

Bob Hancké

# Intelligent Research Design

*a guide for beginning researchers  
in the social sciences*

OXFORD

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**OXFORD**  
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Great Clarendon Street, Oxford ox2 6DP

Oxford University Press is a department of the University of Oxford.  
It furthers the University's objective of excellence in research, scholarship,  
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Oxford New York

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Kuala Lumpur Madrid Melbourne Mexico City Nairobi  
New Delhi Shanghai Taipei Toronto

With offices in

Argentina Austria Brazil Chile Czech Republic France Greece  
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Published in the United States  
by Oxford University Press Inc., New York

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First published 2009

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data  
Data available

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data  
Data available

Typeset by SPI Publisher Services, Pondicherry, India  
Printed in Great Britain  
on acid-free paper by  
Clays Ltd., St Ives Plc

ISBN 978-0-19-957078-2 (Hbk.)  
978-0-19-957079-9 (Pbk.)

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

*To my teachers Steve, Isabela, Stewart, Gunnar, Torben, Orfeo, Keith, Sig, Mark, Michel, Anne, and Pepper—the other students—and to my students for teaching me so much.*

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## □ PREFACE

This short book has a long history. If it has a beginning anywhere, it started when I was involved in a pan-European doctoral training programme in political economy, called the *European Political Economy Infrastructure Consortium* (EPIC), funded by the European Commission under Framework Programme 4. The ideas developed in EPIC formed the basis for the courses on research design that I started to teach at LSE in 2000, were gradually adjusted and, I hope, improved through discussions with students from all over Europe (in London, Florence, Aix-en-Provence, and Budapest), and found their final incarnation while teaching research design and methods at the Central European University (CEU) in Budapest in the autumn of 2007. Without those courses, and especially the students who happily (I hope?) sat through them, this book would not have existed.

Many of the ideas in these pages have been in existence in some form or other as handouts that I wrote for my students', colleagues', and most of all my own benefit: rather than answering questions that appeared with diabolical frequency, I decided, I might as well write them up and distribute them. The winter break 2007–8 offered the three weeks needed to turn that disparate collection of handouts into a book draft. Between days of hiking in the hills of the Corbières, cross-country skiing in the French Pyrenees, and plenty of excellent meals (thanks Mum, Dad, Chris, Marian, David, Niki, Sarah, and Jude!), the first draft of this book slowly took shape. The comparatively light term that I enjoyed as a Visiting Professor at CEU following the winter break provided me with the time to finish and polish that draft. My sincere thanks go to the administrative and academic staff at both LSE and CEU for making professional life easy enough so that this short book could see the light.

My own teachers, especially those during my undergraduate years as a sociology student, might well chuckle if they discovered that I had written a book on research design and methods: I was neither a star in stats (or maths), and while I could hold my ground in empirical research, I never

thought I would end up systematically thinking about research and teaching it. But by looking over the shoulders of my teachers when they thought about research, theirs and mine, I learnt a lot. And nothing forces you to learn as fast as teaching something—exactly what I started about ten years ago. During my own graduate student years at MIT, I slowly got acquainted with bits and pieces of what has found its way into this book, but not much was offered in a sufficiently systematic way that was easily accessible. Hence this short book—a guide on research design for beginning doctoral students. My recommendation is to read it alongside others. There are many good books on research design in university libraries these days. But very few of them address problems from the point of view of starting Ph.D. students, and some (especially King, Keohane, and Verba [1994]), are sometimes unnecessarily dogmatic in defence of their own approach and sideswipes to other views on research. And those books, like Brady and Collier (2004), which collect debates on methodology and research design in the social sciences, can be a little difficult for starting researchers.

This book tries to address these shortcomings. It is organized around the key idea that research is always *constructed* by researchers, from the moment they start until the day they finish. The social, political, and economic world is not out there, waiting to be explored by all who want to, but has to be constructed to make it amenable to research. Understanding the principles underlying this is therefore a necessary skill that has to be acquired along with substantive insights into how the world operates. Think of this book, therefore, as a friend commented, not as a cookbook, but as one that teaches you how to cook.

Despite this methodological relativism, quite a few readers might consider this to be a highly positivist guide to research. Perhaps that is the case, and if confronting strong arguments with strong empirical material counts as positivist, I do not mind pleading guilty. However, my project with this book was to filter out those points in debates over which, in my opinion, there is a reasonable consensus among researchers who are both engaged in empirical research in the social sciences. Many of my intelligent statistically inclined colleagues, for example, long for better case studies and structured comparisons because those allow them to rethink what they are doing. Most of them know and cherish the division of labour between different research traditions—they just wish, quite reasonably

in my opinion, that so-called qualitative research was as methodologically self-conscious and rigorous as good statistical analysis can be. Note that I don't say much about statistical analysis in this book. There are excellent introductions that are much better than anything I could conjure up. At the start of Chapter 2, though, I present a quick glossary of very basic statistical jargon for readers with very little experience, since the chapter required it. Don't be scared: if I can write it, you can understand it. Most basic stats is, in fact, quite simple and intuitive.

The ideas in this book, as well as the examples, reflect my own professional training and preoccupations: comparative business studies and political economy, comparative politics, and European politics. Since I made an effort to keep the examples simple and straightforward, I hope they make sense to students outside these areas. But I know that colleagues who use this book may have better examples from the fields in which they are active as researchers; please send on such good examples. If I use them in a next version (hope springs eternal), I'll make sure their origin is acknowledged. I also borrow insights from several similar books that preceded it. Where the debt is substantial, I have tried to make sure it was acknowledged. But to avoid misunderstandings: without the books and articles by King, Keohane, and Verba (1994), Van Evera (1997), Hall (2004), Bates (1998), Ragin (1987), Levitt (2005) (at least as much a book on research design as on economics, by the way), Shively (2002), Brady and Collier (2004), and Dunleavy (2003), not much of this one could have been written. Where they and I disagree, they should be exonerated; where we agree, they deserve as much credit as I do. Finally, a good friend wrote and published a book on the philosophy of political economy a few months before I finished mine, in which he also addresses many of the deeper philosophical questions I raise in the first chapter. Richard Bronk's *The Romantic Economist* (Cambridge University Press 2009) disagrees in sometimes brilliant ways with me, and in ways that were not always easy to accommodate within the project I had with this book. I recommend it very warmly.

The standard advice for a book or a paper is almost invariably to write the introduction first and rewrite it at the end. For a reader of this book, this is useful advice as well: read the introduction first, and re-read it again at the end. We can then see where we disagree. If I really take seriously the idea that research is a debate, as I say in the first chapter, then this is a voice

in that debate. I expect others to disagree with it; but I also expect students to learn from those disagreements, and make up their mind on their own. As long as they are thinking about their research while they are doing it, this book has served its purpose.

Thanks, without prejudice, for general discussions and on specific topics, comments on sections and on the manuscript as a whole, and for teaching me a lot by asking the right questions at the right time, go to: Nick Barr, Suzanne Berger, Richard Bronk, Steven Casper, Damian Chalmers, Steve Coulter, Tom Cusack, Michel Goyer, Max Freier, Matteo Fumagalli, Peter Hall, Dermot Hodson, Abby Innes, Erin Jenne, Alison Johnston, Jennifer Jackson-Preece, Niki Lacey, Levi Littvay, Richard Locke, Andrew Martin, Martin Rhodes, Andrew Richards, Gwen Sasse, Waltraud Schelkle, Carsten Schneider, David Soskice, Marco Simoni, Gunnar Trumbull, Christa Van Wijnbergen, Jason Wittenberg, and Stewart Wood; to two anonymous reviewers who, with different degrees of constructive criticism, helped me improve the manuscript; to Steve Coulter for help in the final stages of the manuscript; to Dominic Byatt at Oxford University Press for his encouraging support; to many friends and colleagues that I am undoubtedly and unfortunately forgetting here; and to all the students I taught over the years. One group of colleagues deserves special mention—the other residents in the WZB *Kindergarten* (Stewart Wood immortalized the expression in his own doctoral thesis), where I either learnt or realized for the first time that I learnt most of what is written up here. And, as with everything I do, Bruce and Miles were there to keep me company.

Bob Hancké  
Budapest and London  
December 2008

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# Introduction

Embarking on a doctorate requires, as a colleague of mine once said, a complete suspension of rationality. Think of it: you are required to write 80–100,000 words on a single topic, spread over five years or so, allow yourself, at an age when others with similar qualifications are reaching the top of the food chain, to be subjected to an examination by a group of people whose main goal that day consists of making your life difficult, and if all goes well, you are—assuming you find a job—earning between slightly and considerably less than a taxi driver in central London. Yet every year more people start doctoral studies than the previous year, and universities have started to take their Ph.D. training considerably more seriously. With few jobs and many candidates, the ability to train a young researcher well and make them write a good Ph.D. thesis has become a major pole of attraction for the best-qualified among them. And when good students go to good universities, good teachers want to be there as well.

But the devil is in the detail, as both those who teach Ph.D. students and the doctoral researchers<sup>1</sup> themselves find out almost immediately. Ignore the teachers: they opted for this when they signed up for a Ph.D., or at the very least when they went looking for a job in a university, and have inflicted the same pain on their own teachers—excuses from them will therefore not be accepted. For the students, things are different. Ph.D. students have a great idea—well, often they do—and think, quite reasonably, that since academia is about ideas, the thesis is pretty much written—it's just a matter of writing it up, as it were. So, they set off on their research project: they try to turn that idea into a feasible project which will allow them to make a convincing argument. But they discover quite soon that there is no reliable map to guide them, and they rightly loathe the idea of having to rely on their supervisor the whole time. This is when the Ph.D. project really starts: these doctoral researchers are about to

<sup>1</sup> I will use the words Ph.D. students, doctoral researchers, beginning researchers, etc. as substitutes in the remainder of this book.