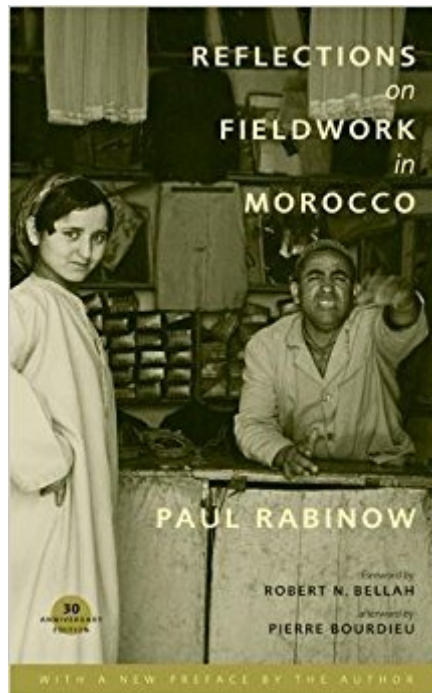


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# Reflections On Fieldwork In Morocco



## Synopsis

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.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

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).

For 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 Iliad 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.

Awesome, quick delivery, would recommend

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.

What do anthropologists do? Well, they do a vast number of things, studying people in Peoria or Papua, Boston or Burma, finding out about law, warfare, religion, family life, enculturation of children, pilgrimage, art, ideas about health.....you name it, an anthropologist has probably written a Ph.D thesis on it. Anthropologists have been accused of aiding the CIA, the colonial regimes of yesteryear, and drug companies (among other things). But in today's world, there is really no way forward without some sort of understanding of "the Other's" point of view. We hope to widen our scope by reading the various works of anthropology written over the years, but since the world is changing very fast, today's anthropology becomes the social history of tomorrow. So, we continuously need more fieldwork. But how is that fieldwork actually done? You are going to get just a vague idea about that in this book because the trouble is that nobody can really describe your fieldwork experience for you before you have it! As Rabinow says in this short but very effective book, nobody really teaches you how to do fieldwork. Most authors never let on how they got their

opinions and information, we never meet the people who spoke to them. You study all kinds of theories and models in graduate school, read some of the great studies of the past, but if you don't do fieldwork, you never really join the fraternity of anthropologists. Even if today's anthropologists no longer search for "untouched cultures" (in quotes because these scarcely existed and your presence put an exclamation point on such an idea), they still undergo similar experiences. You arrive at your destination, whether in a Greek village or on a remote Pacific island, a New York slum or a group of Sri Lankan hospitals. What should you do first? Whom should you contact? Do you speak the language well enough? What are appropriate questions here? What ideas and preconceptions have you brought with you? What will be the consequence of linking up with this person instead of that one? The list of questions is endless and it can be a bewildering experience, at least at first. Rabinow tells the whole story (I think) of his own fieldwork experience and reflects on it at the same time. It's a magnificent effort which should be read by anyone planning to do fieldwork in anthropology. Along with Hortense Powdermaker's "Stranger and Friend", David Maybury-Lewis' "The Savage and the Innocent", Nigel Barley's "Adventures in a Mud Hut (or "The Innocent Anthropologist")", and maybe Malinowski's "Diary in the Strict Sense of the Word", this volume can abuse anyone of the idea that you just waltz in, ask your questions, eat some local food, and head home. If you have already done field work, it will bring back a lot of memories and may help you to make more sense of your own experience.

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