

Ethnic prejudices amongst researchers in Brittany

A major scientific study marred by stereotypes

Edgar Morin died on 29 May 2026, aged 104. Among the many chapters of his long intellectual life, this occasion prompted renewed discussion of an episode less well known than his work on complex thought: the Plozévet study. From 1961 onwards, around a hundred researchers — sociologists, ethnologists, demographers, geneticists, historians and geographers — took turns over a period of seven years in this commune in Finistère to carry out one of the most extensive multidisciplinary studies ever conducted in the social sciences in France, perhaps even the most extensive of all. Edgar Morin, who arrived in 1965, wrote a book based on the research, *Commune en France: la métamorphose de Plodémet* (1967). Another researcher, the historian André Burguière, who was tasked with drafting the summary report of all the studies, published *Bretons de Plozévet* in 1975, which was reissued in 1992. This is the official critical assessment of the project, written by someone who had been part of it from the outset.

Rereading these two books today, along with the preface to Burguière's work written by Robert Gessain, the project's initiator, is a disconcerting experience. Not that one finds any dishonest or slapdash research: on the contrary, the sheer scale of the work accomplished commands respect. But one can see, with a clarity that, sixty years on, seems almost comical, the extent to which this scientific endeavour viewed Brittany through an ethnocentric lens.

A founding principle betrayed

The ability to systematically set aside all preconceptions is the epistemological requirement upon which the social sciences are founded. Émile Durkheim made this the first corollary to the fundamental rule of sociological method, which consists of 'treating social facts as things'[1]. The researcher, he explains, must rid themselves of spontaneous representations and inherited assumptions, both when defining their subject matter and throughout their arguments; otherwise, they will merely be confirming what they already believed to be true. Yet this rule was not observed in Plozévet: the numerous researchers mobilised by the scientific establishment, far from breaking with their preconceptions, revived a host of ethnic prejudices, some of which were of very ancient origin.

Eleven centuries of prejudice

From the early Middle Ages onwards, the Bretons were the subject of recurring judgements in the writings of Frankish chroniclers. As early as the 9th century, in his poem on Louis the

Pious, Ermold the Black referred to Bretons who had: 'No regard for children, widows or churches; brother and sister share the same bed; a brother takes his brother's wife; all live in incest and crime. They dwell in the woods and make their beds in the thickets; they live by plunder, like wild beasts[2].' The historian Pierre Riché, who studied all the texts written about the Bretons by chroniclers of the early Middle Ages, has shown that these emphasised not only the savagery of the Bretons, but also their strange dress customs, their propensity for drunkenness, their incomprehensible language and their bad temper[3]...

Yet this well of stereotypes has never truly run dry; every era has drawn upon it, selecting clichés to suit its own interests. It was in the nineteenth century that Breton stereotypes became entrenched, with the great French authors lending them their literary authority. Michelet, Balzac, Hugo, Flaubert and Daudet, in particular, depicted the Bretons as savage, archaic, stupid, ignorant, dirty, stubborn, superstitious and drunkards[4]. The climate also found its way into these descriptions, with rain becoming the 'scientific' cause of Breton alcoholism: 'Man, numbed beneath a damp sky, seeks sensations of pleasure in drunkenness', explained a prefect in 1802[5].

A field chosen out of suspicion

It is precisely this background that the Plozévet study unwittingly revives, and nowhere is this more striking than in its initial hypothesis. The project's instigators initially wanted to replicate in France what American community studies had done in Middletown or Yankee City: to study an average commune, without any particular distinguishing features[6]. The choice of Plozévet, however, belies this ambition. Gessain explains that this commune was not selected for its representativeness, but because it was believed to be 'one of the most characteristic centres of endogamy in present-day France'[7], and because the region exhibited a remarkable incidence of congenital hip dislocation (dysplasia). The hypothesis was that this 'hereditary defect' could be explained by the endogamy of a Breton 'isolate'[8].

In other words: the major French scientific study of Brittany, launched in 1961, was based on the suspicion that the Bretons lived in isolation and married amongst themselves. Eleven centuries earlier, Ermold the Black had accused them of living 'in incest'. This is obviously not the same thing: one is a case of medieval slander between warring peoples, whilst the other takes the form of population genetics. But the structure of the suspicion remains the same, as does its subject: a population imagined to be so insular as to become biologically abnormal. The research team has, moreover, never been able to demonstrate this link: 'it therefore seems out of the question that we could establish, with regard to the Plozévet community, a definite link between the variability of anthropometric characteristics and endogamy', acknowledges Burguière[9]. And with good reason. Twenty years later, the ethnologist Martine Segalen established, with figures to back it up, that consanguinity in the Bigouden region was in fact historically low — much lower than in Corsica or the Massif Central, in particular — and that families there practised a subtle 'chain of alliances' spanning several generations to preserve their heritage without resorting to endogamy [10].

A false premise — recognised as unprovable by the very people who had put it forward — was therefore enough to mobilise a hundred researchers for seven years, perpetuating a very old myth.

Setting and vocabulary

The rest follows. Burguière opens his book with a scene depicting the discovery of Plozévet ‘on a rainy winter’s morning, at a time when the day is still hesitating to pierce the mist’[11]: here we find the Breton rain, a staple setting in two centuries of literature. The author then goes on to describe the Bigouden headdress and the church which ‘evokes the old Celtic legends’[12]: this is the same reflex already evident in the writings of medieval chroniclers and which reached its peak amongst nineteenth-century travellers: the recurring fascination with the Bretons’ exotic dress customs.

Even more revealing: this vocabulary is not confined to the setting: it permeates the analysis itself, right down to the book intended to provide a critical assessment of the survey. The sunken lanes of Plozévet possess ‘an archaic and wild charm’[13]; a folk lament reveals ‘the crude feelings, the blind impulses that govern this wild world’[14]; clandestine abortions constituted a ‘primitive and wild’ form of birth control[15]. This is neither self-criticism nor irony: the researcher tasked with the official assessment of the survey uses the same adjective — ‘wild’ — as Ermold in the 9th century, Jouvin de Rochefort in the 17th century or Victor Hugo in the 19th century[16]. And when the people of Plozévet say they are ‘deeply shocked’ that an official in charge of the inquiry speaks to them ‘as if to an audience completely ignorant of geography’[17], they are reacting to a prejudice that can be traced, word for word, from the ‘ignorance of all commercial principles, even the most basic’ that Balzac attributed to the Bretons[18] right up to the ‘War of the Ignorant’ referred to by Victor Hugo[19].

Robert Gessain, incidentally, articulates this mindset in his preface, explaining why the team did not include any Black researchers: ‘In vain did I seek an African anthropologist or ethnologist with a level of training such that he might be entrusted with an independent part of this investigation into the French. So many white people have studied so many Black societies; it would have been only fair [20].’ The sentence, intended to be generous, reveals the author’s low regard for Black researchers, automatically places the study in the tradition of colonial ethnology, and ignores the distinctiveness of the Bretons, who are simply presented as “French people”.

A revealing blind spot: alcohol out of context

Burguière and Morin refer repeatedly to Breton alcoholism: a ‘solid commercial mainstay’ as early as the 1850s, notes Burguière, as if it were merely a matter of local customs[21]. Neither of them ever links this self-destructive behaviour to the marginalisation and deculturation endured by Breton society. This is a strange silence for researchers who, moreover, adopted the ethnological perspective of ‘exotic societies’: had they been observing Native Americans or any other marginalised people in the world, the hypothesis

of a link between alcoholism and cultural destruction would probably have occurred to them immediately.

This link was subsequently established on numerous occasions in later studies. The psychoanalyst Erik Erikson, for example, emphasised in 1968 that ‘the existence of feelings of inferiority and a morbid self-hatred is widely attested in all minority groups’[22], and that alcoholism, suicide and drug use are consequently particularly widespread amongst them. Pierre Clastres, for his part, would demonstrate that ethnocide — which kills peoples in their minds, whilst genocide murders them in their bodies — is ‘the normal mode of existence’ of Western states[23]. Applied to Brittany, this framework sheds light on historical reality. In the aftermath of the Second World War, an entire generation of Bretons came to realise that social advancement required a complete renunciation of their original culture: housing, clothing, religious practices, and even the language, the abandonment of which has sometimes been described as ‘linguistic suicide’[24]. This voluntary alienation, combined with the unresolved traumas of the wars of the century, created a breeding ground in which the traditional habit of heavy drinking turned into chronic alcoholism, before giving way, from the 1970s onwards, to another form of self-destruction: suicide, for which Brittany now has one of the highest rates in Europe [25].

None of this was scientifically beyond reach in 1965: Frantz Fanon had published *Les Damnés de la terre* four years earlier, and the question of the psychological effects of colonisation was already the subject of widespread debate. But the researchers at Plozévet had reserved this interpretative framework for peoples other than the one before their very eyes. They borrowed colonial ethnology’s exoticising gaze — the isolated, the savage, the archaic — without ever adopting its critical lucidity regarding the effects of domination.

Linguistic blindness

The most glaring issue — and the one most damaging to the very quality of the study — concerns language. The research teams did not deem it necessary to enlist the help of researchers who spoke Breton. As a direct consequence: the gerontology study proved partly unworkable, as a significant proportion of Plozévet’s elderly population could only express themselves properly in Breton. More broadly, the questionnaires and interviews, conducted solely in French, were only able to elicit, as Burguière himself admits, ‘stereotypical responses, except amongst the most educated residents of the village, who were also often the least integrated into the Plozévet community’[26]. For most adults at the time, Breton remained the language of feelings, private thoughts and humour: precisely what a study of mentalities claimed to seek to capture. Yet, according to Edgar Morin, a lack of knowledge of the Breton language would not have constituted an obstacle to communication, except for ‘marginal sectors of our research’. Admittedly, there were ‘still some elderly women who spoke only Breton’, but ‘saying a few words of Breton, drinking red wine — that other way of saying a few words of Breton’ — were, in his view, sufficient to bridge the gap between interviewers and interviewees[27]. His remarks, as we can see, serve both to revive the cliché of the Bretons’ penchant for alcohol and to downplay what Burguière acknowledges was a genuine methodological problem.

He does not, however, attribute this neglect of the language to deliberate hostility towards Breton, but rather to the mechanical effect of a scientific enterprise organised from Paris, where 'the most powerful and prestigious laboratories' were concentrated, and where 'few research teams took the trouble to include researchers who spoke Breton'[28]. A structural oversight, then, rather than an intentional act, but an oversight which unwittingly perpetuates a much older practice: that of the republican school system which, a century earlier, had made Breton the enemy to be eradicated from the classrooms of Plozévet.

Hide this minority from my sight!

One question remains: how could researchers so sincere, so concerned with respecting the population they were studying, have reproduced such a perspective without realising it? This is not a matter of individual bad faith. It is a problem of conceptual framework, within the context of 'a centralised inquiry, just like the State'[29].

The French State, centralised since the days of the monarchy and refounded on a republican universalism that recognises only one people, united and indivisible, has never acknowledged the existence of minorities within its borders. This is not merely a cultural habit, but a constitutional principle, still in force today. In 1991, the Constitutional Council struck down the law recognising a 'Corsican people, a component of the French people', on the grounds of Article 3 of the Constitution, which recognises only one indivisible French people[30]. In 1999, it blocked the ratification of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages on the same grounds[31]. As for the Council of Europe's Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, opened for signature in 1995, France has never even signed it[32]. It is the only Member State of the European Union in this position. Under French law, minorities – as understood by most other pluralist representative systems – simply do not exist.

Yet the researchers at Plozévet derived their scientific legitimacy from this state apparatus: the DGRST[33], the university and research institutions. They could easily apply the framework of cultural domination to study colonised peoples outside this constitutional framework: this was precisely what French ethnology of the time was doing, with Gessain leading the way. But turning that same framework inwards, towards a part of their 'metropolis', would have meant creating a category that the institutions which employed and accredited them did not recognise. They were therefore left with only three options, each of which can be found in the study. The unthought-of, when 'researchers tended to trivialise the fieldwork, excluding all atypical traits (for example, Breton identity) from their field of observation' [34]; hence the absence of Breton speakers from the team and the silence regarding the link between alcoholism and deculturation. Folklore, where Breton distinctiveness is only accepted provided it is decorative and harmless: the Bigouden headdress, the 'Celtic legends' of the opening sequence. Excess, finally, when that which cannot be perceived as a legitimate distinctive feature is taken to be an anomaly to be measured: 'endogamy', 'consanguinity', 'isolate'... What Segalen would reveal twenty years later was not a mere error of measurement: a genuine cultural difference — a subtle and coherent system of marriage alliances — had been a priori pigeonholed as an 'excess'.

They did not take everything away

The final word goes to someone who closely observed the course of the survey. In *Le cheval d'orgueil*, the Bigouden writer Pierre Jakez Hélias recounts the arrival of these sociologists, anthropologists and other ethnologists “armed with survey plans, questionnaires, grids, statistics, graphs, distribution tables, and laden with tape recorders and cameras” [35]. He recounts a witty remark made in Breton by an old man from Plozévet about what had eluded all these researchers whose names end in ‘-logue’: ‘*Ni zo bet debret gand al loged* (We’ve been eaten by the “mice”),’ he told me. A wink, and then: ‘*N’eo ket aet toud ganto* (They didn’t take it all)[36].’ The play on words rests on the fact that *loged* can be understood both as the plural of the French ‘-logue’ and as the Breton word *logod*, which means ‘mouse’.

And Pierre Jakez Hélias adds: ‘I have met so-called ethnologists whose endeavour was doomed to failure from the outset, simply because all their actions and words made it clear from the outset that they believed themselves to be superior to the populations they were studying. The opposite was true, since these populations were a problem for them, whilst they were no problem for the populations themselves. Merely objects of curiosity[37].’ What more is there to say?

Notes

[1] Durkheim Émile, *Les règles de la méthode sociologique*, 16th ed., Paris, Presses universitaires de France, coll. « Bibliothèque de philosophie contemporaine », 1967.

[2] Fleuriot Léon, « Le patriotisme brittonique et l’histoire légendaire », in Jean Balcou and Yves Le Gallo (dir.), *Histoire littéraire et culturelle de la Bretagne*, Paris-Genève, Champion-Slatkine, vol. 3/1, 1987, p. 106.

[3] Riché Pierre, « Les Bretons victimes des lieux communs dans le haut Moyen Âge », in Gwennoù Le Menn and Jean-Yves Le Moing (dir.), *Bretagne et pays celtiques : langues, histoire, civilisation. Mélanges offerts à la mémoire de Léon Fleuriot 1923-1987*, Rennes, Skol and Presses universitaires de Rennes, 1992.

[4] Le Coadic Ronan, L’identité bretonne, Rennes, Presses Universitaires de Rennes (PUR) and Terre de Brume, 1998, p. 113 to 118 ; Faligot Roger, Bernicot André, and Nono, « Ils ont des chapeaux ronds »: bons mots et préjugés sur la Bretagne et les Bretons, Spézet, Coop Breizh, 2012.

[5] Le Coadic, Ronan, ‘Tout est bon dans le Breton’, *Ethnologie française*, no. 4, vol. 42, 2012, p. 704.

[6] Robert S. Lynd and Helen Merrell Lynd, *Middletown : A Study In Contemporary American Culture*, New York, Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1929; Warner W. Lloyd (William Lloyd), *Yankee City*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1963.

[7] André Burguière, *Bretons de Plozévet*, Paris, Flammarion, 1992, p. 41.

[8] *Ibid.*, p. 42.

[9] *Ibid.*, p. 55.

- [10] Segalen Martine, *Quinze générations de Bas-Bretons : parenté et société dans le pays bigouden Sud, 1720-1980*, Paris, Presses universitaires de France, coll. « Les Chemins de l'histoire », 1985.
- [11] André Burguière, *Bretons de Plozévet*, *op. cit.*, p. 23.
- [12] *Ibid.*
- [13] *Ibid.*, p. 26.
- [14] *Ibid.*, p. 116.
- [15] *Ibid.*, p. 71.
- [16] Le Coadic Ronan, *L'identité bretonne*, *op. cit.*, p. 113 à 122. Very similar biases were observed in the accounts of 19th-century British bourgeois travellers, who described Brittany as 'so wild'... See Jean-Yves Le Dizez, *Étrange Bretagne: Récits de voyageurs britanniques en Bretagne (1830-1900)*, Rennes, Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2015.
- [17] André Burguière, *Bretons de Plozévet*, *op. cit.*, p. 34.
- [18] Honoré de Balzac, *Les Chouans*, Paris, Gallimard, 1972, p. 319.
- [19] Victor Hugo, *Quatrevingt-treize*, Paris, Gallimard, 'Collection Folio' series, 1993, p. 232.
- [20] André Burguière, *Bretons de Plozévet*, *op. cit.*, p. 13.
- [21] *Ibid.*, p. 105.
- [22] Erikson, Erik H., *Adolescence et crise: la quête de l'identité*, Paris, Flammarion, 1978, p. 324 (first American edition, 1968).
- [23] Clastres, Pierre, « De l'ethnocide », *L'Homme*, no. 3-4, vol. 14, 1974, p. 107.
- [24] Beck, David and Lam, Yvonne, 'Language loss and linguistic suicide: A case study from the Sierra Norte de Puebla, Mexico', *Toronto Working Papers in Linguistics*, vol. 27, 2008, pp. 1-12.
- [25] Le Coadic Ronan, « Suicide and societal culture in Brittany », in Céline Kopp Bigault et Michel Walter (dir.), *La prévention du suicide en Bretagne: connaître, comprendre, agir*, Paris, l'Harmattan, coll. « Constellations Psy », 2023, p. 187. Self-destructive behaviours amongst Bretons (alcoholism and suicide) were at the heart of Dr Philippe Carrer's work, compiled in two volumes in Carrer, Philippe, *Ethnopsychiatrie en Bretagne*, Spézet, Coop Breizh, 2011.
- [26] André Burguière, *Bretons de Plozévet*, *op. cit.*, p. 298.
- [27] Morin Edgar, *Commune en France: la métamorphose de Plodémet*, Paris, Fayard, coll. « Le Monde sans frontières », 1967, p. 35.
- [28] André Burguière, *Bretons de Plozévet*, *op. cit.*, p. 336. However, only one researcher who spoke Breton took part in the survey, on his own initiative: the ethnologist Donatien Laurent. The songs he collected on this occasion were published in 2008 in Goyat Gilles, *Chansons traditionnelles du pays bigouden : eur Vigoudenn o kana. Enregistrements de Donatien Laurent*, 2nd ed., revised and expanded, Brest, Emgleo Breiz, 2008.
- [29] *Ibid.*
- [30] Conseil constitutionnel, « Décision n° 91-290 DC du 9 mai 1991. Loi portant statut de la collectivité territoriale de Corse ».

[31] Conseil constitutionnel, « Décision n° 99-412 DC du 15 juin 1999 relative à la Charte européenne des langues régionales ou minoritaires ».

[32] Council of Europe, 'Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities'.

[33] General Delegation for Scientific and Technical Research, which at the time coordinated the initiatives decided upon by the government, the universities and the CNRS in the field of research. Its remit is now carried out by the ANR, the National Research Agency.

[34] André Burguière, *Bretons de Plozévet*, *op. cit.*, p. 337.

[35] Hélias, Pierre Jakez, *Le cheval d'orgueil : mémoires d'un Breton du pays bigouden*, Paris, Plon, 'Presses pocket. Collection Terre humaine' series, 1982, p. 607.

[36] *Ibid.*, p. 608.

[37] *Ibid.*