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(1945-1989)

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<sup>1</sup> Photo by Felipe Silverwood-Cope in the 1980s.

## TRICKS OF CHANCE<sup>2</sup>

### I

I am well aware that memoirs edit the facts, by censoring, adding to them, and above all by trying to make them consistent. I shall resist these tendencies but shall not fully succeed.

George Homans<sup>3</sup>

Many years ago, while interviewing Brazilian social scientists, I observed an unusual phenomenon.<sup>4</sup> My goal at that time was to clarify some aspects that remained nebulous to me, even after having read the books and studied the intellectual careers of these authors, whom I considered fundamental to understanding the development of the social sciences in Brazil. Most of them had been born in the 1920s and were around 50 - 60 years old at the time. Among them were Florestan Fernandes, Antonio Candido, Darcy Ribeiro and, the youngest, Roberto Cardoso de Oliveira. During those interviews, which took around two hours each, I was surprised to hear the expression “foi por acaso” (“it was by chance”) as an

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<sup>2</sup> A Portuguese version of this paper was published as “Artimanhas do acaso”, Chapter 4 of *A Favor da Etnografia*, Rio de Janeiro: Relume Dumará, 1995. I have made some slight changes to this version. However, I have not changed some references to old books and films, which were recent at the moment I wrote the piece.

<sup>3</sup> George Homans, *Coming to My Senses. An autobiography of a sociologist*. New York: Transactions Publishers, 1984.

<sup>4</sup> I owe to Mariza Corrêa the challenge that led me to write this essay. The interviews with Antonio Candido, Florestan Fernandes, Darcy Ribeiro and Roberto Cardoso de Oliveira date from November/December 1978. At the time, I was doing research for my doctorate thesis (cf. Mariza Peirano, *The anthropology of anthropology. The Brazilian case*. Ph.D. dissertation, 1981). See Howard Becker, “Foi por acaso: conceptualizing coincidence”, *The Sociological Quarterly*, 35(2):183-94, 1994, for a follow-up of the ideas presented in this paper.

explanation for some of the radical changes in their careers. All of them resorted to chance in the conversations we had.

My surprise had a reason. Having been trained in sociology, I started from the assumption that each individual adheres to a certain world view, even if not explicit. Since I was dealing with social scientists, I imagined that my ethnography would be facilitated by my distinguished informants. I supposed that they would probably have explicit what an anthropologist must devise from often vague or implicit formulations from whatever “natives”.

I was not totally wrong. All of them already had an elaborate discourse to explain their intellectual trajectories. However, at some critical moments, perhaps confronting an unexpected question, the answer would be: “*Ah, foi por acaso*” (“Well, it was by chance”). It was “by chance” that Florestan Fernandes decided to investigate the Tupinambá – because he had attended a seminar held by Herbert Baldus, and, as he was supposed to hand in a final paper, he followed the suggestion of the friendly teacher by dedicating himself to an analysis of the chronicler Gabriel Soares, later on expanding the initial sketch into books and articles. It was also by chance that, years later, he changed his topic of interest from the Tupinambá to the study of race relations between Blacks and Whites. Indeed, there was a recognized ambition to create a research group focused on a new sociological problem. But “it was by chance” that the topic of race relations was chosen, since, at the time, Florestan was researching the acculturation of Syrian-Lebanese immigrants. It was then, “by chance”, that Alfred Métraux, having arrived in Brazil to direct a UNESCO project on race relations, sought Roger Bastide, who, in turn, called Florestan – who rejected the invitation. This decision lasted until the moment when, after a long conversation between them, Bastide, leaving the room, turned back from the door and addressed Florestan: “Professor, I will gather all the data; you just interpret. Will you accept working with me?”. Coming from his old professor and put in this humble way, the question brought tears to his eyes and produced an inevitable “Yes”. (And thus began the style of doing sociology in Brazil.)

But it was not only Florestan who was favored by chance. Darcy Ribeiro also says that he became interested in the subject of national problems due to an ‘occasional incident’: as a student at the Escola de Sociologia e Política, he received a fellowship to organize an archive

on Brazilian literature related to anthropological and sociological interests. The work had been commissioned by Donald Pierson, but, since Darcy was a curious fellow, he read the novels he was supposed just to catalogue, among which were Euclides da Cunha, Silvio Romero and many others. Due to having come in contact with this literature at that specific moment of his education, he feels he became an heir of that kind of Brazilian literature. According to his own explanation, it was “by chance” that he avoided two fatal dangers: one that accompanies Brazilian academics in general, that of becoming a channel (“cavalo-de-santo”) for foreign intellectuals; the other of becoming a “contemplative communist,” a reader of Louis Althusser or any other French scholar, forever remaining unable to take pragmatic decisions.

Roberto Cardoso de Oliveira benefited from the chance of an encounter. At the end of 1953, Darcy Ribeiro delivered a conference at the Biblioteca Municipal de São Paulo, and because he was looking for an assistant professor for a program to be offered by Museu do Índio, in Rio de Janeiro, Roberto was introduced to him by a friend in common. Right then, Darcy decided Roberto was the best person for the job. But Roberto was reluctant to accept, because his education had been in philosophy and sociology. Darcy was adamant, and insisted that, if Lévi-Strauss had become an ethnologist after his graduation, why not Roberto? Thus, by virtue of this purely accidental meeting at the Biblioteca Municipal, Roberto Cardoso de Oliveira made the transition from sociology to anthropology, picking up from Darcy the indigenism preoccupation and maintaining Florestan’s theoretical ambition. From this encounter a sociologically inspired anthropology was born, which shows, in the concept of “inter-ethnic friction”, the evidence that Roberto created an “Eve” from the University of São Paulo’s sociology “rib”.

Finally, Antonio Candido. Here there is a difference, since his was the least improvised testimony, despite the touches of exquisite sophisticated humor. His interview especially emphasized the sociological aspects of his trajectory: he mentioned the general characteristics of his generation, the teaching the latter received, the theoretical orientations of the time. He tried to explain the different paths his fellow students took, including their personality traits. Taking Florestan Fernandes as a counterpoint, he says his friend was very positive in his beliefs; Candido himself, too skeptic; Florestan believed in revolutionary solutions. He himself favored gradual transformations. But, he encountered

Florestan after a “purely accidental” event, which shows that “o homem põe e Deus dispõe” (“what man decides God changes”). He only went to São Paulo because his father, a doctor, decided to move to the town of Poços de Caldas to reorganize the thermal springs of that spa city. His father could not readapt to Rio after returning from Europe. Because the distance to São Paulo was shorter than that to Rio, Antonio Candido studied at the Universidade de São Paulo. Had he gone to Rio de Janeiro, his options would have been quite different.

My “informants” of 1978 are in good company. When George Homans turned 81, he recognized in the search for consistency one of greatest dangers that memory produces. Maybe this is why, in his autobiographical piece, he began with great caution, revealing that, as a graduate in English Literature, he had become a sociologist “through almost pure chance” (Homans 1983).

Trying too to avoid paralyzing logic, I start this brief exercise observing how the subject of chance is present in our daily life; I follow this by trying to uncover alternative sources of explanation so that, in the end, I may return to the safe terrain of anthropological tradition.

## II

Chance and chance alone has a message for us. Everything that occurs out of necessity, everything expected, repeated day in and day out, is mute. Only chance can speak to us.

Milan Kundera

The subject of chance seems to have become a topic of interest that has invaded the West in its daily life, despite (or because of) all the scientificist postulates that are around us: the belief in predictability, the ideas of progress and development, the miracles of science.

A few examples give the dimension of this concern: Tomas, Milan Kundera's hero, discovers, to his surprise, that his relationship to Tereza, the book's young character, was the result of six chances, which he lists carefully: an attack of meningitis, the chief doctor's sciatica, the hotel where he stayed, the restaurant where Tereza worked, her moment off duty, and the table she attended. For Tereza, there were four chance events: the brandy Tomas ordered, the book he was reading, the music of Beethoven, and the yellow bench where Tomas waited for her in the park. They are the background to Kundera's book against the panorama of the Spring of Prague. For Jung, these occasions would be the result of synchronicity. (Together with this book, the theme of chance has its archetypical example in García Márquez's *Crónica de una Muerte Anunciada*, whose characters try to intercept the events, but cannot produce the coincidence that would prevent the announced death.

The same topic invades movie screens: for Steven Spielberg, scientific imagination allows us to travel in time. However, these trips are dangerous: a simple act of the young Marty in the past could change his entire future, even prevent his parents from meeting, thus threatening his own birth. In the second film of the series, "Back to the Future", Spielberg is more daring, and shows the possibility of more than one present resulting from options/chances at a certain point in time. "Doc" Spielberg's task then is to go back in time to fix the past event that produced the undesirable present situation. Francis Coppola also returns to the past, but, differently from Spielberg's, the future is written and unchangeable: though Peggy Sue returns to the past, she cannot alter it. "Field of Dreams", the movie directed by Alden Robinson, attempts to sort out the past in a present baseball field, where former sport heroes return to revise, fulfill dreams, settle accounts – theirs and others – in a whirl of different times and characters.

Refractory to religious orientations, chance then seems to oppose, in our Christian experience, any attempts at general explanations. Hinduism, for example, does not encourage change in individual trajectory because karma – foreordained series of events that result from actions in previous lives – is only changeable by divine grace. But, in the West, we find this tension between external forces, like the gods, fortune and God's purpose, and the belief in the possibility of choice, option and individual will. (It is to clarify

this tension that Gilberto Velho suggests that we examine the concept of fate since ancient Greece.)<sup>5</sup>

In this context, traditional sociological explanations would be located in the category external forces, that which is more deterministic. However, according to the interviewees, it was not because there was a historical tendency for the social sciences in Brazil to question certain topics in the 50s and 60s that Florestan decided to move from the Tupinambá to the study of race relations. Rather, it was “due to chance”; it was “due to chance” that Darcy was hired by the Indian Protection Service (SPI) after becoming acquainted with Brazilian literature; and it was also “by chance” that Roberto Cardoso ended up combining the theoretical orientations of the hegemonic sociology of the University of São Paulo with Darcy’s indigenous preoccupations, establishing the foundations for an anthropology of inter-ethnic contact. Founding explanations on chance, our social scientists have avoided both the idea of a predetermined fate as much as its opposite, i.e., the emphasis on individual will. I would anticipate that they did so to leave room for a (perhaps apparent) disregard for individual will. I shall return to this subject later.

### III

In contrast [to “determinism”], when the indeterminacy, the “freedom” of the individual is stressed, it is usually forgotten that, simultaneously, there are always many mutually dependent individuals. (...) More subtle tools of thought than the usual antithesis of “determinism” and “freedom” are needed if such problems are to be solved.

Norbert Elias

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<sup>5</sup> For the notion of fate, see G. Velho, “Destino, campo de possibilidades e províncias de significado”, *Projeto e Metamorfose*. Rio de Janeiro: Jorge Zahar Editor, 1994; for Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. New York: Harper & Row, 1984, pp. 54-5; for an anthropological perception of the notion of *kharmā*, see T.N. Madan, *Non-renunciation: themes and interpretations of Hindu culture*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987.

Academic disciplines have also been occupied by the topic of indetermination. Norbert Elias asks that we find more subtle tools of thought to overcome the antithesis between determinism and freedom. Other dichotomies, such as individual and society, also disturb us today. It seems that we are all engaged in pursuing what Luiz Fernando Dias Duarte appropriately designated as “the residue and unsettling limit of our knowledge”. If even Newton’s discoveries can be focused in the light of the psychoanalytic theory of transference, a vast field is open to examine both the constraints and the triggers of creativity. This was proposed by Brian Bird, who assigns the Newtonian discoveries to the repetition of feelings, reactions and events in the context in which he found himself when he was 23 years old: away from colleagues and living with his mother, due to the 1665 plague, Newton mastered, in just over a year, the basic laws of mechanics, discovered the fundamental law of gravitational attraction, invented the methods of infinitesimal calculus, and advanced in his discoveries in optics that he would develop later. If then transference is a universal highly creative mental function, one may speculate that a psychological analysis would not only produce alternative explanations for the events described as occasional by our social scientists, but also different interpretations of the relationship between Bastide and Florestan, Darcy and Pierson, Roberto and Darcy, or Florestan and Antonio Candido. (But, as I lack the talent for this, I will resist the temptation).<sup>6</sup>

However, if indetermination is one big problem today, from literature, we have a paradigmatic example in Virginia Woolf’s text composition to control the past. With the same ethnographical material, she exercised various genres, such as her long diaries, the sketches of the past, and the novels, the most striking example of which being perhaps the description of the consequences of her mother's death when the author was 13. In the diaries and sketches, the mother is Julia Stephen, married for the second time, the husband a widower himself, while in *To the Lighthouse*, the mother is alive in the character Mrs. Ramsay, whose death is communicated to the reader by a literary device, as powerful as seemingly simple: we become aware of the event in two phrases in brackets, leaving the

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<sup>6</sup> For the opening citation, see page 167 of Norbert Elias’s *What is Sociology?* London: Hutchinson & Co., 1978:167. For citations in the text, see also L. F. D. Duarte, “Freud e a imaginação sociológica moderna”, J. Birman (org.) *Freud. 50 anos depois*, Rio de Janeiro: Relume Dumará, 1987, and B. Bird, “Notes on transference: universal phenomenon and hardest part of analysis”, *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association*, 20(2): 267-301, 1972.

reader perplexed and forced to return to the text several times to make sure of the fact – as probably the author did in the text and in her real life.<sup>7</sup>

The Brazilian social scientists I visited have not used autobiographies to control the past: Florestan gets close to the genre, and Darcy gradually entered the realm of literature and based the novel *Maira* on his ethnographical experience. But the Brazilian academic ethos may become more clear if we remember that Simon Schwartzman never published in Portuguese his delightful autobiographical essay, “Intellectual life in the periphery: a personal tale”, where the idea of chance is also present in the decision of his grandfather to go from Bezzarabia to Rio de Janeiro, and then from Rio to Belo Horizonte, instead of going straight to New York – an alternative that, as a fellow Berkeley student remarked, would have prevented him from facing several obstacles in his intellectual career.<sup>8</sup> In any case, the idea of chance might have occurred to the authors I interviewed because they were not allowed any extra time for a deep examination: in front of them was a tape recorder and an anxious student decided not to waste a moment of the opportunity that had been granted to her. My conclusion is that chance was not used with George Homans’ intention – that of avoiding the trap of logical consistency – but due to the spontaneity of the moment, and to the social scientists’ generous spirit to collaborate with a beginner.

#### IV

Azande always say of witchcraft that it is the *umbaga* or second spear. When Azande kill game, there is a division of meat between the man who first speared the animal and the man who plunged a second spear into it. The two are considered to have killed the beast. (...) Hence, if a man is

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<sup>7</sup> Virginia Woolf describes her mother’s death in “Sketches of the past”, *Moments of Being* (ed. Jeanne Schulkind), London: Grafton, 1978. The fictional death of Mrs. Ramsey is described here: “[Mr Ramsey, stumbling along a passage, stretched his arms out one dark morning, but, Mrs Ramsey having died rather suddenly the night before, he stretched his arms out. They remained empty.]”, *To the Lighthouse*, London: Grafton, p. 120.

<sup>8</sup> For details of these biographical observations, see F. Fernandes *A Sociologia no Brasil*, Petrópolis: Editora Vozes, 1977 and *A Condição de Sociólogo*. São Paulo: Hucited, 1978. Simon Schwartzman’s piece, “Intellectual life in the periphery: a personal tale” was presented at the XI World Congress of Sociology, Delhi, 1985.

killed by an elephant, Azande say that the elephant is the first spear and that witchcraft is the second and that together they killed the man. If a man spears another in war the slayer is the first spear and witchcraft is the second and together they killed him.

E.E. Evans-Pritchard

Azande explain undesirable coincidences in a straightforward way by means of witchcraft. Witchcraft does not explain *all* misfortunes, but, in certain conditions, it is part of a chain of causation. One example of Evans-Pritchard's ethnography refers to a man who stumbled over a tree stump and suffered a cut that became infected. As the Azande do not routinely stumble over stumps in their path, this particular infection was attributed to witchcraft. Another example of Zande ethnography is the collapse of a barn eaten by termites at the exact moment that a group of people sought refuge there to escape the harsh noon heat. Why would the barn collapse right then, and why on that particular group of people? These spatio-temporal coincidences are, for the Azande, connected by a link of witchcraft that, as emphasized by Evans-Pritchard, does not contradict the empirical knowledge of cause and effect, but acts, as in the case of hunts, as the "second spear" that effectively kills the animal.

In a certain sense, then, witchcraft has an affinity with our *acaso* (chance), if we accept the popular definition by the Novo Dicionário da Língua Portuguesa – Aurélio Dictionary, which describes it as "the set of small independent causes, which relate to poorly known causes, and determine any one event". Like the Azande, who did not know the reason for the coincidence of the collapsed barn with those people in its shade, our authors were also unaware why, on a particular day in 1953, Roberto Cardoso de Oliveira had gone to attend a lecture at the Biblioteca Municipal of São Paulo, after which, coincidentally, he was introduced to the lecturer, Darcy Ribeiro; or why Métraux had arrived in Brazil with the UNESCO project on "race" when Florestan was devoted to the study of the Syrian-Lebanese immigrants.

But there are three differences to retain. The first is that witchcraft is presented as an explanation for misfortune whereas *acaso* (chance) generally explains an auspicious phenomenon. Second, witchcraft is a causal explanation, while chance is related to indeterminacy. Third, witchcraft is a socially relevant cause because the aggrieved man or woman may claim compensation from whoever is deemed responsible by means of consulting oracles. In chance, there is no human intervention; it occurs due to "poorly known laws". Both in witchcraft and chance, however, the explanation is *a posteriori*, and in both it refers to specific phenomena in time and space.

Despite this relation to particular phenomena (the situations in which witchcraft and chance can act are endless), the two types of explanations are socially recognized as legitimate causes for certain events. In other words, there was no "accident" that all authors interviewed spoke of *acaso*; this is as much a socially acceptable explanation for us as witchcraft is to the Azande.

## V

And thus, by way of socially acceptable explanations, Marcel Mauss takes us back to the safety of anthropological terrain to remind us that, at least since Malinowski, ethnologists have sought to explain both rational and empirical understanding of uncontrolled phenomena. The classic examples are the anticipatory magic of the Trobriand islanders and retrospective witchcraft explanations of the Azande: in the first case, magic seeks to prevent systematic knowledge from being disrupted by unexpected events – after all, a technically well-built canoe is not free of powerful unpredictable waves that could sink it; in the second, witchcraft is the explanation for the fact that, despite his skill, a good potter molds some objects in clay that crack. Without denying the important contributions from areas such as psychoanalysis and literature, it is possible that a spiral back to anthropological tradition may help us tackle new challenges as well.

It can be argued, however, that the distinctions that Malinowski and Evans-Pritchard made between control by knowledge and control through magic, or between the rationality of empirical thinking and the natural philosophy of witchcraft are just a few more dichotomies.

In an effort to show that the primitive mind was logical and inquisitive within the premises of their own culture, these authors played the current European mindset of the time. At this point, I feel I should include the poignant 1975 study of the Baktaman people by Frederik Barth. The author shows us that the seven long and painful stages of initiation of this New Guinea group result in the simple understanding that whatever knowledge one may reach is only a limited area of brightness in a dense, dark, uncertain universe – just like a small clearing in the middle of a thick forest.<sup>9</sup>

But there is another aspect to consider. Zealous as they try to be in dealing with other people's perspectives, anthropologists have not always managed to reflect back onto themselves. Invoking chance as a subject is thus a way to include *our* version of Zande witchcraft and to blur the dominant Western tension between predetermined destination and individual will. In other words, like the Azande, theoretical innovations about the dialectic of inter-ethnic friction between Indians and locals, about the movement from Indians themselves to Blacks within Brazilian society and so on, were explained not by intellectual individual pursuits, but as special moments in sequences of events – the *acasos*, the results of some sorts of coincidence. Viewed against the backdrop of Zande witchcraft, these accidents are closer to what Paul Ricoeur called “founding events,”<sup>10</sup> situations that led those authors towards new experiences, or, perhaps, as those privileged moments in which a transcendent truth is perceived in a flash of intuition – occasions that Virginia Woolf calls “moments of being”. To think about chance in this way does not invalidate more comprehensive, psychological or sociological explanations, but it adds a new dimension to them.

I conclude with two observations resulting from looking at social scientists as natives: the first is related to *chance* and *vocation* which, at first glance, may seem contradictory: the calling, vocation, concerns an intellectual predisposition; chance is related to the unexpected. How can we imagine that chance guides vocation?

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<sup>9</sup> See E.E. Evans-Pritchard, *Witchcraft, Magic and Oracles among the Azande*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1937; B. Malinowski, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, [1922] New York: Doubleday, 1961 and *Magic, Science and Religion*, New York: The Free Press, 1948. For the Baktaman ethnography, see F. Barth *Ritual and Knowledge among the Baktaman*. New Haven: Yale, 1975.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. P. Ricoeur, *The Conflict of Interpretations*, Northwestern University Press, 1974. Rio de Janeiro: Imago,

It is Max Weber who remarks that, although strict specialization is the path to scientific consciousness, chance plays an important role in sociology, more than in any other career. He confesses that he himself owes to chance his appointment to a university chair at a very early stage in his life. Considering the unquestionable authority of the author, we are left to wonder if Weber speaks as a common citizen or as a privileged sociologist, especially if we contrast his appointment with the delay with which Sigmund Freud received his. At 45 years old, Freud recognized that originality and merit were not enough to promote him to a professorship, and decided, in an attitude that exemplifies “*anti-acaso*”, to make use of the necessary influential personal relationships he had.

The second point stems from ethical concerns: by invoking chance, my interlocutors, and also Weber, implicitly denied that they had responsibility for the fateful events that changed their intellectual careers (again, Freud is the exception). Appealing to chance exempted them from individual will, thus adhering to an ethos of personal humility, whose rupture would perhaps indicate an undesirable arrogance.<sup>11</sup> Of course, given the project of building a cohesive academic group, a “school”, some other topic other than race relations would have served Florestan, or that, having found Darcy Ribeiro, Roberto Cardoso could have created another “Eve” from sociology instead of the notion of inter-ethnic friction. In the native version, however, it is as if the development of the social sciences in Brazil depended on chance events, an interpretation that, certainly, none of them would accept. More appropriate, then, would be to consider chance the allowable residue of “irrationality” in the academic world, or, that *imponderabilia* does not invalidate, but rather enriches and gives that essential human dimension to the understanding of sociological phenomena .

## VI

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<sup>11</sup> For an appraisal of a sociologist’s career, see Max Weber, “Science as vocation”, H.H. Gerth & C. Wright Mills (org.) *Essays of Sociology*, 1970. For a biography of Freud, see Peter Gay, *Freud*. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1989.

Since it is you, I must say do it, and good luck. I must find time to read Antonio Candido. But I must say I do not ~~approve~~ approve of excessive use of dualism in intellectual expositions - externalism/internalism, flip/flop, tic/toc. ~~It~~ It makes things seem too simple, too facile. Reality to me seems all shades of murky gray; people don't do the opposite to what they did just because they were caught on their other foot, swinging this way. Only the most improbable chain of accidents can explain why I am here in Brasil, now.

I agree that it is our job as anthropologists or historians etc to try and hack some form out of the morass of events, trace some logic ...

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I agree that it is our job as anthropologists or historians etc to try and hack some form out of the morass of events, trace some logic, discover patterns.

*But I don't see that we can really rely on too many of them at once, as givens, without leading to the most precarious of arguments.*

The author of these lines is Peter Silverwood-Cope (1945-1989), who inspired many of his students to temper tradition with irreverence, and prevent a separation between anthropology as an academic discipline and the anthropologist's own life experience. Like Georges Braque, he knew that, with age, "*l'art et la vie ne font qu'un*". The excerpts above are part of a letter, dated August 14 1979, in which Peter commented on my doctorate thesis research project. Reflecting on the theme of chance, I take the opportunity to dedicate these "Tricks" to his memory.

*English revision by Brian Hazlehurst*