

Alfred Sauvy's Working Method

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Alfred Sauvy's Working Method

by

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Abstract

This research specifies the objective of the scientific method used by Alfred Sauvy (1898-1990), economist, sociologist and French demographer of international renown, before analyzing its characteristics

Keywords

Sauvy; Alfred Sauvy; methodology; diachronic analysis; synchronic analysis; demography; prospective; Scientific methodology

Résumé**

Cette recherche précise l'objectif de la méthode scientifique utilisée par Alfred Sauvy (1898-1990), économiste, sociologue et démographe français de renom international, avant d'en analyser les caractéristiques.

Mots-clés

Sauvy ; Alfred Sauvy ; Méthodologie ; analyse diachronique ; analyse synchronique ; démographie ; prospective ; méthode scientifique

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Introduction

Some intellectuals expound their working methods in a dedicated opus[1]. It was not Alfred Sauvy's case, probably for two reasons. First, he was too modest to present himself as a "master", having created his own method. Apropos of "masters", he preferred to quote wittily the French dramatist and novelist Tristan Bernard (1868-1941) who, referring to some important person, said: "They called him master, and he did deserve that title, since he was now incapable of learning"[2]. Second, Alfred Sauvy probably thought that the method he used was self-evident. It is indeed possible to draw information from his publications.

As the method is a means to an end, one should first focus on the objective pursued.

The objective of the method

As early as 1929, observing that the world of leaders is one "of illusions, of naivety", he decided that the aim of his whole life would be "to enlighten action" [3]. Already in the 1930s, Alfred Sauvy chose for a chronicle a title consistent with his lifelong commitment: "De la lumière" (*Light*). He started by evoking Goethe's last words: "Mehr Licht ! Mehr Licht !" (*More light! More light!*). His objective was clearly stated: In a well organised democracy, 'Enlightenment' should be the motto of all parties, right or left. Dictatorship is less an extension of executive power than the possibility of hiding your actions, of distorting their impact, and then of suppressing control by public opinion, often more effective than that of Parliament. Still in the 1930s, Alfred Sauvy regretted the lack of interest of political leaders for statistics, which can be an extraordinary "instrument of prospection".

This is how he later explained what he discovered at the time: "The contrast is deplorable between the progress of science and technology,

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[1] For example Guitton, Jean, *Le Travail intellectuel*, Paris, Editions Montaigne, 1951.

[2] Sauvy, Alfred, *Humour et politique*, Paris, Calmann-Lévy, 1979, p. 60.

[3] Sauvy, Alfred, *De Paul Reynaud à Charles de Gaulle*, Paris, Casterman, 1972, p. 12.

and the ignorance of the people, which, at least in parliamentary democracies, determines that of their leaders, and influences even their technicians, afraid to be branded as technocrats or conservatives" [4].

In his writings, Alfred Sauvy underlined the discrepancy between the results of his observations and people's mentality. "It is clear that figures and indices are not enough to resolve problems, but ignoring them or approaching them in an imperfect and twisted way is a sure means of committing grave errors, which are the more dangerous as their consequences only appear later and are attributed to other sources. The body economic is, these days, even less well treated that the human body in the days of Molière's doctors" [5].

Thus, Alfred Sauvy worried about "the powerful" who "in all countries aim at pleasing rather than enlightening, and neglect in a singular way the art of enlightening while pleasing" [6]. His method is therefore dependent on the objective of bringing light, which points to a considerable distrust of theory.

Fact scrutiny and distrust of theory

This method consists first in an essential step: examine the available facts. His pedagogy of fact scrutiny excludes all forms of ideology, theory and Manichaeism. "Above all I am interested in facts; first because it is my speciality, my profession, and then because it is the weak point of all political parties, of all those who follow politics, and especially of those who seek a political change" [7]. Observing is a must. In a text concerning economic issues, Alfred Sauvy wrote: "The necessary condition to succeed, in economics as in medicine, is to establish a correct diagnosis and, at the very least, to be well aware of the facts. This condition is very far from being fulfilled"[8].

The corollary of the importance given to facts is a thorough distrust of theory. It is true that Alfred Sauvy entitled his largest book *General Theory*

[4] Letter to the *Nouvel Observateur*, 11 September 1972.
[5] Sauvy, Alfred, *De Paul Reynaud à Charles De Gaulle*, Paris, Casterman, 1972, p. 11.
[6] Sauvy, Alfred, *La terre et les hommes*, Paris, Economica, 1990, p. 170.
[7] Letter to the *Nouvel Observateur*, 11 September 1972.
[8] Preface to Dumont, Gérard-François, *Apprendre l'économie*, Paris, Economica, 1982.

of Population.[9] This title, *a priori* in contradiction with his method, must be looked at in the context of triumphant Keynesianism: it was a way for Alfred Sauvy to force a debate with economists, most of whom made *The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money*, published in 1936, their ideological basis. For example, the reproach directed to economists is present in the preface to the third edition (1963): "this obstinacy in erring, this lingering of the superficial character of economic observation... there should not be 'pure economists', who stay away from demography and sociology" [10]. The *General Theory of Population* is therefore not really a theory and saying so is not an insult to its author; he himself expressed it in his inimitable way in the dedication to volume II of the third edition: "To my granddaughters Corinne and Marion, this book which will be old well before they are" [11].

Thus Alfred Sauvy deliberately waived the idea of participating in the elaboration of any theory. He mistrusted it and did not hesitate to say so. For him no theory but only one judge, the results of experience. The quasi-absolute refusal to lock himself in a theory that would become forgetful of the facts is indeed at the heart of his scientific approach.

Among the theories which Alfred Sauvy deemed must be avoided like plague, is the theory of cycles. Indeed, many economists explain developments via cyclical theories such as that of Kondratiev. What Alfred Sauvy thought of it is invigorating: "If I had to bring up young people these days, I would tell them: beware of three curses, plague, cholera and cycles. Cycles are extraordinary restful for the mind. As soon as the word is out, the most scientific mind already loses its qualities of rigor, austerity, so satisfied it feels. Instead of the torment, instead of the void, instead of the worry, one can rely on a cycle..."[12].

This is at the core of Alfred Sauvy's scientific approach, which requires of the scientific mind great humility, when it would be so restful to subscribe to a theory by adhering to it explicitly or, often, implicitly.

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[9] Sauvy, Alfred, *Théorie générale de la population*, Paris, PUF, volume I, 1952, volume II, 1954 (first editions).
[10] Sauvy, Alfred, *Théorie générale de la population*, volume II, Paris, P.U.F., 3rd édition, 1966, p. VII.
[11] Quoted by Véron Jacques, " La *Théorie générale de la population* est-elle une théorie générale de la population ? ", *Population,* volume 47, n° 6, November-December 1992.
[12] In Dumont, Gérard-François (ed.), *L'enjeu démographique*, Paris, Éditions de l'APRD, 1981, p. 17.

The examination of available data did not stop Alfred Sauvy from applying the second aspect of his method, i.e. a critical eye upon the said data[13]. In short he was an original scientist, or even a non-conformist one: refusing theories, he considered that the only objective scientific approach rests on observation first, because facts are hard-headed. And he had only one preconceived notion: not to have any.

Recourse to diachronic and synchronic analyses

The third and fourth elements of Alfred Sauvy's working method consisted in undertaking a rigorous reasoning in order to draw lessons based on the facts examined. To this end, Alfred Sauvy often carried out both diachronic and synchronic analyses. When he studied an issue, he examined how it had been looked at or ignored in the past, and how historical facts threw light upon it. Thanks to diachronic analysis, one can avoid the risk of focusing on the short term which, by nature, bears a very relative significance. Sea foam gives very little information on the movements of the depths. Alfred Sauvy deplored: "The phenomena which most retain attention are surface ones or even episodes (stock exchange, accounting balances, price movements) obscuring deep currents which should be retained and studied instead" [14].

In parallel, Sauvy frequently undertook a synchronic analysis, examining the facts around the same issue occurring at the same time in different places, putting them in perspective or comparing them. This double approach, both diachronic and synchronic, enables a thorough study. It prevents one from being satisfied with summary or partial data leading to a loss of rigor in analyses.

For example, to study the consequences of population ageing[15], Alfred Sauvy first used diachronic analyses, based on the teachings of History,

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[13] Cf. for example his article entitled « Ce qu'il faut penser des progrès de la Russie », *Le Capital,* 25 March 1931. It concludes that "the progress recorded to date are mediocre" and "it is difficult to argue that the communist regime has done better than the tsars", i.e. analyses the pertinence of which will only be accepted by European public opinion decades later.

[14] Sauvy, Alfred, *Théorie générale de la population*, volume II, Paris, P.U.F., 3rd edition, 1966, p. VII.

[15] Sauvy, Alfred, « Les conséquences du vieillissement de la population », in Dumont, Gérard-François (direction), *La France ridée*, Paris, Hachette, Pluriel, 1979, 2nd edition, 1986.

which showed, for Greece before Christ, and for Rome in the 3rd and 4th centuries, "the same sequence": "fall in birth rate; ageing; decadence" [16]. The decline of Greece at the end of the 3rd century BC had demographic aspects: "Towns are depopulated and miserable. About Megalopolis, it was said: big city, big desert" [17]. Sauvy thus summarised the teaching of historians on the decadence of Rome: "Like an exhausted earth that no longer bears fruit, the pagan world no longer bears men" [18]. Secondly, Alfred Sauvy used synchronic analysis, comparing different European territories at the same period of the 19th century; he showed how ageing had penalised Wallonia compared with Flanders, Gascony with Brittany or France with Germany.

Always be attentive to demographic issues

Fifth item in Alfred Sauvy's method, which is at the antipodes of many economic studies: never forget the demographic dimension[19]. He wrote to a University professor: "It is essential that your students understand the influence of population phenomena on History, an influence that is always underestimated"[20].

Indeed Alfred Sauvy frequently noticed an indifference to demographic issues, summarising it in the following formula: "The drop of water in a cloud knows neither the shape nor the dimension of a cloud, it does not even know it is part of a cloud; in the same way the population is unaware of population" [21].

There are probably good reasons to this indifference, but the duty of any citizen is to ignore them. It is particularly distressing in politicians, in

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[16] Sauvy, Alfred, *op. cit.*

[17] Duruy, Victor, *Histoire des Grecs*, Paris, Hachette, tome III, 1889, p. 458. The quotation is from Polybe (*Histoire*, II, 13) who adds in another passage: " People no longer get married; they no longer raise children, even born outside marriage, or one or two at most in order to leave them their wealth; should illness or war remove them, the house is deserted, and the city is an abandoned hive". (XXXVII, 4)

[18] Duruy, Victor, *Histoire des Romains*, Paris, Hachette, tome VII, 1885, p. 539. "Thus, fortunate Campania, which has never seen a Barbarian yet, already counts 120 000 hectares where there is neither cottage nor man".

[19] Cf. Dumont, Gérard-François, « Economie-démographie : le grand divorce ? », *Panoramiques*, n° 47, 3rd quarter 2000.

[20] Alfred Sauvy's letter to Gérard-François Dumont, 30 November 1989.

[21] Conference held in Villeneuve-Saint-Georges, *Le Républicain,* 27 November 1980.

view of the responsibilities they take upon themselves; Alfred Sauvy's thoughts in this matter are summarised thus by his daughter: "Demography is a very simple science which consists in anticipating that children aged twelve will be twenty, eight years later. But the obvious character of this calculation rarely interests politicians, whose horizon is often limited to the next Election Day, rather than the future, and to the popularity of their decisions rather than their consequences"[22]. Alfred Sauvy's fight against indifference towards demography is reflected in this sentence: "Population problems are so fundamental that they take terrible revenge on those who ignore them".

The art of detour and forecast

Sixth step of Alfred Sauvy's method: examine the interactions of the phenomenon under study. This implies practising the art of detour: "Intelligence in animals, says Prof. Kohler, starts from the moment when they know how to make a detour. In economics, we are far from this threshold: we want to go straight on and commend the results. This is why we retain an outdated political regime. By continuing to see things as we'd like them to be, we prevent them from becoming what we would wish" [23].

In population studies the art of detour implies, for example, not to imprison oneself in pure demography, in a science confined in an ivory tower, engaging in purely speculative work, without taking into account social phenomena. According to Sauvy, with such an attitude demography serves no purpose, and also loses all its specificity, for two reasons: first, it is satisfied with the exclusive use of mathematical language and is reduced to it; second, it entirely loses sight of the specificity of its field of research, men in all their complexity, in their capacity to express willpower, to choose their cultural modes: "Pure demography, as they call it, is not tainted by a contact with social realities. By somehow looking after rules of human accounting, birth rate, mortality, age distribution and so on, in the end it constitutes a simple branch of mathematics, 'renewed-set' theory. This theory is generally, but not necessarily, inspired by the human model,

[22] Sauvy-Wilkinson, Anne, « Alfred Sauvy aurait cent ans », *Population & Avenir*, n° 642, March-April 1999, p. 2.
[23] Letter to *Le Nouvel Observateur*, 11 September 1972.

and can also apply to animal or vegetable species, and even to sets of objects such as books in a library, cars in a car park, stones in a garden"[24].

Now, precisely, demography does not concern sets of objects or plants, but men, which, as Alfred Sauvy wrote, is a real 'embarrassment'. Indeed "just as administrations would function satisfactorily 'if there were no public', equally economic theories would be relatively easy to establish, without having to deal with this insufferable nuisance that is Man" [25]. To understand, it is therefore necessary to constantly diversify approaches, mixing statistics, economics, sociology, history … the only hope to better account for the state and life of populations and their interactions with societal developments. This involves a global conception of demography[26], already expressed in the first issue of the review *Population:* "People often define demography in a limited manner, expecting only a descriptive study of populations, from a purely quantitative standpoint; [they should really] include qualitative phenomena and give particular attention to causal factors. […] Economics, sociology, psychology must be examined simultaneously" [27].

Seventh element: Alfred Sauvy tried to work out what could happen in future in order to induce adequate decisions and obtain results other than those of projections, deemed unsatisfactory. Thus scientists have a duty to retain various hypotheses, including those which lead to results deemed not desirable. These are probably more important than those which would nowadays be labelled 'politically correct', as they could lead to decisions that would change the hazardous results projected: the aim is "to foresee in order not to see". Contrary to those who confuse projections and forecasts[28], who reject projections or refuse to make any, Sauvy considered them essential to knowledge and action.

The eighth element of the method is never to despair for the future. If Alfred Sauvy did underline the various aspects, positive and negative, of the issues he studied, he always hinted that another policy is possible.

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[24] Sauvy, Alfred, *Leçon inaugurale*, Paris, Collège de France, n° 29, 10 April 1959, p. 10.
[25] Sauvy, Alfred, *Théorie générale de la population*, volume I, Paris, P.U.F, 3rd édition, 1963, p. 3.
[26] *Population et sociétés*, n° 339, October 1998.
[27] *Population*, volume 1, n° 1, January-March 1946.
[28] Dumont, Gérard-François, *Géographie des populations. Concepts, dynamiques, prospectives*, Paris, Armand Colin, 2018.

A simple and clear language for the analysis as well as the prescription

So that the message got through, the ninth element in Alfred Sauvy's method involved using a simple, clear mode of expression, short and synthetic formulations, sometimes sprinkled with corrosive humour.

Very punctilious about the correct use of language, he always worried about the growing recourse to 'misuse of language'[29] when "the correct language must be well understood, free of ambiguities", which did not proscribe the emancipated idiom of, say, a San Antonio[30]. To underline the necessity of clarity, he proposed translations from 'misused' to 'clear' French. Quoting the example of a conference entitled *The theory of the economic horizon and lengths of anticipation in the dynamic formation of the business plan*, Alfred Sauvy proposed instead: *Long term forecasting in business*. Sometimes, he cited convoluted sentences read in official reports, adding that they were untranslatable.

Moreover, Alfred Sauvy attached great importance to punctuation; the proofs of books and articles corrected by him contain innumerable examples of the good use of punctuation. As long as he remained in charge, he never stopped checking on the clarity of INED publications. However, after he left his directorial functions, he could not avoid observing some slackening. Hence, reacting to some published work, he wrote in 1987 an 'article of pure linguistics'. And concluded: "First and foremost, a clear expression" [31].

Tenth and last step, after having improved knowledge, scientists must formulate some principles for action, since an expertise without prescription would be insufficient. For instance, analysing the ageing of population leads to the following proposition: "There is no salvation for a country, for a forest, for any living system without a sufficient rise of young elements" [32].

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[29] *La revue de Paris*, May 1966.

[30] Alfred Sauvy even found in San-Antonio a passage on the issue of ageing: San-Antonio, *Un éléphant, ça trompe*, Paris, Fleuve noir, 1968.

[31] Letter of Alfred Sauvy to Gérard-François Dumont, 3 August 1987. The sentence was underlined by Sauvy.

[32] Sauvy, Alfred, « La montée des pays jeunes », in Dumont, Gérard-François (direction), *La montée des déséquilibres démographiques*, Paris, Economica, 1984, p. 164.

Alfred Sauvy's method, which unfolds in ten elements, allowed him to develop over half a century an abundant literature, refusing any *a priori*, examining facts as unique actors of science. And his work is still, in the 21st century, an essential source of understanding of the world and scientific stimulation[33].

G.-F.D.

(*Translation:* Sylvie Vanston)

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[33] Dumont, Gérard-François, « Un texte d'Alfred Sauvy datant d'un quart de siècle : toujours une source de stimulation scientifique », *Sciences & Devenir - Les Cahiers du MURS (Mouvement universel de la responsabilité scientifique)*, n° 56, 2008 ; « Pour répondre aux défis du XXIe siècle : la pensée d'Alfred Sauvy », *Population & Avenir*, n° 708, May-June 2012.

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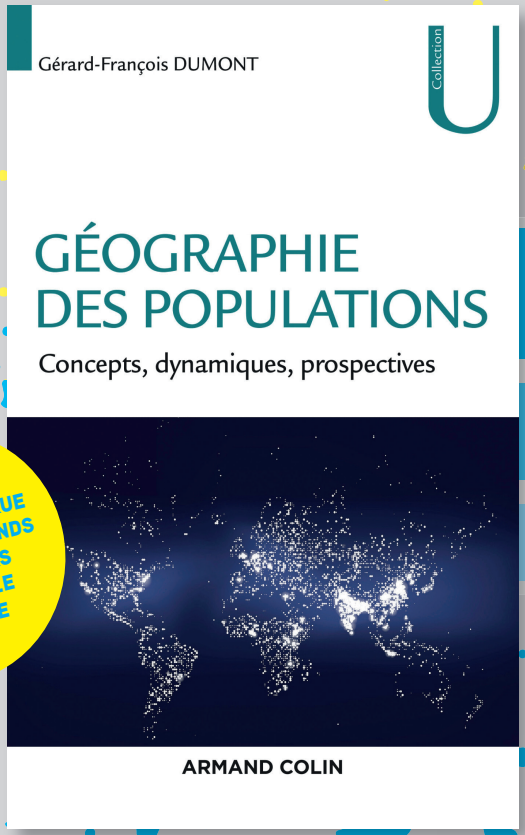
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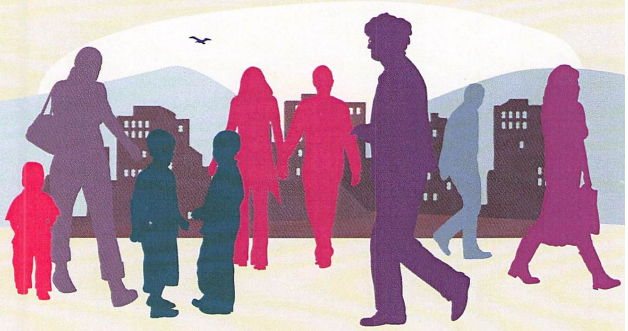


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