

Advocating a new 'hands-on' approach to science

Her rejection of the *Légion d'Honneur* in August 2012 gained her a great deal of publicity. Was this through some sense of bravado, a desire to be talked about or did she simply delight in being provocative? No, not at all. It is true that Annie Thébaud-Mony has never sought to 'hobnob' with the political – or academic – elite but the French sociologist would undoubtedly, and modestly, have accepted this award if after a 30-year-long university career she had not come to the conclusion that there was widespread indifference to the growing social inequalities in health among scientific, institutional and political circles. 'In 1984, a worker's risk of dying of cancer was four times that of a senior manager. By 2008, this risk was 10 times as great', she writes of the situation in France.

'I find it unacceptable in this day and age that workers should suffer and die from industrial poisoning', she explains to justify her new book on inequalities in illness and death. Unlike her previous works, this time she is bold enough to write in the first person, in the singular but above all the plural. Although aimed at publicising occupational health scandals, this book is notably a tribute to her companion in life and work, Henri Pézerat, a toxicologist who died in 2009 and who is credited with bringing the asbestos scandal to light in France. While asbestos brought Henri Pézerat some media attention, his tireless work on behalf of the victims (often workers) of other toxic substances is unfortunately far less well-known.

This is something that Annie Thébaud-Mony intends to change. She recalls how, in the final years of his life as his health was deteriorating, he still continued to fight alongside former miners suffering from bronchopulmonary cancers, farm workers poisoned

by pesticides and the staff of an animal vitamins factory affected by renal cancer.

This work, however, is not simply a book dedicated 'in memory of'. While she writes most tenderly of her partner, her pen can suddenly turn sharp when she has a target in her sights. Annie Thébaud-Mony has not forgotten that the struggles they both led against the industrial lobbies and the promoters of 'a strategy of doubt' were often also struggles against their own community, sometimes even their own colleagues.

'Some of them choose to work on different subjects but they are in a minority. Most are sure of their place and their power within the institutions so they generally also receive funding from foundations and these are the instruments by which manufacturers control research.'

One of her particular targets is the study of epidemiology, which she blames for having set itself up as the only tool necessary for preventing cancer.

'This obsession with mathematical evidence has paralysed mainstream science in terms of our understanding of the links between toxic chemical substances and health. Over time, the demand for such evidence has resulted in a "hands-off" epidemiology that repeatedly refuses to acknowledge the evidence of the facts and the materiality of exposure', she states. This approach 'merely counts deaths', she adds later in the book.

Henri Pézerat and Annie Thébaud always preferred a 'hands-on' approach to their research, which they conducted directly with the workers. 'We always refused to distance our work as researchers from its roots in co-operating with those individuals and groups that we consider to be the sentinels of health', she states.

At the turn of the century, Annie Thébaud founded a scientific interest group on occupational cancers, a research project that brought together the University of Paris 13 and the cancer departments of three hospitals in Seine-Saint-Denis, the poorest department in metropolitan France. Between 2002 and 2012, her team reconstructed the career paths of nearly 1 200 workers affected by cancer. From this research it emerged that 83% of these patients had been exposed to at least one carcinogen during the course of their working life. Over the 10 years of the study, nearly 300 patients thus had their illness recognised as occupational cancer.

Now retired, the sociologist no longer has to battle institutional inertia. Her energies are now devoted to the foundation that bears her partner's name, one that is aimed at ensuring that workers no longer have to suffer in silence.

— Denis Grégoire

La science asservie. Santé publique: les collusions mortifères entre industriels et chercheurs

('Science in thrall. Public health: deadly collusion between manufacturers and researchers')

By Annie Thébaud-Mony
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