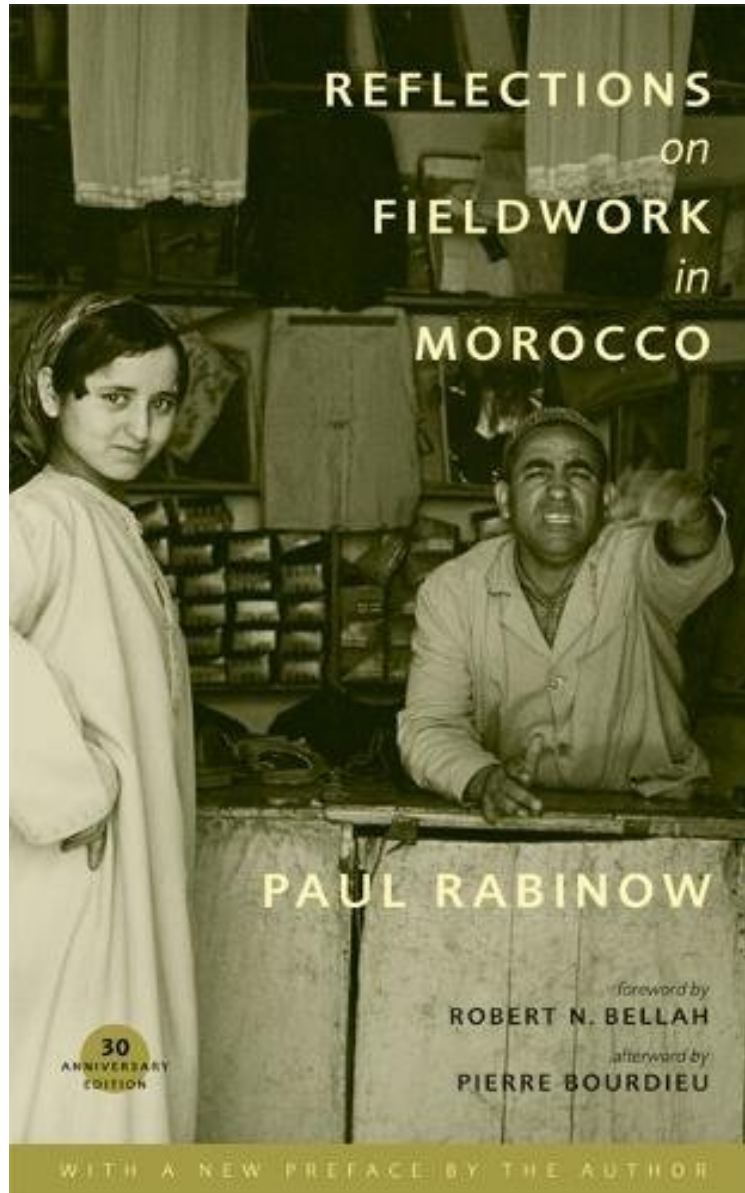


Reflections on Fieldwork in Morocco

Paul Rabinow

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Paul Rabinow : Reflections on Fieldwork in Morocco before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Reflections on Fieldwork in Morocco:

14 of 15 people found the following review helpful. False Starts and New DeparturesBy Etienne RPFFor anthropologists, doing fieldwork is a kind of rite of passage, a process of initiation into the profession as well as a

marker which separates anthropologists from other social scientists who "don't do fieldwork". But at the time when Paul Rabinow wrote his *Reflections*, there were surprisingly little books attempting to define what fieldwork is and giving aspiring anthropologists some tools and lessons on how to pursue their field research successfully. *Reflections on Fieldwork in Morocco* thus soon became required reading in anthropology classes, and many graduate students were encouraged to hold a research diary in which they would record similar introspective thoughts in parallel to their scholarly work. But Rabinow's book is not a fieldwork manual and it will provide little guidance to young researchers going on the field. It is by no means a "how to" book. If anything, it records false starts, dead ends and failures, where a more standard scholarly manual would give an impression of fulfillment and completion. The anthropologist's research study on *Symbolic Domination: Cultural Form and Historical Change in Morocco*, which constitutes the shadow volume to this short essay, could have turned out completely differently and its completion owes much to chance encounters, the politics of getting access to the field, and the choice of informants who provided the author with their insider's knowledge. Doing fieldwork, it turns out, is not very different from simply hanging around. "After all, now that I was in the field, anything was fieldwork", remarks Rabinow. Like those Dutch masters who reproduced in their paintings a reflexion of the painter in action, the anthropologist includes himself in the picture and tries to conform to a projected image. Spending his days in the old city of Sefou "fulfilled all of my images of myself as anthropologist sitting in the heart of a thousand-year-old walled city, with my turbaned friends, notebook on my lap, drinking tea and being the participant observer." But the anthropologist is not the only one to strike a pose. The observed Moroccans also act consciously so as to convey a certain image of their society to the observer, and their behavior is affected by his presence among them. One is surprised to find out that many contacts of Rabinow had previously worked with other anthropologists. Informants too are engaged in their own fieldwork, an activity for which they are more or less talented, and they expect a kind of retribution for the service they provide. This compensation often takes the form of monetary payment for work sessions, as the author would normally pay for language tuition (the two often go together), but some informants choose other forms of retribution, as the author obliged to give taxi rides to a vast number of solicitors soon finds out. There is a lovely scene in which a seemingly dying old lady is driven to the hospital, only to ask to be dropped to the nearest market, where she has some shopping to do before dying. Rabinow's remark on how he is pushed around and probed by his informants who try to test his strengths and weaknesses reminded me playing soccer on a field with Moroccans, who consider this kind of testing a normal form of social interaction. At the time of his writing, Paul Rabinow subscribed to a definition of anthropology as consisting of participant observation (his later work would drive him closer to Michel Foucault's archeology of knowledge and away from Clifford Geertz's interpretation of cultures). But as he notes in his book, observation is the main objective the anthropologist can achieve, and participation remains an elusive goal. "There may be situations in which the anthropologist can directly aid the community, he remarks, but my guess is that they are rare." Especially for a scholar who seems to be deeply suspicious of aid agencies' efforts to alleviate poverty and promote development. One should note however that many anthropologists today are engaged in practical issues, advising governments and various institutions on how best to take account of the local context in projects that involve social change and potential disruption in traditional livelihoods. The book closes with an afterword by Pierre Bourdieu, a well-known French social scientist who also has done similar fieldwork in Algeria before turning to French modern society. It opens with a foreword from Robert Bellah, another social scientist, who interestingly compares Paul Rabinow's narrative to a mythic tale, relating the journey of the hero on a dangerous mission and his successful return. An anthropologist is a dealer in myths, and it is all too natural that his venture in the field reproduces the narrative structure of an *Illiad* or an *Odyssey*. Ulysses comes home to a deeply changed Ithaca, and only his faithful dog recognizes the wandering hero. Likewise, Rabinow who had "left America with a sense of giddy release" returns to a country he doesn't recognize as his own. "Revolution" had occurred during his absence, the sixties were over, and the shadow of Vietnam loomed large over the anthropologist's agenda. His *Reflexion on Fieldwork in Morocco* would stand out as an isolated gem, and he would soon move on to other terrains and pursuits.

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Five Stars
By Michelle Fournier
Awesome, quick delivery, would recommend
0 of 1 people found the following review helpful.
required and actually good
By sarah elizabeth smith
This was a required text for me and I was surprised that a required text actually turned out to be a good read! There was some highlighting in it, but overall the book was in good condition.

In this landmark study, now celebrating thirty years in print, Paul Rabinow takes as his focus the fieldwork that anthropologists do. How valid is the process? To what extent do the cultural data become artifacts of the interaction between anthropologist and informants? Having first published a more standard ethnographic study about Morocco, Rabinow here describes a series of encounters with his informants in that study, from a French innkeeper clinging to the vestiges of a colonial past, to the rural descendants of a seventeenth-century saint. In a new preface Rabinow considers the thirty-year life of this remarkable book and his own distinguished career.

About the Author Paul Rabinow is Professor of Anthropology at University of California, Berkeley. He is the author of

many books, including, most recently, *A Machine to Make a Future: Biotech Chronicles*, with Talia Dan-Cohen (2004).