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## FRENCH SOCIOLOGY AT THE BEGINNING OF THE NINETIES

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In the 1980s, French sociology no longer enjoyed the favourable climate of the 1960s and early 1970s. Today there are few illusions left. Sociology has ceased to occupy a central position in the “guided transformation” of society and the sociologist is no longer seen as a herald of modernism or post-modernism, a favourite “adviser to the prince”. The educated public has become progressively less interested in books dealing more or less directly with sociology. Uncertainty about the future, whether on a professional, a national or even a European level, has generated a wave of nostalgia which has given a real boost to history, and not only to the prestigious tradition of university history. The attractiveness of sociology has also begun to wane for the new generation of students who tend to be more interested, at least where the human sciences are concerned, in the specialist fields of information and communication. Consequently, even if some sociology departments have managed to keep student numbers buoyant, the decline has already set in, especially in Paris. These various factors have combined to weaken the overall position of sociology, which remains fragile despite the unquestionable developments which have taken place in the discipline. And yet this situation, though difficult, hardly warrants, in my view, a pessimistic diagnosis of the present or future state of the discipline, given the new directions currently shaping up.

### **1. The transformation of the intellectual climate and the crystallisation of new research directions**

For a variety of reasons, connected both with the disenchantment generated by the Chinese, Cuban or Soviet “models”, and with the domestic failure of successive governments to resolve the major problems posed by the recession, the 1980s have seen a progressive and increasingly adamant rejection of global ideologies. Marxism, which previously occupied a dominant position in intellectual life, and whose general influence was felt far beyond the small circle of academic Marxists, has been the first to experience the full blast of this shift in direction: it has now ceased to be the major reference point against which to “situate” individual social scientists. In its “fall”, it has been accompanied by other ideologies – such as Third Worldism – with which it was more or less

closely associated and which, although of less general importance, are often quite significant in the social sciences.

In this connection, it is important to note that while all types of Marxism have been hit by this deep-rooted disillusionment, the previously dominant version, structuralist Marxism, has been more specifically and more durably affected; so much so that it has experienced a virtual collapse. The approach and the themes developed by Althusser, who was one of the leading protagonists of intellectual debate in the former period, or by Poulantzas, the main champion of structuralist Marxism in the field of sociology, have rapidly lost whatever influence they ever had. This had led to a somewhat paradoxical situation : if their ideas have any currency at all today, it is to be found neither in France nor even on the continent of Europe, where they were developed, but in the Anglo-Saxon world, in Great Britain and especially in the United States.

But in France, the structuralist approach, which underlies this current and which, in a variety of more or less radical or explicit forms, constitutes one of the dominant characteristics of the social philosophy and of the sociology of the two preceding decades, has now been fundamentally challenged. And in such a context it was virtually inevitable that the thought of Michel Foucault, another major representative of the previous period, would eventually be tarred with the same brush. Some have called for Foucault to be “forgotten”;<sup>1</sup> in fact, what is happening is a break with Foucault.

The combined insights of Althusser and Foucault so dominated the previous period that it is possible, on the basis of these two approaches alone, to identify the former overriding tendencies in sociological research : sociologists were recommended, if not actually required, to think in terms of structured totalities (whether these were social formations or epistemological systems), themselves subjected to modes of structural causality, in a perspective which aimed to supersede existing theories of “the science of man”. The flavours of the month were *structuralism*, *determinism*, “*anti-humanism*” and *holism*. In such a climate, sociologists were more attentive to synchronic than to diachronic criteria; they became obsessed with the problem of the reproduction<sup>2</sup> of social systems and paid scant attention to the analysis of social change. Their constant preoccupation was in apprehending “structural determination”; they tended to attach little or no significance to the degree of autonomy enjoyed by the agents they were studying, these being sometimes reduced to mere “structural support systems”.<sup>3</sup>

1 Jean Baudrillard, *Oublier Foucault*, Paris, Galilée, 1977.

2 The ideas of the “reproduction” school, as elaborated in particular by Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron in *La reproduction*, Paris, Minuit, 1970, no doubt constitute the clearest expression of this type of interest.

3 Here we have used the terminology of Louis Althusser.

Sociologists were expected to steer clear of lapses into any “philosophy of the subject” and in so doing to neglect the specific impulses of different social actors. Finally, they were prone to postulate the existence of a form of total social control whose ramifications the disciples of Foucault (in the light of their master’s work, *Surveiller et Punir*) had the task of denouncing.<sup>4</sup>

Today’s sociology is based on a totally different set of characteristics. The structuralist and post-structuralist wave has broken. Structuralism is no longer a first source of inspiration, even if it still represents a type of thinking against which some sociologists find it useful to situate themselves. The obsession with social control has gradually faded and with it has disappeared a fundamentally naïve – if not actually caricatural – vision of the phenomena of domination. Determinism is regularly challenged, and even when it is not rejected outright, there is much greater reluctance to accept that it can have a massive or unilateral impact. As for anti-humanism, the new direction is much less clear, but the concept itself is considered outdated, and the major protagonists on this question would not use the same type of language. Where sociology is concerned, it is therefore possible to speak of a complete turnaround in thinking. It would, of course, be too simplistic to see this merely as a return swing of the pendulum : sea-changes in the intellectual landscape never entirely respect the neat patterns of periodisation, nor does the emergence of new directions in research generally happen overnight or without encountering resistance.

The turnaround is characterised above all by the “official” appearance on the French sociological scene of methodological individualism, an astonishingly late development when compared with Anglo-Saxon countries.<sup>5</sup> The event itself was even invested with a degree of solemnity on the publication of Raymond Boudon’s and François Bourricaud’s veritable manifesto, the *Dictionnaire critique de la sociologie*.<sup>6</sup> The two authors situate their work in the tradition of Max Weber, at any rate the Max Weber who, in a letter to Robert Liefman, expressed his utter hostility to “exercises based on collective concepts” in sociology.<sup>7</sup> That sets the tone : Boudon and Bourricaud express their rejection of “totalitarian realism”, propose to treat social facts as “aggregate phenomena

4 *Surveiller et punir : naissance de la prison*, Paris, Gallimard, 1975. As an example, see Philippe Meyer, *L’Enfant et la raison d’Etat*, Paris, Seuil, 1977, in which Foucault’s theses are reduced to a simple “vulgate”.

5 The debate about methodological individualism took place in Great Britain in the 1950s and the early 1960s.

6 This seminal work was published by Presses Universitaires de France in 1982, with a second edition in 1986.

7 Max Weber’s letter is dated 9 March 1920, the year of his death. The quotation from this letter is given on the fly-sheet and also at the beginning of the first article of the *Dictionnaire*, which deals with action. This gives an indication of the importance that the two authors attach to it.

... resulting from the coming together of individual actions” and assert that “the principle of *methodological individualism* must be regarded as a fundamental principle, not only of economics but of all the social sciences”.<sup>8</sup> Clearly, a work of this type could not be received without reticence and reservations; but its publication and its impact bear witness to the new climate which I believe can be characterised by three basic traits : (1) an interest in the economic paradigm; (2) a mistrust of determinism; (3) an insistence on the rational dimension behind human and social behaviour.

The *economic paradigm*, which for years aroused the hostility of most French sociologists, and which had in fact been more or less ignored by them, began to attract attention through partial borrowings (Simon’s theory of limited rationality) or shared insights (the importance attached to game theory) in seminal works such as Crozier and Friedberg’s *L’Acteur et le système* or Adam and Reynaud’s *Conflits du travail et changement social*,<sup>9</sup> both of which offer a model of strategic analysis. And this new interest was reinforced by translation of the works of professional *economists* which dealt with problems the sociologist could not ignore, such as Olson’s *Logique de l’action collective*, published with a preface by Raymond Boudon.<sup>10</sup> Thus the problem of the relationship between economics and sociology was gradually formulated – or rather reformulated. In this respect, it is interesting to note the recent (relatively successful) organisation, under the aegis of the *Société française de sociologie*, of a colloquium on “Economy and Sociology”.<sup>11</sup> Such an event would have been difficult to imagine twelve or even ten years ago. The publication of the collective work, *Sur l’individualisme*, is also an indication of these recent preoccupations, although, as Pierre Birnbaum and Jean Leca indicate in their general introduction, individualism is approached from three distinct directions – descriptive, justificatory and explanatory<sup>12</sup> – of which only the latter need concern us here. But it is nevertheless revealing to see several authors pondering (and this is sometimes the central theme of their article) on the specific contribution of methodological individualism to the apprehension of social and political phenomena. It should be stressed that the conclusions to such studies are not

8 Raymond Boudon and François Bourricaud, *Dictionnaire critique de la sociologie*, p. 287, 2<sup>e</sup> éd., 1986, p. 307.

9 Michel Crozier and Erhard Friedberg, *L’acteur et le système*, Paris, Seuil, 1977; Gérard Adam and Jean-Daniel Reynaud, *Conflits du travail et changement social*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1978.

10 Mancur Olson, *Logique de l’action collective*, Paris, PUF, 1978. Boudon’s preface, pp. 7–20.

11 The colloquium took place on 6 and 7 February 1987.

12 Pierre Birnbaum and Jean Leca (eds.), *Sur l’individualisme*, Paris, Presses de la Fondation Nationale des Sciences Politiques, 1986, p. 13.

always positive. The present writer believes that, in the final analysis, the individualistic or utilitarian perspective does not offer an adequate basis on which to build a genuine theory of social-political mobilisation.<sup>13</sup> Georges Lavau even expresses serious reservations about the economic explanations of electoral behaviour.<sup>14</sup> More generally one might say that methodological individualism has aroused more interest than genuine conversion – but, as we shall see, this interest has helped incubate a number of significant developments.

*Mistrust of determinism* finds its strongest expression in Raymond Boudon's *La Place du désordre*.<sup>15</sup> This work is a resounding plea for the recognition of at least partial indeterminism in social phenomena. Specialists in these fields, Boudon insists, should prefer rather more cautious formulations than those which they have usually adopted: "determinism" has now been quite considerably relativised.<sup>16</sup> Here Boudon is translating into his own language themes which remain vague, though nevertheless implicit within the sociological community: the futility of any research into primary causes of social change; scepticism about the nomothetic pretensions of sociology, which were nevertheless proclaimed by the "founding fathers"; weariness, in the wake of the more excessive (and often also the more degraded) versions of structuralism, with any presumptuous, generalising theoretical constructions. But a good many sociologists would refuse to go further than this partial realm of agreement. In particular, they would not agree to base the analysis of social change solely on the principles of methodological individualism. And, despite well-known abuses resulting from theoretical generalisation, they would not systematically reject any "general theory". Whatever the state of these differences of opinion, there is broad agreement around the notion of a diversified set of determining factors, as opposed to one massive determinism: Boudon's warnings about epistemological caution appear to have been heeded, although it would be fairer to say that they were already shared by many. Researchers are now better equipped to pay attention to the plurality of situations, as can best be seen by the renewal of interest in local studies. Sixty local areas have recently been subjected to an in-depth study under the impressive research programme "observation of social change" that has brought together several teams under the joint direction of Jacques Lautman and Henri Mendras. The synthesis resulting from these projects bears witness to a new understanding of the

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13 François Chazel, "Individualisme, mobilisation et action collective", in Birnbaum and Leca, pp. 244–68.

14 Georges Lavau, "L'électeur devient-il individualiste?", in Birnbaum and Leca, pp. 301–29.

15 This work was published in 1984 by Presses Universitaires de France.

16 This expression was considered by the author to be of such significance that he used it as the title of Chapter VI of his book.

“local” phenomenon which is now understood less as a “visible” community and more as a complex whole made up of action systems.<sup>17</sup> This complexity can be usefully studied at the level of sociability : as Alain Degenne<sup>18</sup> has shown, researchers are now looking more specifically at networks of relationships and are thereby rediscovering the interest shown by Célestin Bouglé (1870–1940), or even Georg Simmel (1858–1918) in *social circles*; at the same time, they can benefit from the techniques for analysing social networks that have been developed in the United States. In this way, these new directions can give rise to methodological progress or at the very least, as a first step, to new methodological depths. The same point could be made about other objects of study, for instance the notion of “social trajectories”. First, the vocabulary has changed : today we are more inclined to speak of “itineraries”, that allows us to take more account of the element of autonomy enjoyed by the actors. Second, we are beginning to see more concern for the duration of phenomena, whether in the context of an individual biography or a collective history, a family or several generations. This reformulation of the aims and objectives has brought about shifts in methodology, which is now required not so much to serve up samples or cross sections but to get to grips with processes, both in their specificity and in their development. This explains the keen interest in biography and longitudinal analyses.<sup>19</sup>

In these new approaches, whether motivated by a desire to break with determinism or simply by a recognition of the occasionally contradictory plurality of determining forces, individual social actors can no longer be either ignored or neglected, and this reassessment has given rise, in certain instances, to an insistence on the *rationality of behaviour*. Of particular relevance in this connection are the rich insights to be drawn from the application to the sociology of organisations of Michel Crozier’s model of strategic analysis. François Dupuy and Jean-Claude Thoenig have succeeded in showing how, in the context of French administration, the same civil servant can at the same time rationally play two seemingly contradictory games : he can avoid any trespassing on his own patch by fostering relationships of avoidance (*évitement*) both with his superior and with his own staff, as well as a relationship of non-communication with his colleagues, while all the time looking for an “arrangement on the margins” with his external associates. It is therefore correct to suggest that the

17 Jacques Lautman and Henri Mendras (eds.), *L’esprit des lieux. Localités et changement social en France*, Paris, Ed. du CNRS, 1986.

18 Alain Degenne, “Sur les réseaux de sociabilité”, *Revue Française de Sociologie*, vol. XXIV, 1983, pp. 109–18.

19. Methodological workshops, regular meetings, research reports and publications in both French and other languages all bear witness to this new interest.

state administration suffers from bureaucratic rigidity, but only if it is also recognised that the same administration is constantly adapting itself to the environment through specific arrangements negotiated on a case-by-case basis.<sup>20</sup> Such an approach, which it would not be inappropriate to call “relatively rational”, is easily transposed from the specific sphere of organisations to that of public policy, and it comes as no surprise that these two authors, especially Jean-Claude Thoenig, have clearly set their sights in that direction.<sup>21</sup>

In a totally different field – collective behaviour – Pierre Birnbaum has argued the case for the (at least partial) value of utilitarian perspectives.<sup>22</sup> From general principles, he moved to specific examples by stressing the rational individual components of working-class strategy.<sup>23</sup> But once again it was Raymond Boudon who emerged as the most ambitious – and the most reckless – theoretician in putting forward, in one of his most recent books, a “rationalist theory of ideology”.<sup>24</sup> As Boudon himself admits, “classical” theories, whether or not they are Marxist in inspiration, see ideology as a body of false ideas that people cling to for passionate (in other words *irrational*) motives; while “modern” theories, like that of Geertz, rather tend to see in ideology a serious interpretation of the world which refuses to fit into criteria of truth or falsehood. But Boudon sees the analysis of ideologies quite differently: they may well be based on *false* premises, but it can be quite *rational* for the individual to adhere to them. The central part of Boudon’s book is devoted to an explanation of this paradox. It must be stressed that, in order to do this, Boudon is led to adopt a very broad definition of rationality: he is concerned to bring out the *correct reasons* which have led an individual to cling to false ideas, without restricting himself to a utilitarian interpretation of rationality or even to the Weberian framework of *Zweckrationalität*. On the other hand, Boudon wants to clarify the relationship between ideology and science, categories which he is careful not to set up in naïve opposition to one another. Indeed, for Boudon the problem is precisely to explain how false ideas can be backed up by the authority of science, and the explanation lies at the heart of his “restricted theory of ideology”. Boudon himself recognises the limits of his own theory, but, even so, one has to ask whether this analytical approach, which is influenced by the sociology of knowledge and is, in that sense, very exciting, can in fact offer an explanation

20 François Dupuy and Jean-Claude Thoenig, *Sociologie de l’administration française*, Paris, A. Colin, 1983 and *L’administration en miettes*, Paris, Fayard, 1985.

21 Jean-Claude Thoenig was responsible for Volume IV of the *Traité de Science Politique*, edited by Madeleine Grawitz and Jean Leca, Paris, PUF, 1985.

22 Pierre Birnbaum, *Dimensions du pouvoir*, Paris, PUF, 1984, Chap. X.

23 Pierre Birnbaum, “Action individuelle, action collective et stratégie des ouvriers”, in *Sur l’individualisme*, op. cit. ch. X.

24 Raymond Boudon, *L’idéologie ou l’origine des idées reçues*, Paris, Fayard, 1986.



of the intensity of the hold that ideologies, particularly political ideologies, can exert over social actors. Hopefully, Boudon will develop in more depth his concept of rationality,<sup>25</sup> so that the discussion deserved by the importance of this theme can begin to take place.

This stress on rationality (at least partial rationality) is symptomatic of the growing attention that is now being paid to the meaning of behaviour patterns. Can we now speak of a “return of the actor”, to use Alain Touraine’s expression?<sup>26</sup> The work of Touraine and his colleagues, whether dealing with the strengths and weaknesses of the new social movements (students, regionalism, anti-nuclear) or with the overall decline of the labour movement,<sup>27</sup> suggests that the expression is appropriate. It has shown that any in-depth analysis of social movements cannot avoid getting to grips with the meaning and intentions of action, even if their particular method – sociological intervention – gives rise to serious reservations. In the same way, François Dubet’s appropriately titled book, *La galère : jeunes en survie*,<sup>28</sup> shows how certain categories of particularly disadvantaged young people cannot be satisfactorily defined in terms of domination and exclusion (as the “received wisdom” of the 1970s would have put it), nor even in terms of disintegration, following the principles of classical sociology, but in fact show signs (often rather fleeting) of autonomy and resistance. Towards the end of his book, Dubet is led to speculate about the symptoms of “a nascent social movement”. In *Le Retour de l’acteur*, which admittedly sees itself as a sociological essay with a much broader sweep, Touraine goes even further in asserting that “a new type of subject is beginning to emerge”. “This book”, he continues, “ought perhaps to have been called *Le Retour du sujet*, because the subject is the name we give to the actor who is engaged in historical processes, in the production of the great normative directions of social life”.<sup>29</sup> Despite the brilliance of this formulation, I personally am worried by the equivalence (even partial) between actor and subject, which I fear risks creating confusion. It is essential to draw a rigorous distinction between the *analytical* and the *empirico-historical*. The return of the actor, in the sense in which we would use the term, can be used, in the current context, to refer to a more positive reassessment of the place of the actor in the

25 This concept only appears in this work as a long footnote at the end of chapter 1 (No. 14, pp. 294–95).

26 Alain Touraine, *Le retour de l’acteur*, Paris, Fayard, 1984.

27 Alain Touraine, Michel Wieviorka, François Dubet, *Le mouvement ouvrier*, Paris, Fayard, 1984. Previously Touraine and his team published *Lutte étudiante* (1978), *La prophétie anti-nucléaire* (1980), *Le pays contre l’Etat* (1981), all with Editions du Seuil.

28 Paris, Fayard 1987.

29 Alain Touraine, *Le retour de l’acteur*, op. cit., p. 15.

interpretation of social life, a reassessment which owes a great deal to the Touraine school. The return of the subject, on the other hand – if we have to use this type of language – is a concept which only acquires its full meaning with reference to concrete socio-historical change. If we accept the validity of this distinction, we would expect the expression “return of the actor” to be reserved for a certain type of transformation, observable via the paradigms and analytical modes of sociology, independently of any hypothesis or forecast about social evolution. Thus the actor (with a small “a”) as an analytical concept in sociology, would be totally dissociated from the historical Subject, a beast both the sociologist and the citizen have every reason to steer clear of.

## 2. Against the tide ?

Pierre Bourdieu and his followers have, at any rate, engaged battle against the “illusions” of a “philosophy of the subject” and steadfastly oppose any drift of sociological research towards subjectivism. The main concerns of the Bourdieu camp hardly seem in tune with the evolving trends I have tried to identify. Admittedly Bourdieu has always been at pains to distance himself from structuralism, in particular from the Marxist variety, which he regularly accused of having done away with all agents.<sup>30</sup> Very probably it was his rejection of Althusser’s reduction of historical agents to the simple function of structural “supports” that was at the heart of Bourdieu’s notion of “habitus”. The habitus, as a “system of lasting and transposable dispositions”<sup>31</sup> allows for mediation between the realm of social determination and the realm of practice. But it must be stressed at once that the habitus is the product of objective conditions, more precisely “of the material conditions of existence characteristic of a social class”<sup>32</sup> and, as such (necessity becomes a virtue), it gives rise to aspirations and practices that are objectively adjusted to meet the situation. Bourdieu’s “agents” are therefore very far from being “subjects”, and while the mediation of the habitus can be effective in so far as it is self-modifying in response to practical reality, it is in fact illusory, at least as far as the actor is concerned, since he is credited with no real autonomy. Only the deficiency of these habituses, that is to say the extent to which they lag behind present reality, allows us to escape from the dominant logic of reproduction, and it is only in this indirect

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30 This critique is formulated in Bourdieu’s *Le sens pratique*, Paris, Editions de Minuit, 1980, p. 70.

31 Pierre Bourdieu, *Le sens pratique*, p. 88.

32 Pierre Bourdieu, *Esquisse d’une théorie de la pratique*, Genève, Droz, 1972, p. 175.

way, and therefore to a very limited extent, that the habitus can be regarded, *stricto sensu*, as a “principle of invention”.<sup>33</sup> Such a concept, I feel, *recognises* the role of agents but, to paraphrase Bourdieu, does not *misrepresent* the importance of the social factor.

It is therefore hardly surprising if, in the new context of the 1980s, Bourdieu’s theoretical constructions have been subjected to serious criticism, directed in particular at his two major notions : educational *reproduction* and symbolic *domination*. Bourdieu’s model of reproduction through schooling, and the systematic opposition which he posits between democratisation and reproduction, have been accused of amounting to the “effect of a theoretical closed shop”.<sup>34</sup> The static features of his theory – at least in the early version – have also been deplored.<sup>35</sup> But it is the criticisms that have been levelled at the most recent formulation of the theory which seem to me to be the most relevant and the most significant. Pierre Bourdieu has now modified his theory in an attempt to take account of the changes in the French educational system over the last two decades and in particular of the explosion in student numbers. According to Bourdieu, the real “detonator” of this phenomenon is to be sought in “a transformation in the reproductive strategies of those sections of the upper and middle classes with the greatest quantities of economic capital”.<sup>36</sup> In order to maintain their position in a new economic system, which implies a new type of industrial management where degrees and diplomas become crucially important, these sections of the upper classes have, according to Bourdieu, converted their “economic capital” into “educational capital” and, as a result of their own intense usage of the educational system, they have forced all the other classes to increase very substantially their own investment in education. This may explain the concurrent phenomenon of inflation and devaluation of educational qualifications. These “conversion strategies” thus amount to little more than “changing in order to conserve”, competition in the educational field being quite simply translated into educational achievement rates as between the different classes and strata. In the end, “this peculiar form of class struggle” contributes massively to the “reproduction” of the status quo.<sup>37</sup> This original thesis, which

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33 Pierre Bourdieu, *Questions de sociologie*, Paris, Ed. de Minuit, 1980, p. 135.

34 Jean-Michel Berthelot, “Réflexions sur les théories de la scolarisation”, *Revue Française de Sociologie*, vol. XXIII, 1982, pp. 585–604. Berthelot’s remarks relate to all those subscribing to the model of the reproduction school, and not just to the Bourdieu/Passeron version of it.

35 Mohamed Cherkaoui, *Les changements du système éducatif en France 1950–1980*, Paris, PUF, p. 22, p. 91 n. 29.

36 Pierre Bourdieu, Luc Boltanski et Monique de Saint-Martin, “Les stratégies de reconversion”, *Information sur les Sciences Sociales*, vol. XII, 1973, pp. 61–113.

37 Pierre Bourdieu, *La distinction*, Paris, Ed. de Minuit, pp. 176–85.

draws attention to the relationship between shifts in the structures of industrial management and the educational itinerary of élites, does not stand up to close scrutiny, as Mohamed Cherkaoui has shown.<sup>38</sup> Instead of there being prior intensive use of the education system by those with most economic capital, Cherkaoui has shown that there is a *simultaneous* demand for education across all social groups. Moreover, far from there being a parallel evolution in educational attainment rates, he has discovered *differential* growth according to social categories. More generally, Cherkaoui emphasises the limitations of this type of explanation that only brings in factors exogenous to the educational system itself and that therefore seem to him to be “reductionist”. Through his insistence on *endogenous* factors and through his concern to develop a sociology of *change*, Cherkaoui is in effect pleading for a new analysis of educational phenomena that is poles apart from the previously dominant tradition, of which Bourdieu is the principal representative.

The break is certainly less dramatic in the area of the sociology of culture, if only because Bourdieu’s early project – to demonstrate the social stratification of cultural practice – is perceived, even according to the “pre-established” notions of the discipline, as being taken for granted. But if there is agreement on the basics of his study, there is little chance of agreement on the extreme *conclusions* which Bourdieu feels can be drawn from them, nor on the *theoretical interpretation* of the survey data which Bourdieu proposes. Indeed, there are very few people, including sociologists, who would accept the pure and simple substitution of the *social critique of judgment*<sup>39</sup> for the *Critique of Judgment*, or who would bestow upon the sociologist (no prizes for guessing which one ...) the eminent position previously occupied by the philosopher (in this case, Kant) ! At a more basic level, Bourdieu’s interpretation has been attacked, less, it must be said, because of its concentration on cultural domination than because it offers a reductionist vision of that domination. According to Claude Grignon and Jean-Claude Passeron, Bourdieu is guilty of “legitimism”, of only viewing the tastes of the “middle classes” and even more so of the “popular classes” through the prism of “dominant” tastes :<sup>40</sup> “to have popular tastes, in this view, is to have no taste for things which are inaccessible and reserved for others”.<sup>41</sup> Such a negative definition of popular culture, which is seen in terms

38 Mohamed Cherkaoui, *op. cit.*, pp. 90–97.

39 This is the subtitle of *La distinction*.

40 Claude Grignon et Jean-Claude Passeron, *Sociologie de la culture et sociologie des cultures populaires*, documents du GIDES, no. 4, 1984.

41 Claude Grignon, “Quelle sociologie des pratiques culturelles”, in F. Chazel (ed.), *Pratiques culturelles et politiques de la culture*, Bordeaux, Maison des Sciences de l’Homme d’Aquitaine, 1987, p. 21.

of what is *lacking*, in effect prevents it from being studied seriously. If popular culture has its absences, middle culture is truncated : Bourdieu only comes at it from the angle of “cultural goodwill”, which amounts to aping, more or less successfully, the genuine “distinction” that is the preserve of the dominant class. Inevitably, therefore, in Bourdieu’s view, it lacks both autonomy and creativity.<sup>42</sup>

However, as far as the critique of Bourdieu and his disciples is concerned, it is insufficient simply to refer to a sociological approach that is rather old-fashioned in some of its expressions (sociology of education) or challenged in its hard core (sociology of culture). It must be pointed out that Bourdieu himself and some of his close collaborators have made efforts to adapt to some of the new prevailing trends of the 1980s. Three main aspects deserve mention here. First, Bourdieu has often adopted a strategy of defensive adjustment that, as we have already seen with the reformulation of the theory of reproduction, is not devoid of a genuinely scientific dimension, even if it is not as successful as had been hoped. There is a particularly striking illustration of this in *Choses dites*, a recently published collection of texts and interviews where Bourdieu stresses “the idea of strategy as an orientation of practice”.<sup>43</sup> This now seems to have replaced habitus as the cornerstone of Bourdieu’s theoretical edifice. Second, we have been witnessing a *redefinition of priorities* : previously, despite the well-known formula which defined habituses as “structured structures with a predisposition to function as structuring structures”,<sup>44</sup> this type of sociology tended to see societies first and foremost as *structured*, whereas today it tends to attach more importance to the other side of social reality and to rediscover the significance of the *structuring* element. The most influential application of this new approach is Luc Boltanski’s work on cadres. The author, one of Bourdieu’s best-known disciples, devotes himself to the task of highlighting the progressive construction of an identity, of teasing out the processes of social formation from a universe of representation.<sup>45</sup> But sometimes Bourdieu’s influence can be felt in a less obvious way. In a book bubbling with original insights, and that seeks to elaborate a *Sociologie des crises politiques*<sup>46</sup> from the standpoint of “strategic interaction”, Michel Dobry attempts to reconcile this major approach

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42 On this point, see the critical note by Etienne Schweisguth, “Les salariés moyens sont-ils des petits bourgeois ?”, *Revue Française de Sociologie*, vol. XXIV, pp. 679–704.

43 Pierre Bourdieu, *Choses dites*, Paris, Ed. de Minuit, pp. 33–34.

44 Pierre Bourdieu, *Esquisse d’une théorie de la pratique*, op. cit., p. 175 and *Le sens pratique*, op. cit., p. 88.

45 Luc Boltanski, *Les cadres : la formation d’un groupe social*, Paris, Ed. de Minuit, 1982.

46 Michel Dobry, *Sociologie des crises politiques*, Paris, Presses de la Fondation Nationale des Sciences Politiques, 1986.

with a hypothesis about “regression towards habitus” in times of crisis, which effectively exposes his attempts at theoretical construction to extra difficulties, which in my view are futile. Such a construction poses relatively acutely the problem of the compatibility between profoundly different models, which is perhaps not very surprising at a time when interests are being redefined. Dobry’s position is also significant in another way : *institutionally*, he belongs to a political science department, but *professionally*, he sees himself as a sociologist. He is far from being alone in this respect among the new generation of political scientists, who are strongly, although not exclusively, influenced by Bourdieu.<sup>47</sup> This brings me to my third and final point : the displacement of Bourdieu’s influence. Formerly dominant in the fields of sociology of education and culture, it is now more in evidence in political science among the younger researchers who are struggling, within their institutions, for full recognition to be granted to political sociology.

### 3. Towards a reconstitution of the sociological landscape

Such at any rate are the elements suggested by the main trends we have just outlined. But one must beware of oversimplification : it would be too simplistic, for example, to say that we are moving from a “collectivist” to an “individualist” world view, or in ideological terms, from “left-wing” to “right-wing” sociology. As we have seen, it would be an exaggeration to consider methodological individualism as the dominant current, even though its influence is beyond dispute. Moreover, although this school’s main protagonists in France have been conservative in sympathy, methodological individualism is in no way tied to a particular political ideology. If proof were required, one merely needs to remember that it was seen in the 1970s, in the United States, by the younger generation of sociologists as a protest against the then dominant academic tradition, which was accused of being conservative (when in reality it was closer to liberalism). The case of Jon Elster, who claims to be both a Marxist and a methodological individualist, suggests that alignment with a particular school or paradigm can also be based on a specific interpretation of Marx.<sup>48</sup>

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47 To give but one example, Bertrand Badie’s *Le développement politique*, Paris, Economica, 1978 (3<sup>e</sup> éd. : 1984) and also his more recent *Les deux Etats : Pouvoir et société en Occident et en terre d’Islam*, Paris, Fayard, 1986, is totally unaffected by Bourdieu’s influence.

48 Jon Elster, *Making Sense of Marx*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press (and Paris, Editions de la Maison des Sciences de l’Homme, 1985).

To return to the French context, I believe it would be more accurate to say that we have witnessed the rapid break-up of a reifying vision of society, which threatened to impose upon sociology a type of jargon that came close to paralysing the discipline. This collapse was the result of the combined efforts of various critiques, prominent among which were those of the methodological individualist. In some ways, the present situation can be seen as a period of *transition*. Sociology will henceforth be more *open*, which is a considerable blessing, but it is still difficult to say what the future holds. It is probable, given the general evolution of society, that the crude labels of “right” and “left” will be less and less relevant or appropriate as yardsticks for judging the opposing camps within the discipline. That is not to say that sociology is gradually joining the “end of ideology” model. But beyond this global sense that ideological spectacles are inadequate instruments with which to examine the new developments in the discipline (and a good number of sociologists would agree with that), there is likely to be little agreement on the shape of the sociology to come.

This uncertainty is reinforced by two factors : first by the characteristics of the present time which, as befits periods of transition, has first opened up avenues for the *reconstruction*, on new bases, of sociological knowledge; but secondly as a result of the institutional fragility of sociology in France. French sociology is lacking – in a general sense – the great debates and their attendant excitement. I am not talking about the pseudo-debates which are drummed up by the media between “instant thinkers”, or around popularised issues (Heidegger’s links with Nazism). I am thinking of the lack of any really rigorous discussion in the scientific journals or in scholarly works. There has been, in France, no equivalent of the controversy between Habermas and Luhmann in Germany. In my opinion, the exemplary nature of that particular clash lay less in its specific content than in the mutual recognition and respect in which the protagonists held each other, over and above the real differences between them. Such conditions for debate have usually been lacking in France.<sup>49</sup> Sociologists have either tried to protect themselves against ideological reductionist views, as with the empiricist wave during the 1960s, or they have succumbed to an ideological over-determination leading to dogmatic sectarianism, as in the aftermath of the events of 1968. Furthermore, although sociology in France has not escaped the general tendency towards institutionalisation (even if it happened later than in the Anglo-Saxon countries), the professionalisation which necessarily must follow has not yet been fully taken on board. There is still, quite obviously, a strong tendency towards more or less impressionistic

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49 Jean-René Treanton has the merit of having attempted to preserve this aspect of the debate in his critical notes in *Revue Française de Sociologie*, even if his salutary observations were not always fully understood.

essay-writing. This is all the stronger in that the different types of intellectual production all have their specific markets and that this outlet allows the public access, with minimal outlay, to a symbolic form of gratification. I am not suggesting for a moment that the sociologist should be denied the use of a genre (the essay) or prohibited from following his or her intuition, especially in new or relatively peripheral areas of the discipline. But there are two major risks to be avoided if this path is pursued. Essays, by definition, tend to lack clear content definition and it is perhaps no accident that certain essay-writers, including some of the most lucid, like Jean Baudrillard, have progressively drifted away from their disciplinary moorings.<sup>50</sup> At the same time, essayists often tend to overestimate the importance of their contribution to the social sciences. They fail to recognise that an essay is no substitute for authentic research, even if it can prepare for or put the finishing touches to research.<sup>51</sup> Professionalisation is also incomplete for a quite different reason, one which is less often noticed: the fact that researchers and scholars often have too narrow a conception of “the professional”. The rapid expansion of demand for “social” (but in fact administrative) knowledge has brought about an increase in resources for applied research and an upsurge in surveys. One of the strongest (and therefore least controlled) tendencies has been to go for low-cost utilisation of these new opportunities, by acquiring a basic technical skill that can be readily adapted to different survey areas. In this way we have witnessed the development of a “short-term expertise”, too deeply involved in conducting raw surveys to bother about interpretive depth or methodological creativity. True sociological research has thus had to steer a narrow path between the mirage of impressionism and the illusion of technicity. And today it also has to protect itself against a number of ingenious projects in which banal variations on well-known themes are cleverly dressed up in technical jargon.<sup>52</sup>

The present situation is full of all sorts of possibilities for the short term, not all of which are positive. But there are reasons for optimism. The transitional period we have just been through can be seen as the first stage of a reconstruction that has been marked by intensive criticism of the past and the crystallisation of new directions. The conditions clearly exist for pursuing this task of

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50 The intellectual itinerary which led Baudrillard from *La société de consommation*, Paris, S. G. P. P., 1970, to *Cool Memories : 1980–1985*, Paris, Galilée, 1987, is highly significant in this context.

51 This explains why, contrary to his declared intentions, Michel Maffesoli cannot offer any genuine alternative to the accepted forms of sociology in his *La connaissance ordinaire*, Paris, Librairie des Méridiens, 1985.

52 Bernard Cathelat, *Styles de vie*, Paris, Ed. d'Organisation, 1985, 2 vols. For a useful update on this, see the critical notes by Nicolas Herpin in *Revue Française de Sociologie*, vol. XXVII, 1986, pp. 265–72.



reconstruction. One promising development is the increasing participation of (often younger generation) sociologists in the work of the major research bodies, INSEE and INED. This collaboration has undoubtedly led to richer and deeper perspectives in the analysis of survey data, as can be seen from the most recent issues of *Données Sociales*<sup>53</sup> and many articles in *Economie et Statistique*,<sup>54</sup> which has now become as precious a resource for sociologists as the major sociological journals. It is also worth noting that this participation also covers the planning and carrying out of major surveys (in particular current work on associative life and leisure activities). As a result, a mass of specifically sociological data is now available for use by researchers across a range of disciplines. In recent years there has also been a serious effort in translation, although it must be said that there was a considerable backlog of major works demanding attention. In the first instance we have seen translation of the classics, in particular Georg Simmel<sup>55</sup> who has remained little known in France, and of well-known and relatively early works like Nisbet's *The Sociological Tradition*, Lewis Coser's *The Functions of Social Conflict*, or Howard Becker's *Outsiders*,<sup>56</sup> as well as others.<sup>57</sup> This effort, which several publishers have helped promote, is symptomatic of a new state of mind, of a new curiosity about work carried out abroad, and of a further retreat for outdated "Francocentrism" (of which the "Parisian mentality" is but a shallow form) already strongly shaken in the social sciences.

This optimism would be misplaced if I failed to point out that there are serious obstacles to achieving full disciplinary autonomy. For instance, increased sensitivity to the historical dimensions of social phenomena – which has led to a transcendence of the artificial boundaries between sociology, perceived uniquely as a science of the present, and history – has not always been accompanied by a sufficiently clear consciousness of the specificity of each discipline. Sociology can derive great benefit from social history, but cannot be reduced to it. It is

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53 See, especially, *Données sociales 1984* and *Données sociales 1987*.

54 Several authors deserve mention here, but in particular François de Singly, whose work, *Fortune et infortune de la femme mariée*, Paris, PUF, 1987, benefited, in de Singly's own words, from the INSEE "treasure trove".

55 We have seen the publication, in the collection "Sociologies" directed by Raymond Boudon et François Bourricaud, with Presses Universitaires de France, of *Sociologie et épistémologie* (1981), *Les problèmes de la philosophie de l'histoire* (1984) and *Philosophie de l'argent* (1987).

56 The books by Coser and Nisbet were published in 1982 and 1984 in the collection "Sociologies"; *Outsiders* was published by éditions A. M. Métailié, Paris, in 1985.

57 Mention should be made, among others, of Anthony Giddens, *La constitution de la société*, Paris, PUF, 1987, Albert Hirschmann, *Bonheur privé, action publique*, and Jürgen Habermas, *Théorie de l'agir communicationnel*, both with Fayard, in the collection directed by Pierre Birnbaum, respectively in 1983 and 1987.

also becoming essential to rethink the links between sociology and philosophy. From an initial position of undue mistrust (in the early positivist period), sociology moved to one of undue dependence (as in the 1970s when certain philosophers – Althusser, Foucault – became major models of reference). This problem is very acute today because it is explicit in the works of Raymond Boudon and implicit (albeit from a different intellectual perspective) in the reflections of a group of sociologists who draw their inspiration from Habermas and also in part from ethnomethodology. But these early flurries cannot conceal the extensiveness of the work to be done in this area.

All things considered, it seems to me, however, that the present trends are in the direction of a model of sociology that is *pluralist, open* (that is to say able to discuss from within its own ranks, without excluding anybody, the diversity of its approaches), *attentive* to work done abroad, without relinquishing its own specificity, both *empirical* and *theoretical*, while avoiding both the facility of empiricism and the cult of theory for its own sake<sup>58</sup> and finally, *autonomous* in the sense indicated above. That, at any rate, is my hope, even if the road is likely to be long and hard.

*An earlier version of this article (which is still unpublished in French) has appeared as a chapter in "Contemporary France. A Review of Interdisciplinary Studies", Volume 2, edited by Jolyon Howorth and George Ross, Pinter Publishers, London and New York. The translation of this first version, adapted to an American student audience, was made by Jolyon Howorth. A slightly revised translation of this new version has been prepared under the responsibility of the Editor of the Swiss Journal of Sociology.*

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58 If sociological language were not already heavy with neologisms, I would have used the word "theoricism" here. I should add that this overview is by no means complete. We have hardly mentioned the history of sociology, which has seen some well received works, such as Jean-Claude Lamberti's *Tocqueville*, Paris, PUF, 1983 and Philippe Besnard's *L'anomie*, Paris, PUF, 1987.

