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MAGAZINE

The laboratory

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Considerations of a historian on the importance of team work and confronting during the writing of manuals.

There is one aspect in humanistic research that may sometimes be forgotten or overlooked**:** **historians also have their own laboratory**. I filter what I am going to write through the lens of individual experience, recounting the professional moment I am living in these weeks: that of a visiting researcher on the other side of the Atlantic working within a research group. That said, let's move on.

Let's take the example of **manuals**, those on which – in some way – anyone who has dedicated energy to study has had to spend time. When as a student I read and underlined (in pencil only, may it never be!), I gave very little or almost no thought to imagining the hard work of those who had written those manuals. I was satisfied with the contents, sometimes getting even bored. Now that time has gone by and I have moved to the other side, that of the writer, the point of view has changed.

How do you prepare a book of this kind, or rather, how do I think you should prepare it? We **need teamwork, we need a lab.** Here is a possible **path**: we start from the **idea**. Already this first step may not be yours, but suggested by someone who reading an essay or a book that you have written asks you: why don't you try to offer a more general look? You might say yes, think about it and prepare a reasoned index, discuss it with colleagues you trust and start studying and, in parallel, writing. A **text begins to take shape**, but to have a general look means dealing – often in a nutshell – with issues you have never committed yourself to. Then you turn to whoever did it and keep learning. You write some paragraphs and you send them over to read, **collect suggestions** and work on them. And so on until – and that's a difficult personal responsibility – you have to tell yourself: it's time to **write the words "the end"**. Having made this difficult decision, you pause and ask for new reviews, waiting for suggestions on content and style. As you get them you put yourself **to work again** and set the fundamental points, updating the **references** and **bibliography**. The time comes to deliver to the **editor**, and again you wait, ready to react to what you are asked to do on the drafts, and correct the oversights that are always there. Before seeing **your 'research product' printed**, you **write your thanks**, being very careful not to forget anyone, aware at the same time that often few people will read them.

So, if you have come this far I have a request for you: **could you please read the thanks of the next book I will suggest?** They are so important, because (at least for us historians) they are one of the few appropriate ways to bring out how fundamental the laboratory has been for our work.

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