

Acknowledgements

Social science can be practised in more or less risky ways. Pursuing one unchanging line of research, whatever the novelty of the findings it yields, is one option. It is safer than others, but it is often associated with decreasing returns. Investigating the surprises emerging from the field and using them as a hunch is another option, and often a fruitful one. But conversely there are more risks involved. This book is the result of the second option. All of the findings exposed were unexpected with regard to my initial research project. I intended to investigate the power of independent regulatory agencies, by comparing European food and pharmaceutical agencies. My strategy was to circumvent the usual controversies that seemed to justify the creation of these agencies and determine their success or failure, to study the admittedly more mundane and nitty-gritty aspects: what people in these agencies do, their day-to-day acts and practices, their expertise and ways of thinking, the way in which the objects of their action are constituted, categorised and classified, and so on. One thing made a strong impression on me (and despaired me a little too) as I started to interview and observe people. All used a highly coded language in the most natural way to describe the regulatory activities in the area. They had a language of their own. They employed a number of very neutral and procedural terms, often neologisms, without apparent need to define them even though there was nothing natural in regulation being constructed by such terms. 'Periodic safety update report', 'post-authorisation safety study', 'marketing authorisation' and 'pharmacovigilance', 'risk assessment', 'risk management', 'traceability', 'rapid alert system', 'identification of emerging risks' or 'epidemiology-surveillance' sounded to me like a very odd glossary. They indicated that the daily practice of regulation seemed coded and to some extent also codified. There was enough there I thought to depart from my original plans and I set out to understand how this knowledge to conduct regulatory activities comes about.

The result of this intellectual journey is exposed in the book, so I need not go into more details here. But I want to thank the people who took the risk of accompanying me down this road. Jean-Claude Thoenig could have discouraged me from taking such an unprepared change of direction and pushed me on safer paths. Instead, his interest grew as I progressed

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