

IMVP and GERPISA's parallel history

A study of two forms of international co-operation in social sciences

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Introduction

For most people involved in social science research, this remains an individual and solitary activity. Yet government authorities, research organisations and universities have made many efforts, as have the researchers themselves, to find other forms of work that will make it possible to increase the yield and practical applicability of research. Should we conclude from this that the forms which have been used up until now (seminars, colloquiums, collective publications, magazines, networks, teams etc.) are sufficient, i.e., that they cannot be bettered?

The primacy of individual work offers many advantages: a diversity of research topics and approaches, a greater sensitivity to new themes, personal involvement, an easier evaluation of researchers' output, the stimulation of scientific debate due to each participant's need to emphasise his/her contribution, etc. On the other hand, the subjects that are being dealt with and people's theoretical ambitions tend to be sized in terms of what one individual can reasonably be expected to do and to achieve. This has two consequences: some debates are never resolved because the work they require cannot be accomplished by one researcher working alone; and field researchers are forced, whenever they try to develop theoretical conclusions, to present their work in terms of current theoretical truisms or the conjectures of whatever essayists are in fashion at the time. This leads to a paradoxical situation, characterised by an increasingly wide range of viewpoints; by a huge pile of information in a scattered and difficult to articulate form; and by relatively mediocre theoretical advances.

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And there is another reason for not considering that the current form of work in the field of social sciences constitutes a definitive version. National representatives and government authorities periodically and legitimately worry about research orientations - and about the uses that are being made of the funds they invest. Hence the many new systems, often unwieldy, contradictory, even suspicious, which seek to orient research and to make it controllable. For all of these reasons, researchers need to find forms of collective work that are productive and satisfying - before others make the decision in their place.

It is therefore highly salient to describe the experiences of two interdisciplinary international networks that have been founded by researchers themselves. The first, known today under the name of the IMVP (International Motor Vehicle Programme), was created by two researchers from MIT (Massachusetts Institute of Technology), Alan Altshuler and Daniel Roos. The second, known as the GERPISA (a French acronym for the Permanent Group for the Study of the Automotive Industry and its Employees) was founded by Patrick Fridenson and myself, working out of the EHESS (Paris) and the Université d'Evry ¹.

These networks have a number of points in common - but they diverge from one another in the forms of co-operation that each chooses, and in the research findings that each has developed. They were created at the same time, respectively in 1980 and 1981. They study the same field, the automotive industry and its employees. They both work using scientific preoccupations and ancillary practices. They aim to explore macro and micro relationships and to predict the sector's possible futures. They deal with similar topics: industrial systems, internationalisation, etc.. They share the same ambitions, both theoretical (enhancing our understanding of the ways in which firms, and the environments within which they operate, have changed) and practical (communicating the results of their work to the actors involved and discussing with them the actions that they plan on taking). Finally, both networks are still functional after 20 years.

Nevertheless, the IMVP has developed a type of co-operation that tends to be market-oriented in nature, whereas the GERPISA seeks to establish a system based on a co-operation between equals. The two networks' findings have been very different - yet contacts between them have increased over the years.

From an epochal shift to a single research question, 1980-1985

By the late 1970s, everyone had become aware of the fact that the world was truly about to enter into new era. There was continued disagreement as to the organisation of work, but this focus tended to be replaced by a rising concern about firms' longevity, and about the development of employment. This reversal was particularly manifest in the

¹ Of course, it is impossible at this juncture to provide a sociological analysis of the two networks. My account of their parallel history is being done without the luxury of hindsight – I am after all very involved in one of the two networks. The GERPISA's orientation, organisation and development have been discussed on a great many different occasions (one echo being *La Lettre du GERPISA*, the network's bilingual monthly publication which can be consulted on <http://www.gerpisa.univ-evry.fr>). These discussions underpin the comments I am making in the present article, but they are my own, that is, they do not necessarily reflect the opinions of GERPISA's members or of its international executive committee.

automotive sector. Altshuler and Roos raised the question of a potential decline in the automotive industry, particularly in the United States. To foster a debate on this subject, they offered to put together a global "diagnosis of the automobile system". This was to involve the mobilisation of researchers from a variety of disciplines. Moreover, all of these researchers were to come from the main automobile producing nations.

In France, after the steel sector had nearly gone bankrupt in 1979, many observers were openly wondering whether the automobile industry was not about to experience the same problems. Patrick Fridenson and I had already been studying this sector for a number of years. We knew from our own experience about the mass of information, level of competencies and sheer time that would be required to carry out a historical and global analysis of a given sector of economic activity. But we were also convinced that this analysis was a necessary bridge to cross if we were to advance in our understanding and exploration of the relationships that exist between the macro and the micro levels. We also knew that this provided us with a propitious framework for interdisciplinary collaboration. Someone had to do something.

Programme sizes and network perimeters

Altshuler and Roos set up a project that was due to run for 4 years, and which was known back then as the Automobile Programme. The researchers that they brought together were relatively free to choose the topics they wanted to study². The main reason for this was that MIT funding for this programme only covered its co-ordination costs.³ Each team had to be self-funding if it was to complete the study programmes it planned. Automobile firm leaders, trade unionists and government representatives from the programme's seven countries were invited to make up research teams at annual forums and colloquiums.

When the GERPISA was created, we knew nothing about the existence of MIT's Automobile Programme. Our plans were to discuss each others' fieldwork, with a view towards improving and accelerating our understanding of certain worrying trends in the automotive industry⁴. We also wanted to invite foreign researchers and try to develop a historical and global analytical approach. Senior managers, trade unionists and representatives from official missions or government administrations were sometimes invited to monthly Workdays as panelists or as discussion group members. The GERPISA was recognised as a group associated with the Centre for Historical Research (CRH in French), part of the EHESS. It was then recognised as a member of the "GRECO Work and Workers in the 19th and 20th Centuries" scheme, whereupon it received a few thousand francs enabling it to get off the ground.

² With no idea as to the type of research that was being done in these countries and pressed for time, they formed teams with an extremely diverse composition. Depending on the country, different disciplines were represented in each of these teams, including consultants, representatives from automotive firms and from government administrations. All in all, 141 persons became active, including 18 Americans.

³ Having received material and institutional support from MIT, Altshuler et Roos also obtained subsidies from the United States' German Marshall Fund and from the Lilly Endowment.

⁴ This group included researchers who are still GERPISA members in 2001: Jean Jacques Chanaron, Yves Cohen, Jean Pierre Durand, Joyce Durand, Nicolas Hatzfeld, Jean Louis Loubet. In 1982, two members of the Automobile Programme's French team joined the GERPISA.

IMVP
International Motor Vehicle Program,
(MIT, Cambridge, United States)

Direction of Programmes

Automobile Programme, 1980-1984 Alan Altshuler (policy science, International Studies Center, MIT), Daniel Roos (Professor of Public Works, Transport Studies Center)

IMVP 1, 1985-1990 Daniel Roos (Director du Center for Technical and Industrial Development, MIT), James Womack (Management Researcher, MIT), Daniel Jones (Management Professor, Cardiff Business School, United Kingdom)

IMVP 2 et 3, 1991-1999, Daniel Roos., Charles Fine (Management Professor, Sloan Management School, MIT)

IMVP 4, 2000- , Charles Fine, John Paul MacDuffie, (Management Professor, Wharton School, University of Pennsylvania)

Diagnostics on one side, identification of essential issues on the other

After four years, the Automobile Programme succeeded in putting together a "report" that was attributed to MIT and entitled "*The Future of Automobile*"⁵. Translated in the programme's various participant countries, *Business Week* called the book one of the ten best to have appeared in 1984 on the topic of companies and the economy. After delving into the three great historical mutations that the automotive industry had experienced since its birth, the report reviewed the environment constraints that weighed on its future, the technical solutions that could limit or nullify their consequences, the growth outlook for the global stock of automobiles, the nature of competition, the respective competitiveness of the North American, European and Japanese poles of automobile production, the future geography of the automotive industry, industrial relations and downsizing, and finally commercial policies.

The book concluded with a list of the options that were considered to be available to the actors in automobile manufacturing: firms, trade unionists, government authorities. The authors wrote that (*N.T., paraphrase due to backtranslation*) "the central message of the study is that the automotive system will evolve in a very dynamic manner if firms are given responsibility for decision-making – and as long as they face intense competition from each other"⁶. This proclamation of belief in the neo-liberal faith, in tune with a point of view that was beginning to dominate in the United States, caused a great deal of disagreement amongst the members of the network.

⁵ Alan Altshuler, Martin Anderson., Daniel Jones, Daniel Roos, James Womack, *The Future of Automobile*, MIT Press, Cambridge, 1984.

⁶ Ibidem, p. 283.

In addition, added to the report was an appendix on systems of social relationships in the United States, in the United Kingdom and in West Germany - where the authors demonstrated that the German system was ensuring the competitiveness of national industry even as it was maintaining a high level of wages. Moreover, it was recognised that the German system was evolving independently of Japanese standards – despite the fact that this is exactly what was being predicted in the rest of the report ⁷.

The GERPISA on the other hand adopted the principle of studying one theme per year. The topics chosen were, in order, internationalisation, automation and agreements amongst carmakers - all of these being operations that many firms hoped could help with their crisis exit strategies. However, before any in-depth discussion on these themes had been carried out, the GERPISA began to publish, starting in 1983, a book in a collection entitled "Repères". This was not an attempt to formulate a diagnosis of the automobile system – instead, it involved a presentation of those issues that had become crucial to the global automotive industry ⁸. Much delayed, the communications that had been issued during the Work days were published in documents entitled “Actes du Gerpisa” ⁹. The viewpoints expressed therein were far from homogenous. However, the network’s researchers were beginning to share a methodological approach that was simple but essential, and which was going to become very important in the history of the GERPISA. This involved an attempt to verify within which industrial trajectories, and/or in which environments, formally similar phenomena were taking place. This ultimately led to the conclusion that what these phenomena were expressing was the existence of a new shared reality.

Whatever opinion one can have of the final message, it is nevertheless remarkable that the MIT team did meet the goals that it had set for itself. Its diagnostic was very complete, well argued and underpinned by a great deal of data. As for the GERPISA, the group had now become more than a simple discussion seminar. Co-operative work had been initiated and a dynamic of collective reflection triggered ¹⁰.

Crisis entry and exit, 1986-1990

Far from helping them to find a way out of the crisis, the carmakers' actions precipitated a deeper recession. With few exceptions, all of the American and European manufacturers experienced a financial crisis between 1979 and 1984. Some of the authors of *The Future of Automobile* began to worry, feeling that carmakers were learning little from their Japanese competitors and spending too much energy on finding

⁷ Kurt Doshe, Ulrich Jurgens, Tomas Malsch., members of the Automobile Programmeme’s German team also published (being the first to do so) an article in *Politics and Society*, n°2, 1985, entitled: "From Fordism to Toyotism? The social organisation of labour process in the Japanese automobile industry".

⁸ Written by three of its members, the text had been the subject of much debate. Géraldine de Bonnafos, Jean Jacques Chanaron, Laurent de Mautort, *L’industrie automobile*, Repères, La Découverte, 1983.

⁹ “L’internationalisation de l’industrie automobile” *Actes du GERPISA* n°1 (in Cahier IREP-Développement n°6), 1984. “Travail et automatisation dans l’industrie automobile” *Actes du GERPISA*, n°2, IREP-Développement, 1986. “Les accords entre constructeurs automobiles” *Actes du GERPISA*, n°3, in Cahiers de recherche du GIP Mutations Industrielles, n°19-20, 1988.

¹⁰ Some of the network’s members were even asked to fulfil an "expert’s role" during a vast internal reflexion process carried out jointly by Renault’s management team and labour unions between 1981 and 1983, under the name of MIDES (acronym, Industrial Mutations and Economic and Social Dynamics).

ways of protecting themselves. The authors felt at the time that the best thing that they could do would be to undertake a detailed study of Japanese methods and demonstrate their efficiency with respect to older Western methods of "mass production".

The GERPISA on the other hand considered the firms' behaviour as attempts to find a way out of the crisis, and felt that the meaning and significance of these actions could be better explained if seen in light of the previous trajectories, and the crisis in macroeconomic and social regulations, that had marked the post-war boom years. The GERPISA then decided to study the history of the principal automobile firms since the 1950s.

IMVP, from diagnostics to solutions, from a network of equals to a network of subcontracting

To demonstrate Japanese superiority, it was necessary to undertake an in-depth and rigorous field survey covering worldwide automobile plant production techniques and performances. To achieve this, the MIT team obtained substantial funding and unreserved support from all of the carmakers. The decentralised organisation of the Automobile Programme, with its occasionally agitated discussion forums and diverging orientations, was no longer acceptable. It was necessary to have a coherent leadership that pursued a clear and shared objective ¹¹. This gave birth to what would be called the IMVP (International Motor Vehicle Programme).

The idea of carrying out a rigorous comparison of productivity in the automobile sector's assembly plants was attractive to the carmakers who saw this as a means of measuring themselves in terms of the global (and above all Japanese) average. This led to a *benchmarking* craze. The MIT team was able to find 5 million dollars in funding ¹². From a network of equals working under the accepted authority of the project's initiators, the IMVP became a subcontractor's network led by the team that had the responsibility for collecting funds. 90 automobile assembly plants in 17 countries were studied ¹³. 116 monographs were completed. Never before in any sector of activity had such a large survey been accomplished.

The result was a book entitled *The Machine that Changed the World* ¹⁴. The survey revealed that in 1988-89 a considerable gap in productivity and quality existed between the Japanese firms' plants (whatever the host country) and all the others. The book's authors stated that this gap in favour of the Japanese could be attributed to an industrial model that, in their opinion, this country had invented. They said that this model was

¹¹ There was a change in leadership at the IMVP. Now in charge were Daniel Roos and James Womack from MIT, and Daniel Jones from the University of Cardiff (Wales). The network was decreased to 55 members (almost three times fewer than during the previous programme), including 32 Americans – 27 of whom came from MIT.

¹² 36 firms (including Renault and PSA) and private and public sector organisations gave financial support to the programme. IMVP's leadership limited each contributor to 5% of the total, or \$140,000 over four years. The monies were deposited in a single account to avoid any of the contributors' allocating their funds to one particular topic.

¹³ In addition to its study of productivity (a methodology developed in collaboration with the carmakers), the book also studied production quality, the utilisation of space, stocks, automation levels, the workforce, its training levels, employee participation, etc.

¹⁴ James Womack, Daniel Jones, Daniel Roos, *The Machine that Changed the World*, Rawson Associates, New York, 1990.

essentially characterised by a systematic attempt by employees themselves to reduce waste (time, space, tools, materials, energy, capital, etc.). Employees, in seeking out and dealing with the primary causes of this waste, found a new meaning for their work and were able to develop their competencies whilst ensuring durable competitiveness for their firm, their jobs and customer satisfaction.

This model supposedly resolved both the crisis of work and the crisis of profitability. It would enable firms to reduce their costs, increase quality, diversify their offer and renew their profitability without having to place all of their faith in economies of scale that were beginning difficult to achieve in an environment of slowly growing demand, ferocious competition and ever-increasing customer expectations. To signify that this model could be transplanted and to express its underlying spirit, the authors did not call it a "Japanese" model - rather, they called it "lean production". Just as "mass production" had transformed the world, "lean production" was supposedly the harbinger of a new era.¹⁵ The book was not only a worldwide best seller translated in nearly 30 countries, but it remained a seminal work for many firms and social sciences.

GERPISA, from a seminar to a co-operative programme

In 1985, GERPISA became aware of the MIT team's intention of launching a new programme, and without knowing the exact theme or system of implementation, it contacted the IMVP's leaders to discuss a possible collaboration. This approach was deemed without interest by this latter group, an attitude that would remain unchanged for several years to come. In the mean time, the GERPISA had experienced a large increase in membership.¹⁶ However, a proper study of the corporate sector requires not only the regular participation of all concerned, but also the involvement of overseas researchers (and the payment of their travel costs). These funds were provided by the PIRTEM-CNRS, which allocated 50,000 French francs to the GERPISA over a two-year period¹⁷.

Around 15 carmakers were studied via a list of questions that had been jointly determined beforehand. The theory of Fordist regulation, and the crisis thereof, were the theories that most closely matched the preoccupations underling the GERPISA's approach¹⁸. The network's members worked hard to verify the various elements

¹⁵ "During the course of these studies, we have become convinced that lean production principles can be applied in the same manner, whatever the industrial sector, whatever the geographic area. We are also convinced that the shift towards lean production will have a profound effect on human society – and in fact, that it might simply change our vision of the world". (N.T. – paraphrased, i.e., back-translated from the French translation of) James Womack, Daniel Jones, Daniel Roos, *La machine qui... op. cité*, p 20.

¹⁶ The GERPISA had begun to be well known since the publication of "Repères". In particular, it was strengthened by the arrival of researchers from Bordeaux, Marie-Claude Bergouignan, Gérard Bordenave and Yannick Lung, whose studies on Ford and on regional economics were of great value. It was also reinforced by the arrival of management researchers, notably Christophe Midler of CRG.

¹⁷ This is what enabled the group to benefit from the collaboration of Harry Katz from the University of Cornell, regarding American carmakers; of Koichi Shimokawa of the University Hosei, regarding Japanese carmakers; of Anne Davies regarding Austin-Rover; and of Bruce Macfarlane regarding Volkswagen and Daimler-Benz. Harry Katz and Koichi Shimokawa were IMVP members at the time.

¹⁸ In addition, this was largely based on cases from the automotive sector, starting with its signature example: Fordism.

contained therein ¹⁹. They discovered that the firms' postwar boom years had in fact been characterised not by "Fordism" but by "Sloanism" – and that this had not had lead to the elimination of "specialist" carmakers (particularly not in Europe). Corporate employment relationships could diverge from national labour relationships, as long as they weren't contradictory in nature. In the industrialised countries, particularly in the United Kingdom, not all national labour relationships were "Fordist" in nature. The firms that were in crisis had found themselves in this situation for a variety of different reasons. The slowdown and even drop in productivity that was taking place stemmed less from the productive system's limitations per se than from the transition to a renewal type of demand; the recent "rigidification" in employment conditions; the explosion of administrative and commercial staff numbers, etc. Despite their ostensible similarities, the changes that were being implemented by those firms who had previously been in a state of crisis did not all seem to go in the same direction – and above all, they were far from being definitive in nature.

The traditional field survey (ad hoc in nature, focused on a specific topic and only sporadically authorised by the firm it covered) no longer sufficed as a means of tracking these developments. It became necessary to survey continuously, and to go to the very heart of current initiatives and internal discussions. Numerous researchers, particularly from the GERPISA, tried to achieve this level of integration. The latter half of the 1980s gave them a rare opportunity. Several firms, casting about for solutions, decided that it was in their interest to be able to benefit from outside monitoring and vision, hoping this would help them to think through the transformations they were about to implement ²⁰. Hence a second programme (1987-1988), still with the support of the PIRTTEM-CNRS, aimed at describing the changes that were taking place inside of firms – and how these changes were being managed ²¹. The report that came out of this programme specifically analysed changes in the fields of design, supplier relationships and productive organisations. It discovered that towards the late 1980s, firms were seeking to render these measures coherent with one another. Were they going to converge towards a single productive model – or were they heading off in different directions? GERPISA's members did not all have the same answer to this question ²².

¹⁹ Michel Freyssenet (dir.), *Pertinence et limites de la notion de rapport salarial fordiste dans le cas du secteur automobile*, GERPISA, EHESS, 1987, 2 volumes.

²⁰ Management researchers (notably from the CRG and from the CGS) were the first in France to reach this level of integration. A confirmed methodology, training in management and an engineer's background could translate into the researcher's being rapidly integrated and trusted. For sociologists and economists, things were very different. The creation in late 1985 of the GIP Mutations Industrielles, which the CNRS put me in charge of, nevertheless enabled several members of this latter group to get into similar positions. Their integration, and the investigative methods they used, were subject to a great deal of discussion. The history of these episodes, amongst many others, can be found in a book by Anne Sophie Perriaux., *Renault et les sciences sociales, 1948-1991*, Seli Arslan, Paris, 1999.

²¹ Géraldine de Bonnafos and Christophe Midler (dir.) were put in charge of this second programme, *Change management decision processes in the automotive sector*. GERPISA, EHESS, 1989. Elsewhere, co-operative work that had begun earlier was beginning to bear fruit, notably: Jean-Jacques Chanaron (dir.), *Annuaire Statistique de l'Automobile. L'industrie et les salariés de l'automobile en chiffres. Séries longues*, GERPISA, 1987.

²² There were an increasing number of publications on Post-taylorism or on Post-fordism. Several major research projects were completed, some of which involved GERPISA members: notably H. Jacot (dir.), *Du fordisme au toyotisme? Les voies de la modernisation du système automobile en France et au Japon*, La Documentation française, Paris, 1990. The reflection was continued at a number of colloquiums organised by (or featuring the participation of) GERPISA members. This included in particular a Franco-

This could have remained a subject of contention for quite some while had we not found a way of resolving it, involving the use of a systematic comparative study.

GERPISA

Permanent Group for the Study of the Automobile Industry and its Employees
(EHESS Paris, Université d'Evry)

Direction of GERPISA

1981-1986 Michel Freyssenet (sociologist, CNRS), Patrick Fridenson (historian, EHESS)

1987-1990, Géraldine de Bonnafos (economist, CEREQ), Christophe Midler (management, CNRS)

1991-2000, Michel Freyssenet, Patrick Fridenson

2001-2004, Patrick Fridenson, Yannick Lung (economist, Bordeaux IV), Michel Freyssenet

Scientific Responsibles of Programmes

"Crisis of the Automobile industry", 1985-1986, Michel Freyssenet

"Change Management Decision Processes in the Automotive Sector", 1987-1988, Géraldine de Bonnafos, Christophe Midler

"Emergence of New Industrial Models", 1993-1996, Robert Boyer (economist, CEPREMAP, CNRS, EHESS), Michel Freyssenet

"Automobile Industry Between Globalisation and Regionalisation", 1997-2000, Michel Freyssenet, Yannick Lung

"Coordination of Competencies in the Regional Automotive Systems", 2001-2003, Yannick Lung;

International Steering Committee of Programmes 1993-2003

Annie Beretti (engineer, Innovation Department, PSA), Robert Boyer (economist, CEPREMAP-CNRS-EHESS, Paris) Juan José Castillo (sociologist, University Complutense, Madrid) Jorge Carrillo (sociologist, Colegio de la Frontera Norte, Mexico), Jean-Jacques Chanaron (economist, CNRS, Lyon), Elsie Charron (sociologist, CNRS, Paris), Jean-Pierre Durand (sociologist, University of Evry), Michel Freyssenet (sociologist, CNRS, Paris), Patrick Fridenson (historian, EHESS, Paris), Takairo Fujimoto (management, University of Tokyo), John Humphrey (sociologist, University of Sussex), Bruno Jetin (economist, University Paris XIII), Ulrich Jurgens (sociologist, WZB, Berlin), Yveline Lecler (economist, MRASH/IAO, Lyon), Yannick Lung (economist, University of Bordeaux IV), Jean-Claude Monnet (sociologist, Research

Brazilian conference called "Concerning the Japanese model", organised Helena Hirata within the framework of the IRESCO on 1 and 3 February 1990; the Study Day "A decade of modernisation. which socio-productive models?", GIP Mutations Industrielles, 18 January 1991; the international research seminars that took place on 25 June 1991 and on 20 June 1992 on "Employment and industrial relations in Japan", by Henri Nadel; the 6th Franco-Japanese economic colloquium, "Employment relationship and accumulation regime in Japan. Emergence, originalities and prospects. initial yardsticks", bringing regulationist economists from both countries to Grenoble on 10-12 October 1991; the International Symposium "Realities and the fiction of a new productive model" held in 1992 at the behest of Jean-Pierre Durand within the confines of the Université de Rouen.

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Department , Renault), Mario Sergio Salerno (Production Engineering, Université de Sao Paolo), Koichi Shimizu (economist, University of Okayama), Koichi Shimokawa (economist, Université Hosei, Tokyo), Paul Stewart (sociologist, University of Bristol), Steve Tolliday (historian, University of Leeds), Rob Van Tulder (economist, University Erasmus, Rotterdam), Giuseppe Volpato (economist, University Ca'Foscari de Venise), Karel Williams (economist, University Victoria, Manchester).

GERPISA international network.

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International success on one hand, mobilisation on the other

The incredible success of MIT's book was certainly largely due to prevailing circumstances. Nevertheless, corporate leaders were not the only ones to fall to its charms. The book convinced a large majority of researchers in social sciences for a whole variety of reasons. Once people consider that industrial history is traversed by a series of major phases, and that each is characterised by a particular productive paradigm ("quasi craft production", "mass production"), it is only logical that a new paradigm can emerge, and that this could effectively be "lean production". The model being presented was striking because of its coherency with many aspects of corporate life. It seemed perfectly adapted to the new conditions of a global market that was supposedly beginning to unify - and many felt that it could resolve the crisis of labour. Its ostensible superiority seemed to be proved by the findings of a global survey that had been carried out rigorously; and by the unquestionable success of Japanese firms.

Next to this, GERPISA's reports seemed like poor cousins! Only a few dozen issues had been published, and they provided no explanation purporting to be definitive. Yet during this period, GERPISA's members were accumulating a decisive experience. They were able to affirm that it was possible to carry out a research programme over a period of several years, and in a co-operative manner, despite disciplinary and theoretical differences - as long as the research subject was scientifically and "politically" mobilising; the indispensable conceptual clarifications well-prepared; and the disagreement arbitration approach shared by all. Moreover, several GERPISA members were also able to acquire an understanding of corporate change processes, and this protected them from making overly hasty generalisations.

More than one productive model? 1991-1995

For proponents of the "lean production" thesis it was paramount to discover how quickly American and European firms were going to adopt the new productive model. The IMVP's directors pursued separate paths towards this end. Womack and Jones organised corporate consultancy activities in addition to their ongoing university responsibilities. Roos continued to run the IMVP, with Charles Fine arriving shortly thereafter to help him. The automakers, who wanted to find out whether the actions they were taking would ultimately reduce the differentials in their respective

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performances, continued to support the IMVP. Funded by the various comparative studies it was undertaking, the network was able to explore new topics. One of these was the partnership between carmakers and suppliers, which came to be seen as one of the main constituents of the new productive model. A decision was then made to extend this analysis to the entire automobile branch.

The success of the "lean production" thesis was an extremely useful weathervane for the GERPISA. Unless someone reacted to this thesis, it would dominate many observers' reasoning for years to come. And yet, the school of thought had a great many weaknesses. For example, it assessed productivity and quality instantaneously, that is at a given time t , whereas in reality there had already been a certain decoupling in the business cycles that affected the world's three main poles of automobile production. Moreover, there was no correlation between firms' productivity and quality-related performances and their financial results. In addition, at no time in the past had there ever been just one single productive model. A series of abusive simplifications had fused Taylorism, Fordism and Sloanism into a unitary concept of mass production - whereas in reality, these systems were very different from one another in certain very essential areas. Ford's experiences outside of the United States between the wars had all been negative, due to the absence of the sort of conditions that enable mass consumption. This historical fact highlights the importance of macroeconomic and societal conditions in corporate performance. Several Japanese colleagues stressed the enormous differences between Japanese firms. Above all, they were concerned about the bursting of Japan's speculative bubble, as the effects were already beginning to be felt by the local economy.

For all of these reasons, opposition to the "lean production" thesis seemed both possible and necessary. Concerned parties began to meet up so as to discuss and summarise the many historical analyses and field surveys that had been carried out across the world on the automobile sector - the purpose being to enrich them with specific projects wherever necessary. It soon became apparent that the MIT's thesis could be replaced by another one. However, to achieve this, the GERPISA had to become an international network; acquire new competencies (especially in the field of macroeconomics); build a dedicated and available team; organise serious programmes and agendas; find the necessary financial and material resources; and get carmakers involved.

The IMVP's instrumentalisation by researchers and firms versus the GERPISA's systematisation of its experiences

A new development, one that would continue to grow throughout the 1990s, started to become apparent at the IMVP. The new project only had two goals: to monitor the diffusion of "lean production"; and to complete its description by integrating suppliers under its auspices. As such, it was clearly less ambitious than its predecessor had been. Moreover, the form of the final product remained relatively opaque. These were two diverging tendencies, but they did have one common characteristic - the de facto instrumentalisation of the IMVP. The network was torn between firms who were primarily interested in developing benchmarking (and who were only interested in the findings that were related to this activity), and researchers (working as subcontractors) who were finding it increasingly easy to impose their research topics on a new and less authoritarian management team.

Freyssenet M., **IMVP and GERPISA's parallel history. A study of two forms of international co-operation in social sciences.** First period, *La Lettre du GERPISA*, mars 2001 (n°150), pp 3-12. Second period, *La Lettre du GERPISA*, avril 2001 (n°151), pp 3-12. Éditions numériques, gerpisa.univ-evry.fr, 2001, Ko; freyssenet.com, 2007, 296 Ko, ISSN 7116-0941.

The GERPISA's plans created a great deal of interest, both in France and abroad.²³ Robert Boyer immediately agreed to help run the scientific side of the network. Researchers who disagreed with one or the other aspect of the "lean production" thesis, or who were disappointed by the form of that co-operation that was taking place within the IMVP, were enthusiastic about participating ²⁴. A widespread opposition group began to take shape, uniting a variety of constituencies: those who saw the "new productive model" as nothing more than a variant of the old model; those who considered that there had always been a plurality of models; those who contested the very idea that there is such a thing as a model; and those who agreed with the idea of "lean production", but who felt that its variants were based on specific national environments. It was no easy task building a programme that was coherent for such a wide range of researchers, especially given the variety of disciplines, national backgrounds and scientific traditions that were involved.

The GERPISA's past experience was a precious guide. Groundwork in conceptual clarification made it possible to decide upon what was to become the central issue: whether one or several productive model(s) was/were emerging ²⁵. To identify the model(s), a historical and structural approach was chosen: historical analysis was to be used in an attempt to become familiar with the problems that had been at the origin of the firms' transformations, and to understand the real meaning of these changes above and beyond their ostensible similarities or differences; and structural analysis was to be used to help identify the process by which solutions are selected, in light of their compatibility within a given environment.

Four international workgroups were assembled, an annual conference organised, and a 20 strong international management committee was created. The latter was composed of the workgroup leaders, and it also included two French car company representatives ²⁶. The goal was to have each group publish a book, and to get the programme's initiators (or the international committee, if collective discussions could be extended far enough) to produce a summative volume. Participants adapted their personal productions, and drew on their own research credits, so as to contribute to the programme. The GERPISA found financial and material resources to cover its co-

²³ By the end of its initial international programme, the GERPISA had assembled nearly 200 researchers from 20 different countries.

²⁴ In 1993 an attempt was again made to structure an official relationship with the IMVP. This was unsuccessful as previous attempts had been. Nevertheless, links were set up with active IMVP members during the Conferences that Ulrich Jurgens, Takahiro Fujimoto and Koichi Shimokawa organised in Berlin in 1992 and in Tokyo in 1993: "Assembly Automation and Work Organisation". Several IMVP researchers asked at the time whether they could participate in GERPISA projects whilst continuing to work with the IMVP.

²⁵ The question as to whether the new models simply extended, in other forms, the split between conception and execution, or to the contrary whether they were starting to reverse this allegedly characteristic feature of "mass production", became a sub-topic of the model's (models') characterisations.

²⁶ The « Automakers' trajectories » group was run by Michel Freyssenet, Andrew Mair, Koichi Shimizu, Giuseppe Volpato, The « Transplantation and hybridation of industrial models » group by Robert Boyer, Elsie Charron, Ulrich Jurgens, Steve Tolliday, the « Variety and productive flexibility » group by Jean Jacques Chanaron, Takahiro Fujimoto, Yannick Lung, Dan Raff, the « Groupwork and employment relationship » group by Juan José Castillo, Jean Pierre Durand and Paul Stewart. Annie Beretti attended on behalf of PSA, with Jean Claude Monnet representing Renault.

ordination costs. These included the organisation of meetings and of international conferences, a permanent liaison between members (a bilingual monthly newsletter, a dedicated Internet server, a quarterly review), a range of services from which all members could benefit (bibliography, circulation of articles members had published, reading abstracts), publications and translations ²⁷.

At the end of their programmes, neither the IMVP nor the GERPISA had succeeded in compiling a publishable product. But the reasons for these relative failures were very different. The IMVP's new surveys revealed the heterogeneous nature of automakers' performances in each of the world's three production poles, such that Japanese firms' performances were more distinct from each other's than from American or European firms. What had happened? Had certain Japanese firms neglected the rules of "lean production" and American and European firms begun to apply them? Observable phenomena did not corroborate this sort of conclusion. Several active IMVP members began to feel unsure of themselves.

Concomitantly, GERPISA production was leading to a number of significant discoveries. Even as IMVP was presenting "lean production" as a *one best way* for a new era, the emblematic firm for this model, Toyota, was experiencing a serious labour crisis that was forcing it to make profound changes in its production system - and inducing it to draw inspiration from some of the socio-technical innovations that European carmakers such as Volvo and Mercedes had developed.

The Toyota and the Honda production systems were not only different from one another, they were fundamentally opposed on a certain number of points. Moreover, they were unique in the Japanese automotive sector. "Lean production" appeared to be an unjustified amalgamation of these two systems. Moreover, it stated, inaccurately, that it had generalised to all Japanese firms. Nissan for example had never succeeded in putting together a coherent system.

Only three automakers had remained profitable over the long run: Toyota, Honda but also Volkswagen, which still successfully embodied the old Sloanian model which many observers thought had become obsolete. As the programme concluded, the participants jointly came to the conclusion that in the future there would probably still be more than one industrial model that could perform with efficiency. Four publications were to be prepared, each with its own emphasis, to explain this plurality.

This work gave birth to the idea that productive models are born out of sometimes unintentional processes that can lead to the creation of a coherent network of practices which can be financial, technical, organisational, managerial, commercial and social in nature - as long as such processes are compatible with their economic and social environment. As such, corporate performance is predicated on the establishment of internal coherency and external compatibility.

²⁷ It became possible to set up an administrative team, comprising a secretary and two research engineers, thanks to the resources that the GERPISA received from the University of Évry and from the (French) Ministry of National Education and Research. The GERPISA has been a "host team" since 1992. Additional financial and material support were received from the European Union (DG XII, Human capital and mobility programme), from the French Automakers' Committee, and from PSA and Renault. The average annual budget during the initial programme was 500.000 FF. In 1991, Michel Freyssenet and Patrick Fridenson took over the management of GERPISA, with Robert Boyer and Michel Freyssenet were in charge of the programme's scientific projects.

Strengthened by these findings, the GERPISA's members felt that they had faced the intellectual challenge raised by the MIT's seminal book.²⁸ However, they had underestimated the time they would need to finish writing and publishing their texts, and the international management committee decided to launch a new programme immediately²⁹.

It also became clear that it would be difficult to draw any further shared conclusions, above all ones that could describe the models exactly. Yet this was indispensable – otherwise it would be difficult to devise a representation of industry history capable of replacing the MIT's. Everyone agreed that the programme leaders had to work on this problem.

History decides, 1996-2000

In the mid-1990s, globalisation forced itself into the public eye. It was often presented as the logical extension of "lean production". The IMVP added this topic to a programme it entitled "the extended enterprise", which was later further enriched by the addition of the theme of modularisation.

For the GERPISA, the issue of globalisation offered a number of advantages. The topic seemed to be intellectually and "politically" motivating; it provided continuity with the network's preceding topic and thus facilitated the conclusion of the first programme's tasks (seeing as the methodology that had made it possible to detect a multitude of productive models could be easily reused to show the plurality of corporate internationalisation trajectories, as well as firms' scenarios for a recomposed world).

The IMVP attempts to renovate its theories while the GERPISA devises a new scheme for analysing industrial historical

The diversification of the IMVP's themes lead to the creation of a number of increasingly independent subgroups. IMVP members suggested that the extended enterprise and modularisation themes be linked to a thesis they called "Dellism", drawn from the name of a computer maker who assembles PC's on demand and delivers them to its customers' homes. Modularisation, outsourcing, stock-free assembly upon receipt of the customer's order over the Internet, a flexible workforce and rapid home delivery - all of these were to become the ingredients of a new productive model that was supposed to replace "lean production", or at least become an extension for it. This

²⁸ The conference that Giuseppe Volpato organised in October 1995 at the University Ca' Foscari in Venice, "Manufacturing systems and organisational paradigm in automobile industry: international patterns of diffusion", was the first opportunity for discussions on the IMVP's and GERPISA's respective findings to be held at a neutral location; Anna Comacchio, Giuseppe Volpato, Arnaldo Camuffo (eds.), *Automation in Automotive Industries. Recent Developments*, Springer, Berlin, 1999.

²⁹ The preceding programme had been extremely demanding for all concerned. Most participants were university staff members who did not have enough free time to draft in a timely fashion the original texts that were required. Hence the proposal that came up in the International committee, suggesting that GERPISA member research topics be combined into a series of themes that could revolve around a single central focus. It remains the self-deterministic option prevailed, with people feeling that the experience they would acquire would allow them to save time.

initiative would end up by marginalising the topic of globalisation, which in the end did not give birth to any publications.

After a time of trial and error, the GERPISA's second international programme was structured into two groups and three phases³⁰. The findings of the first programme revealed that the success or failure of firms' internationalisation drives depended on the compatibility between their model (or the model that they were trying to adopt) and the market and labour conditions in the various spaces they were moving into. Hence two workgroups: one tracing firms' internationalisation trajectories and their coherency with the model they embodied or were trying to embody; the other studying the spaces' trajectory in terms of their international insertion and their growth mode. After a shared exploratory phase, whose aim was to complete the indispensable conceptual clarification and to question the globalisation thesis, the two groups began to work in parallel before merging to analyse the compatibilities and adjustments between a form's trajectories and the spaces' trajectories.

Their conclusions stressed the primacy of regionalisation over globalisation for automobile industry firms; the re-heterogenisation of spaces instead of their homogenisation; and the reversibility of the emerging countries' growth, and of their automobile markets.

At the same time, progress was being made in the development of a thesis that provided an alternative to the MIT's - but it was slow going. The problem was that this new thesis was to become a tool for thinking about diversity and the renewal of diversity, yet these factors had to be formulated in terms that could be appropriated beyond a small circle of specialists. The formula that was chosen as the best way of providing a succinct expression of this line of thinking (*The World That Changed the Matching*) was purely and simply an inversion of the MIT's statement. It had in fact become apparent that there were two basic conditions underlying firms' lasting (albeit not unlimited) profitability.

The first was the relevancy of their profit strategy to national growth modes (it is no use betting on economies of scale if the growth mode does not include a nationally coordinated and moderately hierarchised distribution of national income - and it is no use betting on conceptual innovation if the growth mode does not allow, via a “competitive” distribution of national income, for new social strata with new expectations to emerge).

The second condition was that an “enterprise government compromise” has to be built between a firm's main actors so that its product policy, productive organisation and employment relationship can respond, in a manner that is coherent and acceptable to all parties, to the requirements of the profit strategy that has been chosen (it is no use thinking about making durable profits by launching conceptually innovative products in the absence of financial independence, or if employees' responsiveness has not been negotiated - and it is no use continuing to cut costs if jobs and careers are not guaranteed in all circumstances).

³⁰ Yannick Lung (Bordeaux IV) and I were put in charge of the scientific side of this second programme. As we had not received a new European contract, the average annual budget dropped to 300.000 FF. Participants paid for themselves if they wanted to attend the annual conference. The co-authors of a book each paid for their own translations. Nevertheless, the number of members in the network continued to rise.

This is why there are no universal or national models - instead there are a limited number of productive models that are personified by a certain number of firms. These are models that are capable of being transplanted, of hybridising, or of reappearing - as long as the conditions that render them feasible and viable are being met. Hence the identification and characterisation throughout the 20th-century of at least 8 national modes of growth, 6 profit strategies and 6 productive models. Of course, the choice of a mode of growth, profit strategy and productive model is far from being a free one. It results from a largely unintentional process in which actors sometimes become aware of the fact that they can create a system, and decide to do whatever they can to ensure that this actually happens - for reasons that are individual, and for a period of time that they cannot usually control.

Manifestations of Japanese diversity and rapprochement between the IMVP and the GERPISA

The IMVP's researchers published their texts separately ³¹. In 1998, the network's director, Charles H. Fine, integrated the IMVP's findings into an overall analysis of the automotive branch ³². He developed two ideas: that a firm's competitive advantage is always temporary; and that it resides in the firm's capacity to concentrate those competencies that will enable it to advantageously control the value being produced in its industrial branch.

At the same time, GERPISA books began to be published. In addition to those that had been written in English (and for two of them, in French) by the first programme's workgroups, now there were two "Repères", one on Toyotism, the other on productive models. These works encapsulated the GERPISA's main thesis. Moreover, the second programme's first book was published simultaneously in Great Britain and in the United States. At present, three other books are in preparation – and the overall summary of the first and second programmes is currently awaiting publication.

The way that things have actually turned out ultimately confirmed the findings that the GERPISA had developed. The prolonged period of stagnation from which the Japanese economy has been suffering, plus the Asian crisis, have revealed the virtual bankruptcy of several Japanese carmakers (forced to agree to capital-intensive alliances with European and American carmakers), as well as the way in which the sudden and durable reversal of growth patterns in certain so-called emerging countries has ended up postponing globalisation's forward march. Ten years after *The Machine that Changed the World*, it was appropriate for the GERPISA to adopt in June 2000, for its Eighth international conference, the theme of *The World that Changed the Machine*; and to present its summative arguments on this occasion ³³. Guests included automakers from

³¹ In particular, Thomas Kochan, Russel Lansbury, John Paul MacDuffie, *After lean production. Evolving Employment Practices in the World Auto Industry*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1996.

Michael Cusumano, Kentaro Nobeoka, *Thinking Beyond Lean, How Multi-Project Management is Transforming Product Development at Toyota and Other Companies*, The Free Press, New York, 1998.

³² Charles H. Fine, *Clockspeed. Winning Industry Control in the Age of Temporary Advantage*, Perseus Book, Massachusetts, 1998.

³³ A summative article written by Robert Boyer and Michel Freyssenet, *Le monde qui a changé la machine, une nouvelle approche des modèles productifs*, is in the process of being published by magazines in 7 countries. In 2001, it had already appeared in Germany (Industrielle Beziehung), Spain

the world's three main production poles, labour union representatives, senior civil servants and researchers – all of whom were given an opportunity to react to the findings being presented.

Several factors contributed to this rapprochement between the IMVP and the GERPISA: changes in people's (including sponsors') frame of mind; the publication by Anglo-American editors of a whole slew of GERPISA books; and the way in which historical changes had confirmed some of its findings. Koichi Shimokawa, an active participant in both networks, took it upon himself to ensure that after 20 years of working in parallel official ties were finally set up between the two organisations. In 1999 it was not only agreed that the two networks' leaders would take part in their respective annual conferences, but that their findings could be presented for discussion on such occasions. In early 2001, the two networks continued along these same lines. The IMVP veered towards the study of *E-Business* and its links to the automobile industry³⁴. The GERPISA set off on its third programme, under the leadership of Yannick Lung, the theme being "The coordination of competencies in regional automotive systems". It is also benefitting from renewed European Union support³⁵.

Books from First and Second Research Programmes of GERPISA

Published

Michel Freyssenet, Andrew Mair, Koichi Shimizu, Giuseppe Volpato (eds.), *One Best Way? Trajectories and Industrial Models of the World's Automobile Producers*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1998.

Robert Boyer, Elsie Charron, Ulrich Jürgens, Steve Tolliday (eds.), *Between Imitation and Innovation. The Transfer and Hybridization of Productive Models in the International Automobile Industry*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1998.

Jean Pierre Durand, Paul Stewart, Juan José Castillo (eds.), *Teamwork in the Automobile Industry. Radical Change or Passing Fashion*, Macmillan, Londres, 1999.

Yannick Lung, Jean Jacques Chanaron, Takahiro Fujimoto, Daniel Raff (eds.), *Coping with Variety : Product Variety and Production Organization in the World Automobile Industry*, Ashgate, Aldershot, 1999.

Koichi Shimizu, *Le Toyotisme*, Repères, La Découverte, Paris, 1999.

Robert Boyer, Michel Freyssenet, *Les modèles productifs*, La Découverte, Paris, 2000

John Humphrey, Yveline Lecler, Mario Sergio Salerno (eds), *Global Strategies and Local Realities: The Auto industry in Emerging Markets*, Macmillan, Basingstoke, et St Martin's Press, New York, 2000.

(Sociologia del Trabajo), Brazil (Nexos economicos), Italy (Economia e Politica Industriale), Japan (Keizai Seminar).

³⁴ The IMVP has been co-directed since 2000 by Charles Fine, Professor at the Sloan Management School; and by John Paul MacDuffie, Professor the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School

³⁵ The GERPISA has received a 2 million FF 3-year contract as part of Europe's 5th programme. Today the network brings together nearly 350 members from 29 different countries. 600 copies of a bilingual 16 page newsletter entitled *La Lettre du GERPISA* are printed every month (there have been around 150 issues so far). Another publication is trimestrial the « *Actes du GERPISA* ». Its 10th international conference will be held on 6-7-8 June 2002, at the Palais du Luxembourg in Paris.

Freyssenet M., **IMVP and GERPISA's parallel history. A study of two forms of international co-operation in social sciences.** First period, *La Lettre du GERPISA*, mars 2001 (n°150), pp 3-12. Second period, *La Lettre du GERPISA*, avril 2001 (n°151), pp 3-12. Éditions numériques, gerpisa.univ-evry.fr, 2001, Ko; freyssenet.com, 2007, 296 Ko, ISSN 7116-0941.

Forthcoming

Robert Boyer, Michel Freyssenet, *The World that Changed the Machine*.

Michel Freyssenet, Koichi Shimizu, Giuseppe Volpato (eds), *Towards the Globalization of Automobile Industry Firms?*

Jorge Carillo, Yannick Lung, Rob Van Tulder (eds), *Cars...Carriers of Regionalism ?*

Elsie Charron, Paul Stewart (eds), *Work and Employment Relations in Automobile Internationalized Firms*.

Conclusion

The two co-operative experiences I have presented both demonstrated their ability to engender effects and results that would be unattainable if we were to simply juxtapose individual research productions and their associated discussions. Today no sector of activity has been as thoroughly analysed as the automotive sector - no other has been subjected to such highly sophisticated theoretical propositions that attempt to apprehend its development. These experiences have directly or indirectly lead to an impressive amount of work and number of publications. They have shaped a rather unusual area of international debate; enabled an extremely rapid "socialisation" of many doctoral students' international research projects; made it possible to set up long-lasting relationships with social actors; and allowed for useful reflection on forms of co-operation in social science.

The form of co-operation that the IMVP developed can be described as market-oriented. Its logical extension would involve an emergence of knowledge entrepreneurs who receive monies from clients expecting answers to research questions they ask, and who thus want to see co-operation between private individual researchers deprived of any other type of financial resource. This may well be a neo-liberal version of research. The fact that it has been unable to materialise in the field of social sciences indicates that it is an improbable scenario. For now, the customary form is a hybrid one, with researchers whose wages are generally paid for by state authorities accepting to become subcontractors for other "entrepreneurial" researchers so as to benefit from extra research credits and to access firms. This form does not automatically infer a single type of content. As we have seen, subcontractor researchers are able to partially instrumentalise the system to their own benefit once it has become partially institutionalised. But one gets the strong feeling that this situation may not last: either the "sponsors" will progressively withdraw, or else the management team will retake control and define, together with the sponsors, the priority research topic and type of final product.

Having faced up to the practical and intellectual challenges set by the IMVP's "lean production" thesis and by its subcontractor form of co-operation, the GERPISA has grown into the world's largest network of automobile sector researchers. The form of co-operation that it represents can be described as one that is based on a co-operation between equals. The conditions that make this possible mainly revolve around the fact that researchers are paid by state authorities; the networks are funded by public budgets;

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and the firms are interested in the fact that the focus is on the actions that they have taken. In and of themselves, these conditions cannot ensure the viability of this form of corporation – far from it, especially now that the individual evaluation of researchers continues to prevail and part-time research has started to come under criticism. For this reason, the present article represents a call for further discussion - a debate we should start sooner rather than later.