#footnote-68) Lazarsfeld and Merton ran the seminars together. Because of these historical-methodological seminars and the subjects it dealt with, Lazarsfeld’s admiration for Quételet was generally well known throughout Columbia University. So even before the 13th volume of the *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* that contained the entry on Adolph Quételet was published, the administration at Columbia University bestowed the title ‘Quételet Professor of Social Sciences’ on Lazarsfeld at Merton’s suggestion.

During the early stages of his work on the history of empirical social research, Lazarsfeld received assistance from Antony Oberschall. Lazarsfeld mentioned having worked with him already on the ‘history of quantification’.[[69]](#footnote-69) Oberschall was also the first of Lazarsfeld’s doctoral students to focus on the history of empirical social research. The joint study on Max Weber mentioned above was one of their shared projects. In 1962 Anthony Oberschall defended his thesis at Columbia University, which was titled *Empirical Social Research in Germany 1848–1914*. He published it in book form as a monograph in 1965.[[70]](#footnote-70) A sign of this cooperation between the United States and France was the fact that the monograph was published in Paris. Another of Lazarsfeld’s doctoral students, Susan P. Schad, defended her thesis on German empirical social research. Schad focused on the history of empirical research in Germany after the First World War. She thus picked up from where Anthony Oberschall left off. Her study, *Empirical Social Research in Weimar Germany*, was also published as a monograph in Paris by Mouton press, which had published Oberschall’s book a few years earlier.[[71]](#footnote-71)

1. **The Sorbonne University Seminars and Lazarsfeld’s Collaboration with France**

French sociologists were aware of Lazarsfeld’s interest in the history of European sociology and his study on the history of quantification from 1961.[[72]](#footnote-72) Thanks to the translation by Bernard-Pierre Lécuyer the study was published in French some years later.[[73]](#footnote-73) After arriving at the Sorbonne in the autumn of 1962, Lazarsfeld began organising a seminar on the early history of empirical research in the social sciences, especially in Europe. The seminar at the Sorbonne regularly took place throughout the 1962/1963 academic year.[[74]](#footnote-74) ‘Organised weekly, this seminar attracted dozens of figures, among them Raymond Boudon, André Davidovitch, Francois-André Isambert, Bermard-Pierre Lécuyer, Catherine Boddard, Michel Dion, Jean-Claude Passeron, and others.’[[75]](#footnote-75)

Particularly important was the published outcome that was then produced by the participants in this seminar, some of them earlier, while others later on. Probably the first such outcome was the important study by Bernard-Pierre Lécuyer, published internally within the Sorbonne, which focused on empirical social research in France in the 16th to 18th centuries and up to the French Revolution.[[76]](#footnote-76) Later his summary article on the history of empirical research in France was published in *Epistémologie sociologique.[[77]](#footnote-77)* Soon after, Raymond Boudon published a study on Gabriel Tarde.[[78]](#footnote-78) Francois-André Isambert published a paper in 1969 devoted to the important French 19th-century statistician d’Ange-Michel Guerry (1802-1866).[[79]](#footnote-79) An anthology of the writings of Le Play was published in English in Chicago in 1982, of which Catherine Bodard was the editor.[[80]](#footnote-80)

Probably the most-read work to come out of these seminars was the encyclopaedia entry published in 1968 in the *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences,* a joint publication produced by B-P. Lécuyer and A. Oberschall.[[81]](#footnote-81)

1. **The Columbia University Seminars and Publications by Lazarsfeld’s Colleagues**

In the field of the history of empirical social research, Lazarsfeld’s closest colleagues gradually came to include Anthony Oberschall, Bernard-Pierre Lécuyer, and Terry Nicols Clark. After Lazarsfeld returned to the United States from Paris, Lazarsfeld and Merton’s joint seminars on empirical social research became an official and permanent part of the work of the Department of Sociology and the Faculty of Political Science at Columbia University. Bernard-Pierre Lécuyer described this as follows: ‘Around 1963 the joint seminar of Lazarsfeld/Merton became officially and entirely devoted to the history of empirical social research’.[[82]](#footnote-82) Lécuyer became the seminar’s organisational secretary for two years, from 1964 to 1966.[[83]](#footnote-83) He wrote that participants in the seminar included Jonathan Cole, Terry Clark, and David Elesh, and from 1964 Catherine Bodard and others[[84]](#footnote-84) and listed the publications that came to be written by participants in the seminar. Thanks to Lazarsfeld’s continuous interest in this historical subject and thanks also to Lécuyer’s enthusiastic involvement, the history of empirical social research came to form a significant link between Lazarsfeld’s work at Columbia University in New York and at the Sorbonne in Paris.

Obserschall was also instrumental in establishing a link between participants in both seminars through a publication he edited: *The Establishment of Empirical Sociology. Studies in Continuity, Discontinuity and Institutionalization.*[[85]](#footnote-85) [Oberschall ed. 1972] Many figures who had participated in the Paris and Columbia seminars on empirical social research contributed to this collective monograph. Stephen Cole analysed empirical social research in England in the 19th century.[[86]](#footnote-86) Terry N. Clark devoted his chapter to Émile Durkheim, focusing primarily on the role Durkheim played in the institutionalisation of French sociology: ‘Émile Durkheim and the French University: The Institutionalization of Sociology.’[[87]](#footnote-87) Also, Waiter Goldfrank contributed an article on Le Play[[88]](#footnote-88), and two studies on developments in Britain were included. The study by G. N. Dark dealt with the forerunners to British sociology, namely William Petty and John Graunt, and their successors in the era of the famous Isaac Newton. David Elesh focused on advances in British statistics, primarily those made at the Manchester Statistical Society.[[89]](#footnote-89)

Anthony Oberschall set himself the task of putting together a clear picture of the evolution of empirical social research in the United States. He titled his comprehensive and clearly composed article ‘The Institutionalization of American Sociology.’[[90]](#footnote-90) This highly informative text almost seventy pages in length was probably the most reliable resource on the history of the early stages of empirical social research until Jean Converse’s study was published.[[91]](#footnote-91) Lazarsfeld likened Obserschall’s article to Philip Abrams’s monograph ‘on the history of English sociology’.[[92]](#footnote-92) About Oberschall’s text he wrote: ‘The work on the United States was summarizes and vastly extended by Oberschall to an extensive paper on the institutionalization of American sociology which is now included in his new collection. Because of the great influence American sociology has at the moment in other countries, it is important that this paper gets the attention of an international audience.’[[93]](#footnote-93)

As well as the publications by Anthony Oberschall listed above, in an overview paper from 1972 Lécuyer also mentions two studies by Terry N. Clark.[[94]](#footnote-94) The first one offered English readers a thorough introduction to the communication research of Gabriel Tarde, one of the classic figures from the early period in French empirical research, with an anthology of selected writings by Tarde. The second one, published in 1973, was, as B.-P. Lécuyer writes, inspired by the ideas of Edvard Shils: ‘Terry Clark published his collection of selected texts by Tarde and in 1973 his major historical work, which was inspired not just by Lazarsfeld, but also by Merton, as well as the ideas about intellectuals’.[[95]](#footnote-95) However, as well as the two studies by Clark that Lécuyer mentioned, Terry N. Clark also published two articles in the *European Journal of Sociology*. The introduction to the historical development of empirical social research in France that Clark offered European readers was important for the spread of interest in the history of empirical social research. The first of the articles dealt with the role of Emil Durkheim in the institutionalisation of sociology within the French university system.[[96]](#footnote-96) The second article, which directly tied in with the first, analysed the role of Durkheim’s *L’Année Sociologique* in the French sociological world.[[97]](#footnote-97) Given the subject matter of both articles, it is almost certain that these texts were the first version of one part of the text of a more comprehensive book published later in Chicago.[[98]](#footnote-98)

The exceptionally prolific Terry N. Clark offered the English-speaking world a kind of window into French sociology. He certainly played a very instrumental role in introducing American sociologists to the history of French empirical sociology. We won’t quote here but will simply list four French social scientists, most of them from the time when sociology was emerging, whose works were introduced to American readers through entries Clark wrote for the international encyclopaedia mentioned above. These were: Jacques Bertillon, Gabriel Tarde, Henri de Tourville, and René Worms. These entries of two, three, or six pages in the *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* did the necessary work of filling in the gap in information on the early stages of French sociology. And what about Clark’s thesis? It was not published separately as a book. Clark richly made up for that with dozens of articles and studies published in respected books and sociological journals. We can find his thesis on the list of theses defended at Columbia University in 1967 titled *Empirical Social Research in France 1850-1914.[[99]](#footnote-99)* It most certainly ranks among the results of the work of seminars on empirical sociological research organised between 1960 and 1970 at Columbia University in New York and partly also at the Sorbonne in Paris. All these works together rank Terry N. Clark alongside Anthony Oberschall and Bernard-Pierre Lécuyer among the closest of Lazarsfeld’s fellow collaborators working on the history of empirical sociology. And the work of these three people and many others is an obvious reflection of the cooperation between France and Lazarsfeld during this period.

1. **Conclusion: three evaluations**

In conclusion, it is possible to assess Lazarsfeld’s opinions, activities, and results on the history of empirical social research with the words of B-P. Lécuyer, Paul Lazarsfeld, and one of Lazarsfeld’s biographers, Paul M. Neurath. On the occasion of ‘Lazarsfeld’s 100-Year Anniversary’, Bernard-Pierre Lécuyer wrote an article about Lazarsfeld’s instrumental role in establishing cooperation between the United States and France.[[100]](#footnote-100) In it he described Lazarsfeld as: ‘Un grande figure francophile de la sociologie empirique’. As well as providing a great deal of important information on this cooperation, he also devoted space to the dispute between sociologists and historians over views on the history of the social sciences. The sociologists’ viewpoints were mainly defended by Lazarsfeld, which he did in the Foreword to the collective monograph edited by Oberschall.[[101]](#footnote-101) Lécuyer summed up the information on this dispute as the dispute between the so-called ‘presentists’ and the supposed ‘historicists’. According to Lécuyer, Lazarsfeld called some of the criticisms from anthropologists and historians insignificant and objected to their exclusive claim to interpret historical facts on the evolution of sociology.[[102]](#footnote-102) [Lécuyer 2002: 65-67]

A clear summary of Lazarsfeld’s views on the history of empirical social research was provided in a retrospective study he published in a collection of work marking the 70th birthday of Fernand Braudel.[[103]](#footnote-103) Lazarsfeld used to regularly meet Fernand Braudel at UNESCO events, where Fernand Braudel represented the French social sciences, in particular history and economics. Giulianna Gemeli wrote in an article about the cooperation between Lazarsfeld and France that Lazarsfeld and Braudel bonded a great deal over the almost identical opinions they shared on the importance of specialised training for researchers in the social sciences: ‘It must equally be underscored that Lazarsfeld and Braudel shared the same idea about the professionalisation of the next generations of researchers, which required a training strategy that, going beyond specialisation, “exposes participants to a sufficiently wide variety of subjects and techniques”, like that highlighted by Lazarsfeld himself’.[[104]](#footnote-104)

Lazarsfeld main idea of the history of empirical social research can be summarised in three sentences: 1) There are two roots of modern sociology: Great masters represented one mainspring; 2)‘But there is a second root – the men, the teams and the organizations which built systems of political arithmetic, looked for regularities to prove divine order or societal laws, wanted to know what industrial society really did to people and what major changes in values were lying ahead.’[[105]](#footnote-105); 3) ‘Empirical social research has its own history, going back as a systematic pursuit at least 300 years.’[[106]](#footnote-106) These ideas formed the axis around which Lazarsfeld based his research activities on the history of empirical social research between 1959 and 1973. And in a final retrospective paper Lazarsfeld reviewed the research goals of his colleagues relating to the analysis of the history of empirical research in Germany, France, Britain, and the United States from its beginnings in the 17th century up until almost Lazarsfeld’s time. Towards the end of the article Lazarsfeld reacted to words that Raymond Aron wrote in the Foreword to *Main Currents in Sociological Thought*. Lazarsfeld noted in his response that: ‘… the conventional university departments were never suited to the execution of research projects which required teamwork, division of labor, and a certain type of leadership which was different from the customary relation between an individual teacher and his disciples.’[[107]](#footnote-107) And with Lazarsfeld’s statement that ‘the training of students in an advanced social research’ is ‘indispensable’ he united his lifelong efforts to establish the conditions for professional research with an in-depth exploration of the history of these efforts. He wrote: ‘The battle for and around these hybrid centers and their financial support is still raging. My interest in the history of empirical research is part of this battle.’[[108]](#footnote-108)

The significance and importance of the history of empirical social research in the life and work of Paul Lazarsfeld has perhaps been encapsulated best by Paul Martin Neurath, the guardian of his legacy and founder of the Paul Lazarsfeld Archive in Vienna. In the conclusion to the large collection of papers published to mark the centenary of Paul Lazarsfeld’s birth, which was published in Paris[[109]](#footnote-109) [Neurath 1998], he wrote: ‘One of his pursuits during his later years was a long effort to put together the history of quantification in sociology, beginning with a big article in ISIS in 1960, then continued in seminars both at Columbia and at the Sorbonne, where he had students write major papers and eventually books on the subject – much of it perhaps in an effort to establish a respectable historical pedigree for the activity on which he had spent so many years of his life.’[[110]](#footnote-110)

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8. Many books and other works have been published on the life and work of Paul Lazarsfeld. We can highlight two of them here and they are both international. A collection of papers was published in Paris to mark the centenary of Paul Lazarsfeld’s birth Jacques Lautman, et Bernard-Pierre Lécuyer, eds., *Paul Lazarsfeld (1901-1976) La sociologie de Vienne a New York* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 1998), and in 2001 the World Association for Public Opinion Research (WAPOR) released a ‚special issue‘ of its journal, *International Journal of Public Opinion Research* *(IJPOR)* devoted to Lazarsfeld. In Editorial to this issue four editors wrote: ‚There is a general impression in the social science world that quantitative research approaches have largely been American, while European scholarship has emphasized systematic theory. While it is true that most macrotheorists like Marx, Weber, Durkheim, Pareto, were Europeans, it is noteworthy that the major influence on social science which stimulated quantitative empiricism was a European, who became an American, Paul Felix Lazarsfeld.‘ Wolfgang, Donsbach, Seymour Martin, Lipset, Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann, and Robert M. Worcester “Paul F. Lazarsfeld (1901-1976),” *International Journal for Public Opinion Research* 13, no. 3 (2001): 225-28. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
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26. Ibid., 114. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
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30. Le Play was searching for social cohesion, but in a slightly different way from Émile Durkheim. He considered it important to ensure that society, whose macrostructures are constantly transforming, be held together. And he looked to family solidarity to achieve this. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
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38. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
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47. Landau and Lazarsfeld, “Quetelet, Adolphe.”, 247. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. Adolphe, Quételet, *Physique sociale: Ou, essai sur le développement des facultés de l’homme* (Brussels: Muquardt, 1869). -> First published as *Sur l’homme et le développement de ses facultés: Physique sociale*. [1835]. *A Treatise on Man and the Development of His Faculties.* Translated.Edinburgh: Chambers 1942. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. It is generally well known that Auguste Comte originally wanted to use the name ‚social physics‘ to refer to his new scientific discipline, which in his view was located at ‚the peak of the pyramid of the sciences‘. However, he came up with this idea after Quételet and thus the term was already taken. Instead he created a new name, ‘sociology’, and it caught on. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
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51. Ibid.; Quételet, *A Treatise.*  [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
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53. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
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56. Adolphe, Quételet *Letters Addressed to H. R. H. the Grand Duke of Saxe-Coburg and Gotha, on the Theory of Probabilities, as Applied to the Moral and Political Sciences*. (London: C. & E. Layton, 1849). [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. Quételet, *Letters, viii.* [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
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