

Interview with Jean-Louis Bodin¹

Katherine Condon
Statistical Journal of the IAOS
E-mail: kcondoniaos@gmail.com

The views and opinions expressed in the interview are those of the interviewee and do not necessarily reflect the policy or position of the Statistical Journal of the International Association for Official Statistics nor IOS Press.



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Jean-Louis Bodin was the second president of the IAOS and one of the Founding members of IAOS in 1985. He was also President of the ISI in 1999–2001. During his distinguished career of 50 years, he served the first 40 years as an official statistician in the French and European statistical systems. He is now an international consultant specialized in the organization of public statistical systems. He also has been active in both national and international statistical societies in many different capacities and has been bestowed with many honors: Chevalier de la Légion d’Honneur (Knight of the Legion of Honour) in France; the Medal of Statistical Merit in Vietnam; the African Statistical Award bestowed by the UN Economic Conference for Africa and Kawaleski Orderu Zaszcęgi (Knight of the Order of Merit) in Poland.

J.-L. Bodin was born in 1941 in Bordeaux, France, the capital city of one of the most famous wine producing regions in the world. He attended and graduated from not just one but two prestigious French schools: the Ecole Polytechnique in 1963, and then the Ecole Nationale de la Statistique et de l’Administration Economique (ENSAE) in 1966.

In the interview, J.-L. Bodin talked about his many experiences within the fields of official statistics, what drew him to becoming a statistician, as well as growing up in post-war France and some of his greatest satisfactions during his official career, as well as in retirement as a champion for the organization of public statistical systems and ethics and good practices in official statistics. The interview concluded with a request that J.-L. Bodin bestows some words of wisdom from a former president to the incoming president of IAOS.

INTERVIEWER: *We are interviewing you in Washington, DC, on a Friday afternoon in a rare*

face-to-face interview. You are traveling from France. What brings you to this area?

I'm a consultant with the World Bank and a member of an Advisory Panel for one trust fund managed by the Bank on Statistical Capacity Building (known under the acronym of TFSCB). I'm in mission every year in DC at this period of the year to fulfill this duty to [annually] evaluate the achievements of this trust fund.

INTERVIEWER: This is not your first visit to the United States; do you remember your first visit and the things you noticed as being different?

In fact, my first steps in the USA were in Brownsville, TX airport in 1967. At the time there were no charter flights for a student to travel between Europe and Mexico City. However, I did find a charter from Brussels to Brownsville, TX, which is on the USA-Mexico border. What I remember most about Brownsville were the men with their splendid hats and everybody had a gun, even in the airport halls. I'm afraid that little has changed since then in Texas! In 1997, I attended the ASA Joint Statistical Meetings in Dallas. There were also many men in the streets of Dallas with hats and guns!

On a more professional note, my real first visit to the United States was a mission to Washington, DC, in 1969 to visit the U.S. Census Bureau. I used the opportunity to visit and discover New York City. Now I am often in New York City, not only for visiting the UN Statistical Division, but also because both my son and my daughter are living and working in the Big Apple. Compared to 1969, the motto of Manhattan could be the one of the Olympic Games: "Citius, Altius, Fortis," which translates to: "Faster – Higher – Stronger".

INTERVIEWER: How are we doing in the U.S. in the food department? Do you head straight for any particular place for a particular type of food that you can only get here in the U.S. when you come for a visit?

Concerning food, it is overall much better than 47 years ago during my first visit!!!

INTERVIEWER: What other parts of the world have you visited while wearing your "statistician" hat?

I have been to many, many countries. I have been interested in international business practically most of my career. I have participated in all ISI biennial sessions (now called the World Statistical Congress) for the last 40 years, which means I have been to 20 different countries all around the world. However, my background in cooperation and technical assistance to developing and transition countries started in 1985. I

have visited almost all Francophone countries in North and Sub-Saharan Africa, as well as Ethiopia, Egypt, Kenya, and South Africa. I have also made several trips to China and maybe 25 visits to Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos. I have had the opportunity to organize joint seminars with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Singapore. In Latin America, I organized cooperation activities with Brazil, Chile and Argentina. Finally, after the fall of the Berlin Wall, I have organized very important cooperation activities with Poland and Romania, and on a smaller scale with Russia, Ukraine, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Bulgaria. And I would not like to forget New Caledonia that is a Pacific Island under French sovereignty. But I certainly forget a lot!

I don't like to merge tourism and professional travels. But when a country seems highly attractive, I return to it for holidays with my wife. I did this for instance with China, Vietnam, Thailand, Mexico, and Brazil.

INTERVIEWER: Did you ever cross paths with 'famous people'? Any anecdotes you would like to share?

Yes, of course. I remember for instance that during the first ISI session I attended (it was in London in 1969), I crossed in a corridor Kolmogorov;² what a surprise! Seeing a theorem in the flesh!

But my most memorable encounter was during my attendance at a meeting in Gaza in 1995 where we had the surprise to see the meeting chaired by Yasser Arafat, the President of the Palestinian Authority. We were a group of about 15 experts coming from different countries for the presentation of the Palestinian Statistical Master Plan. This corresponds to a very interesting thing: when a country is created, one proof of its existence is the production of statistics. It is not by chance that the first administration created by President Arafat after the signature of the Oslo agreements in 1993 was the Palestinian Bureau of Statistics. Something similar happened when Belgium was created by UK, France, Austro-Hungarian Empire, Prussia, and France in 1830. Belgium was a totally artificial creation but the production of a statistical yearbook by Adolphe Quételet in 1831 announced to the World that Belgium existed.

²Andrey Nikolaevich Kolmogorov (1903–1987) "was a 20th-century Russian mathematician who made significant contributions to the mathematics of probability theory, topology, intuitionistic logic, turbulence, classical mechanics, algorithmic information theory, and computational complexity." (Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Andrey_Kolmogorov).

INTERVIEWER: *You were born in Bordeaux, France and grew up there during WWII. Any childhood memories from that era?*

Yes, I was born in Bordeaux, one of the most famous places in the World for the production of great wines. I was born in March 1941, almost two years after the German invasion. But of course, I have not a lot of memories from that time. When the German Army had to withdraw from the Southwest of France in August 1944, I was only 3-years old. But nevertheless, I remember some shelling by the Allied Air Forces since my parents' house was located near the railway station which was a strategic target for shelling, and the projectiles and deployment firing of the German air defense lit up the sky; the light and sound of this was, for me, like a wonderful firework. I also remember the departure of the German infantry with thousands of soldiers walking to the railway station from their barracks with an impressive discipline. This was followed some hours later, by the arrival of the French Free Forces in a total disorder.

INTERVIEWER: *Did you know as a little boy that a war was going on? What was daily life like back then for your family?*

No of course, I was too young to realize that a war was going on. After the war, I was living in a very modest family. My father died by accident in March 1946, when I was 5 years old. I realize now that the life was difficult, especially for my mother. However, it was difficult for a lot of people at that time. Thanks to the social benefits created in France immediately after the war, I succeeded to spend every year one month of holiday on the seaside near Bordeaux. I liked to go to school. I liked very much to read books. Thus, it was not really for me a difficult period even if the daily life was far from being easy.

INTERVIEWER: *Sometimes there are people or events in our childhood or when we are young adults that turn us in a certain direction. Did you experience that? Were you always attracted to statistics?*

As you can read in my conversation with Gilbert Saporta edited one year ago in the *International Statistical Review*³, I arrived at the field of statistics quite by chance. I was a bright student in secondary school and so I prepared for (what is called in the French educational system) the competitive exams to enter "grandes écoles". I was admitted to the "Ecole Polytechnique" which is considered to be one of the most prestigious

of these schools. I was really good at mathematics and physics but was not attracted to a purely scientific career. I wanted to devote myself to public service in the domain of economics and society, and that is how I chose to work at the National Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies (INSEE). I have never regretted the fact that chance led me to this profession fifty years ago.

INTERVIEWER: *You have studied at two prestigious French schools: Ecole Polytechnique and Ecole Nationale de la Statistique et de l'Administration Economique. Did your formal education prepare you well for your future career?*

Yes, and no. No, if you think of the courses in probabilities and mathematical statistics. But yes, if you think of learning the need to be rigorous in thinking and addressing the problems. My formal education also fostered an attitude of openness to the world and the society in these two schools, not only through the courses in economics, but also in different sister disciplines such as sociology.

INTERVIEWER: *Has the field of statistics changed since you received your education? If no, what has sustained it, if yes, in what ways did it change?*

Yes, a lot has changed of course. First, in the production of results; even if it seems unbelievable, when I was at the School of Statistics between 1964 and 1966, I had no course on Electronic Data Processing (EDP) and informatics; we just learned the functioning of punched cards machines, with just a 1-hour presentation of this new machine that was an electronic computer. And of course, the intrusion of EDP in the life of statisticians did not concern only the production of results, but all activities like the collection of data through the Computer Assisted Methods or "tablettes", the econometric models, the treatment of big data.⁴ Another big difference, is the attention paid since the middle of the 70 s to the users' needs. I can say that, at least in developed countries, we were successful at that time in going from supply-driven activities to demand driven activities.

INTERVIEWER: *You have now retired, but you had a long distinguished career at the National Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies (INSEE). Tell us about the French statistical system.*

There are mainly two modes of organization of public statistical systems: either they are centralized like in Sweden or the Netherlands, with a central office com-

³Saporta, Gilbert. 2015. "A Conversation with Jean-Louis Bodin." *International Statistical Review*. 83(1): 2-16.

⁴In some ways, we statisticians are the pioneers in the processing of big data, thanks to the use of administrative data.

petent in almost all fields, or they are decentralized with each ministerial department having its own statistical bureau. The most decentralized system by far is that of the United States. France has a very largely decentralized system, like that of the United Kingdom, but less decentralized than the United States. But the French system is strongly coordinated around the INSEE, the central organization managing and coordinating all the production of statistics, which is not the case for the American system. The French statistical system is in some way “original” because it is both decentralized and narrowly-coordinated.

I know of the organizational methods of many statistical systems all over the world. They are all very different from one another. But I can say that there is no one general system or model that could be considered better than the others. Building an efficient statistical system in a country implies taking into account the culture, history, and existing administrative organizational modes. In France, the model works reasonably well and I see no reason to change it.

INTERVIEWER: During your time at INSEE, what do you see as your greatest accomplishments?

I would prefer to speak of my greatest satisfactions. I leave it up to other people to make a judgment on my greatest accomplishments. And I cannot separate what I did at INSEE with what I did during my times away from INSEE. Actually, out of the 40 years of my active career, I only spent 27 years at the INSEE itself. I also worked for four years from 1977 to 1980 as Head of the statistical service of the Ministry of Equipment, Housing and Public Works. After that, I created a Eurostat Liaison Office with the European Parliament in Brussels for three years from 1997 to 2000. Finally, I spent the last six years of my active career in the international cooperation agency of the Ministry for Economy and Finance. Since I retired in 2006, I have been a consultant in the fields of the organization of public statistical systems, and ethics and good practices in official statistics.

In the 70s I was happy for having convinced the Board of INSEE that it was possible to use automatic EDP methods for data entry. At the beginning of the 80s, I developed the production of big data banks to facilitate the users’ access to statistical information. But the greatest and most challenging work related to an opportunity I had between 1985 and 1997 to participate as a representative of France in international debates at the UN Statistical Commission in New York, or at the Eurostat Program Committee in Luxembourg or at the UN Conference of European Statisticians in Geneva,

and also at meetings of some UN Economic Regional Commissions in Bangkok or Addis-Ababa. Of course, being elected ISI President-Elect in 1997 and becoming ISI president in 1999 was also an important source of satisfaction! And I’m happy to have further opportunities since my retirement as an international consultant and also the chair of an NGO⁵ entitled “Statisticians for development”. I can say that I have an excellent network of statisticians all around the world.

INTERVIEWER: Is there any one project you look back on as your favorite project?

Yes, maybe the creation of AFRISTAT⁶ in the 90s. Let me tell you this story:

The INSEE played an active role in cooperating with countries of Central and Eastern Europe in the 1990s but without sacrificing sub-Saharan African and southern Mediterranean countries. We added one cooperation, but did not replace one with the other. With the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, we can say we rode in on a huge wave, while being able to keep our balance. In Africa, our cooperation took on a completely innovative form with the implementation of AFRISTAT. It has been the most gratifying project on which I worked on in my career. The INSEE thus contributed to the creation of a very original institution. French-speaking African countries are small, and statistical production in small countries is obviously more expensive than in big ones because you cannot realize economies of scale. Yet, these countries had to address the same challenges, consisting at that time in structural adjustment. Conducting a survey on household living conditions is not all that different whether you are in Benin, Niger, Senegal or Burkina Faso. So why not share rare resources in a multinational organization, which would moreover permit researchers to standardize statistics between the different countries? The standardization was all the more necessary as the institutions in charge of the unique currencies of the monetary zones existing in Western Francophone countries and in Central Francophone countries had also acquired in 1993 economic competences, becoming economic and monetary unions. AFRISTAT made standardization of statistics possible which allowed for the assessment of convergences in the two economic and monetary unions. I have always been reluctant to make AFRISTAT evolve too fast towards a continental structure because Africa, with more than fifty, culturally di-

⁵Non-Governmental Organization

⁶For more information on AFRISTAT, go to <http://www.afristat.org/>.

verse, countries is too big to have a unique organization straight away. But one of my deepest regrets is that no other institution like AFRISTAT has been created in other areas, like the SADEC for southern African countries or in Eastern Africa. They could have worked as a network and ultimately become the continental structure Africa needs. Twenty years after the treaty was signed, AFRISTAT is still working and it has become a major reference. AFRISTAT started with 13 member countries and has grown to 22 member countries.

For me, AFRISTAT has been an unforgettable experience. At the time, one had to wear many hats: a diplomatic writer to write the treaty that 13 countries would sign in Abidjan in September 1993; a real estate agent to find premises in Bamako which had been chosen as the organization's headquarters; and a financier to put together a financial package because AFRISTAT rests on a kind of trust fund. And yet, still, I had to remain a statistician! I keep collaborating with great delight in AFRISTAT's works, notably by participating as an observer in the meetings of its scientific committee and its Board.

INTERVIEWER: *You have left your mark as a statistician that touched many parts of the world in different ways. Tell us about your activities outside of INSEE. I am especially thinking of the African continent. Did you introduce the French Statistical System to other countries of the world or did you find that it might not work in all countries?*

As I already told you, I cannot separate what I did at INSEE with what I did during my periods outside of INSEE. However, with respect to the last part of your last question: "did I introduce the French Statistical System to other countries?" Certainly not! I have always presented the French system as an example, not as a model! It is up to every country to build its own model; of course it must be compatible with the international standards as they are described for instance in the *UN Handbook of Statistical Organizations Manual*.

I know of the organizational methods of many statistical systems all over the world. They are all very different from one another. But I can say that there is no one general system or model that could be considered better than the others. Building an efficient statistical system in a country implies taking into account the culture, history and existing administrative organizational modes.

INTERVIEWER: *You are considered one of the founding fathers or original drafters of a number of things. One of them is the UN Resolution on the Fun-*

damental Principles of Official Statistics, which promoted appropriate professional practices to produce reliable statistical data. What is the history behind this resolution, now widely recognized as a critical benchmark in the development of national statistical systems, and what does the resolution stipulate (the Statistical Decalogue)?

Indeed, I am quite proud of having been one of the statisticians behind this Resolution, along with peoples such as Josef Olenski, Poland or Carlo Malaguerra, Switzerland. Its history is actually related to the fall of the Berlin Wall and to the transition of the countries of Central and Eastern Europe from political systems based on a single-party rule and on an entirely planned economy to organizational systems based on a pluralistic democracy and on the principles of a market economy.

Countries of Central and Eastern Europe had methods firmly written in stone and sound, but obviously not comparable to what was being done in Western Europe. In those countries, the statistical systems were sometimes highly developed, often using effective computer systems. The problem was that the use of these statistics was very different from the one we know in democratic and market economy countries. For instance, personal information on firms was transmitted to their competent Ministry, but the aggregated information was considered secret and only the most senior officials of the Planning Office and the Communist Party knew about it. Unlike Western Europe where only the aggregated information was public and accessible without any discrimination to all citizens but where, in contrast, individual information was confidential and strictly protected.

The point was not to provide statisticians from countries of Central and Eastern Europe with a lot of technical advice, but above all to explain the use of statistics in a democratic and market economy country. It was basically a new paradigm for these countries. That was the true origin of this resolution. It was prepared at the request of countries like Poland or Romania because both statisticians and citizens had to understand the purpose that statistics serve in a country that was about to change its political, economic and social paradigms.

The Resolution was thus born in Europe, adopted by the Conference of European Statisticians in Geneva in June 1991 and passed into law in April 1992 by the ministerial conference of the UN Economic Commission for Europe.

In 1993 and 1994, the other regional UN Economic Commissions estimated that the resolution was of great

significance beyond the European framework. In April 1994, the UN Statistical Commission adopted this Resolution as a global one. Twenty-years later, in January 2014, the UN General Assembly endorsed the Resolution, which means recognition of its value by the political level.

The Resolution emphasizes the scientific and methodological independence of national statistical offices, the citizens' right to access information subject to the confidentiality of individual information and the necessity for international coordination and cooperation. The resolution is made up of 10 principles and is often referred to as the "Statistician's Decalogue." Let us hope its life expectancy will be as long as the Decalogue announced to Moses on Mount Sinai!

INTERVIEWER: *Have recent political and economic events in Europe and the world made the adherence to the resolution more challenging for the national statistical institutions? If yes, how so?*

Since then, many other codes of ethics or good practices have emerged, particularly in Europe where the necessities of an increasing standardization and difficulties of various kinds, especially with Greece, have urged the European Commission and Council to adopt a European Statistics Code of Practice. In Africa also, the member countries of the African Union signed in February 2009 the African Charter on Statistics. But the 1994 resolution was in a way the mother of all resolutions and codes.

A well-known case took place in 2010 in Canada where, without consulting statisticians, the government, under the pressure of conservative parties, decided to replace the long census mandatory questionnaire with an optional questionnaire. The reasons were not financial; as the costs were comparable, but ideological as the government considered that the State was not to interfere in what was not of its direct concern. Ivan Fellegi, who was no longer chief statistician in Canada, wrote an article to protest this decision in which he said that, after his initial reluctance to the Resolution, he had no idea how necessary it had become twenty years later. This is undoubtedly the greatest tribute ever paid to the Resolution. As you know, after the recent federal elections, the new Canadian government decided to reinstate the long form census as mandatory for the 2016 Census.

INTERVIEWER: *Since your retirement in 2006, you have been a champion for the organization of public statistical systems and ethics and good practices in official statistics. Over the years as a consultant, have you seen a change in the issues and challenges that you have been asked to work on?*

Most of my time as a consultant was spent with Sub-Saharan Africa and in particular with AFRISTAT. I am not what some people call an "Afro-pessimistic." It takes a long time to build a solid, efficient and reliable statistical system. But I have seen strong progresses for 25 years.

However, it is true that I am as much concerned to defend the integrity of statistics and the independence of statisticians. I do this in a variety of ways: by organizing meetings or conferences and presenting papers; for example, during the ISI World Statistical Congresses. On behalf of the IAOS Program Committee for the next conference I'm preparing the program for the 4th theme: Fundamental Principles in Practice. I was also one of the speakers invited by the UN Statistical Division two years ago for the celebration of the 20th Anniversary of the UN Resolution on Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics.

INTERVIEWER: *You are one of the founding members of the IAOS [1985 with Vera Nyitrai] and you served as its second president (1989–91). How did the organization come about?*

Before the creation of the IAOS, there were other ISI associations (at that time we spoke of sections) dealing more or less with official statistics; for instance, the IASS (International Association of Surveys Statisticians). These other sections are grouping statisticians interested by the development of methods in their domain. The objective of the IAOS was different: several people insisted on giving to the IAOS the name of International Association for Official Statistics and not International Association of Official Statisticians. That means that we hoped that this new ISI section would be open not only to official statisticians but also to the users of official statistics and more generally to all those who are interested by the role of statistics in the society. These goals are still very relevant after 30 years.

I can also add Vera Nyitrai was also happy to create an independent forum where statisticians coming from both sides of the Europe may discuss in a neutral place and a scientific atmosphere.

INTERVIEWER: *Tell us more about Vera Nyitrai.*

What can I say? Vera Nyitrai was a nice person, very open, and she succeeded to make the [*Központi Statisztikai Hivatal*] KSH,⁷ one of the best in Central and Eastern Europe. In particular, she introduced a large number of surveys in social statistics, which was

⁷For more information, see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hungarian_Central_Statistical_Office.

rather rare in the socialist countries. That's true that Hungary was more open to the Western world than all the other socialist countries. She was really a bridge between the statisticians working in the socialist countries and the other ones, and was appreciated and recognized by her peers as such.

After the events of 1989, she had difficulties understanding what happened in her country and consequently it was a challenge for her to be the leader of the statistical transition. However, she left to her successor a wonderful "tool" – for the production of official statistics and, as a result, the statistical transition was certainly easier in Hungary than in other former communist countries.

INTERVIEWER: *You are an advisor to the organizing committee for the 2016 IAOS conference. Any surprises on the program?*

Yes, I am a member of the Program Committee. I think it operates very well and I have no doubt that it will be an interesting and lively conference. I like the motto chosen by the IAOS Executive committee: "The Spirit of Official Statistics: Partnership and Continuous Innovation". The motto reflects exactly the core objectives of our Association.

INTERVIEWER: *What words of wisdom would you pass on to Ola Awad, the current IAOS president?*

Ola doesn't need any words of wisdom! Ola is a very wise and dedicated person. I met her for the first time in 2007 when I was an international consultant helping the PCBS [Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics] to prepare its first National Strategy for the Development of Statistics. It was a very challenging task, especially because of the very specific and difficult situation of her Bureau and the country.

What can I add to what you wrote in the summary of the Ola's interview you made in the last issue of

the SJAOS! She presents a strategic plan built on four objectives: relevancy in terms of activities and publications; visibility; partnerships with key regional and international organizations; and institutionalization of the activities within the association. In this interview, Ola also talked about PCBS, the work that goes on there and the unique challenges of collecting, producing and disseminating data under very unique circumstances and very specific difficulties.

INTERVIEWER: *We thank you so very much for meeting with us face-to-face during your annual visit to Washington, D.C.*

The face-to-face interview with Jean-Louis Bodin took place on March 4, 2016. Katherine Condon and Nancy Torrieri conducted the interview.

Katherine Condon is a demographer/sociologist at U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) Office of Policy and Strategy. She holds a PhD from Florida International University (Miami, FL) in Sociology and Anthropology and has a Masters (and is ABD) from University of Pennsylvania (Philadelphia, PA) in Demography. Prior to joining USCIS, she worked at the U.S. Census Bureau in the Population Division's Population Estimates and Projection Area's Administrative Records and Methodological Research Branch, as well as in the Decennial Programs Area.

Nancy Torrieri worked as a geographer and program analyst for the U.S. Census Bureau before her retirement from that agency in 2014. She now works for ER-IMAX, Inc. providing consulting and technical writing services to the Census Bureau for the American Community Survey and 2020 Decennial Census programs. Nancy holds a Ph.D. in Geography and an M.A. in History from the University of Maryland (College Park, MD).