

Exploring fields. Recent trends in French sociology

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In order to give a short introduction to French contemporary sociological debates, I would like to stress a few trends among many others. The French sociological field is a multidimensional space and I will only try here to project it, from my own position, on four different axes (to talk like statisticians). From this position, French sociology appears diverse in its objects, methods, schools of thought and kinds of research. But we can also perceive behind this appearance a strong unity in its main interests and scientific directions.

In the first part of this paper I will point out the specificities of what we can call the sociology of culture as a kind of capital, which is developing during more than thirty years through works about classes, education and culture, academic and scientific disciplines, family, state and politics, etc. Then, I will try to show the growing interest of French sociologists for the world of media including the question of their interdependence with other sectors of social life. As a third part, the revival of economic sociology in contemporary French research can be underlined as one of the newest and possibly the most promising trends. This will lead me to conclude with more general questions about 'Durkheimian' inspirations in today's French sociology.

Culture as a kind of capital

The investigations about 'culture' in French sociology have been completely transformed (like many other domains) by the works of Bourdieu and Passeron in the 1960s (Bourdieu, Passeron 1964, 1970). Using the concept of 'cultural capital' to explain the reproduction of social hierarchies in an apparently republican and democratic system of education, they have systematically developed an economic analogy, cultural capital being accumulated, transmitted, and evaluated like other types of capital. It permits the understanding of practices, which depend on a form of cultural wealth different from financial assets: educational attainment, daily activities (for example most so-called 'cultural' practices like museum frequentation, photography, alimentary consumption, etc.). It actually helps to interpret all kinds of practices depending on different sorts of tastes, themselves related to different positions in the social space: tastes and practices do not only depend on the volume of capital but also on the structure of capital possessed by social agents (Bourdieu 1979). In the last period, this theoretical construction has been generalized, dynamised (first by Bourdieu himself, Bourdieu 1989, 1992). It has been extended to the study of different social classes or class fractions in different countries. It has also been applied to many specific sectors of social practice, from sport (Suaud 1989) to reading (Mauger, Poliak 1998), through politics (Garrigou 1988), philosophy (Soulié 1995), music (Lehmann 1996), etc. The core of this research program resides in the relations between embodied social dispositions (the *habitus*) and objective structures of the world (the *fields*). It helps to understand the construction and the reproduction of classes, the masculine domination (Bourdieu 1998), the genesis of local and national entities, etc.

This research program is still at the center of discussions in the sociology of education. Many empirical results have illustrated, confirmed and completed the main results of *Les Héritiers* and *La*

Reproduction (Cacouault, Oeuvarard 1995; Goux et Maurin 1997a, 1997b). The 'massification' process has not eroded or reversed the tendency to reproduction of social hierarchies, but it has changed the scale of the process and the moments of social selection in the *curricula*. There is now an "exclusion from the inside" (Bourdieu, Champagne 1993). As far as secondary education is concerned, researchs about France and also many other countries regularly confirm the hypothesis that "delayed selection" (Oeuvarard 1979) is a better expression than 'democratization' to describe the arrival of new types of students, observable through global surveys and local monographies. The world of students and, larger, the space of higher education is itself more than ever caricaturized by strong social differentiations and social selection processes, especially with the internationalization move. This is particularly obvious when we compare the top *grandes écoles* pupils to the university undergraduates in dominated disciplines and when we observe the social relegation of individuals of popular origin, especially women, in the lower and most precarious positions of the labour market after they have left school (Maruani 1996).

Some scholars from other sociological traditions have tried to put into light new dimensions in the reality of education: the subjective experience of pupils and students in relation to the quality of teachers or institutions (Dubet, Cousin, Guillemet 1989), the existence of other factors of the selection processes such as administrative constraints in the management of flows, local institutional factors and interactions, etc. More directly inspired by the theory of capital, some researchers develop the analysis of sexual differentiations which were present though not at the center in the original works (Duru-Bellat 1990; Baudelot et Establet 1992). Theoretical and methodological debates have also been influenced by the use of rational theory models and the use of log-linear models and logistic regression methods to specify different variables affecting educational attainment and social mobility (Goux et Maurin 1997a, 1997b). Those multiple directions, sometimes seen as challenges to the theory of capital, have also given

to this theory a very broad amount of regular empirical evidence and quasi-infinite local specifications. There has been until now a constant dialectic development of empirical researches and theoretical controversies.

The construction by Bourdieu of the notion of field – that is to say a fraction of social space where agents share the same *illusio*, the same interest in the game (Bourdieu 1992) – helps to understand the dynamics of massification and reproduction and not only the tendency to reproduce identically. The field of *grandes écoles* has been studied in its dynamics since 1968, with the use of correspondence analysis with different data sets and historical comparison between schools (Bourdieu 1989). This work reveals the homology between the structure of the field of *grandes écoles* and the structure of the field of power analysed in *La Distinction*, where we can observe differences both in the volume and in the structure of capital (Bourdieu 1979). International comparisons – especially in the field of higher education, where different European research groups are active – also permit to determine variations and invariants in the geography of social hierarchies and the way different species of capital articulate with each other in different social contexts. Besides this internal complexification and extension, the structural and constructivist theory of capital and field developed by Bourdieu has been applied to various fields of cultural production – the literary field (Sapiro 1995), academic disciplines like philosophy (Pinto 1987), sociology (Heilbron 1988), economics (Lebaron 1997), more market-oriented sectors like consulting (Henry 1992), sport (for example Suaud 1989), and other sectors like politics and bureaucracy. It also founded some developments in the sociology of science (Bourdieu 1976). Using the theory of field in *La vie de laboratoire* written with Woolgar (Latour, Woolgar 1988), Bruno Latour has however diverged from this initial inspiration toward a theory of "actor-networks". His postmodern shift has led to criticisms by Bricmont and Sokal (Bricmont, Sokal 1997), Bourdieu (Bourdieu 1994), and also to responses by "rational action theorists" and by "Mertonian" sociologists of science (for example,

Busino 1998). In a context of strong renewal in the social history of sciences, the sociology of science is getting at the center of sociologists' interests, with many recent publications. But one of the richest sectors is to be found in present investigations about the field of media.

The field of media

The development of sociological investigations of the field of media and its relations with other fields, like the political, economic, intellectual or scientific fields is of great importance. Those researchers share a common interest for the interdependence between the social world of journalists (with its different forms of domination, hierarchies, differentiations, growing precarity, etc.) and other sectors of social reality which have effects on it and are at the same time affected by it. The general hypothesis here is the idea that media both contribute to the social construction of reality and are simultaneously depending on external forces (especially economic ones) which determine some of its evolutions.

In his founding work *Faire l'opinion* (Champagne 1990), Patrick Champagne underlines the growing interdependence between electoral struggles and the use of opinion polls in the media. Opinion polls appear as weapons in the political field in the sense that they permit to formulate and legitimate problems, to build collective representations, to define the space of audible questions. Champagne extends this investigations in his contributions to *La Misère du Monde* (Bourdieu et al 1993): the way journalists talk about the 'suburbs' can be described as a way to define collective problems in accordance with a certain type of state intervention or, better, of growing non-intervention. The neoliberal states tend to separate 'social problems' (like so called 'exclusion') from the general social conditions in which they are embedded. The media have, in parallel, a tendency to

stigmatize certain zones of urban space as places of pure violence. This appears to be linked with the new conditions of journalism as a professional activity, with the domination of television and fast thinking (Bourdieu 1996) and the growing necessity for journalists to create strong events within few words.

In continuity with this questioning, Champagne and Marchetti (Champagne, Marchetti 1994) investigate the social construction of risks through the interactions between media, science and economy (especially agriculture and agribusiness). Writing about the "contaminated blood scandal", they show the way some sectors of the field are restructuring around the case and contribute to create a so-called 'scandal'. During this recent period (from the mid-80s till now), they observe a certain decline in the traditional official and scientific carefulness to report complex medical legal controversies, and, symmetrically, a progress of journalistic strong commitment into the cases.

In the same theoretical context, a group of researchers (Duval et alii 1998) interpret the strong intervention of some French intellectuals in the public debate in December 1995 (in the context of a conservative reform of the French social security system), using the model of a complex interaction between the media, the political and economic, and, last but not least, intellectual fields. The existence of different petitions first reveals the internal structure of the intellectual field (with the opposition between a pole of bureaucratic and political power or expertise and a pole of autonomy and political commitment). But, the way the petitions were treated in the media, the conditions in which intellectuals appeared on TV and in the press also illustrate the violent distortion media are now able to produce to the public expression of scientists and intellectuals.

This type of analysis also renews the sociological interpretation of social 'movements' by stressing the symbolic struggles and especially the mediatic struggles in which they are embedded and the social uses

of political instruments like a petition. It continues the tradition of sociology and social history of intellectuals and politics in France, illustrated by the works of Christophe Charle, who inspires many sociologists in that domain since his founding prosopographical studies about writers, academics, and social elites. At the same time, there was a certain renewal of much more traditional debates about 'social movements', with a debate between a marxist or marxian tradition (Groux 1998) and the scholars around Alain Touraine, often present in the field of media. The first ones interpret the strikes of November-December 1995 as a real social movement in line with the secular working class movement, whereas some of the others describe it as a corporatist reaction to 'globalization'.

To conclude on this second point, we can say that the growing interest in the media has also a certain relation with the difficulties of communication between sociologists and journalists, especially when sociology begins to say things difficult to hear by some leading journalists, like the fact that journalism is put under growing economic pressures, and that this tendency is also due to internal forces. Sociology is sometimes used as a weapon by dominated journalists (young or female journalists, coming from province or with popular origins, victims of growing precariousness of employment and neo-liberal management). This is what we call a 'theory effect': sociology (and the social sciences) is getting more and more inside the social debates and the social world which makes *reflexivity* more and more necessary.

Toward a new economic sociology?

As I mentioned, precariousness and precarization are now part of the experience of young journalists. But they also constitute the biggest part of many people's lives under the new phase of economic development which French society is going through (especially

working class people, young, female...). Perhaps these new economic conditions and pressures – linked with the so-called 'globalization' of markets and the various neoliberal shifts in economic policies explain the rapidly growing interest for economy as a social construction in today's French sociology. A simple fact illustrates this recent trend: in 1997, different important French sociological or social sciences reviews (*Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, *Genèses*, *Revue française de sociologie*, *Cahiers internationaux de sociologie*, etc.) published numbers devoted to economy and/or economics. Many well-known French sociologists, like for example Baudelot, Callon or Boltanski, have (at least to a certain measure) turned themselves toward the sociology of economic life or the study of management processes. Some books were published about the tradition of economic sociology (Steiner 1995). Associations were or are being created to improve the relations between disciplines, especially economics and sociology (like the Association pour le développement de la socioéconomie, French extension of the Society for the Advancement of Socioeconomics). This change is probably linked to the arrival on the academic labour market of scholars with both intellectual cultures. Perhaps it is also linked with the changes in the traditional sociology of work and organisations, which is now extending to more general questions about professions and 'end of labour': studies are now centered around the change of work in a context of massive unemployment, reduction of the working time, part-time work, precarity, management "by fear" (Dejours 1998), new forms of domination at work (Balazs 1996). The relation between scholarisation and labour market to understand the way classes reproduce or do not reproduce is for example being investigated through ethnographic and biographical methods, regional monographies like those of Beaud and Pialoux.

One of the most important theoretical and methodological discussions in that domain could be summarized as the debate between "network" (Callon 1998) and "field" approaches of economic reality (Bourdieu 1997). Most scholars see the specificity of sociology (compared to

economics) in the importance it gives to the social contexts of economic actions ('embeddedness') and to the structural conditions of economic life. But for some of them, this context and these structures are to be searched in the personal links in which economic actors are 'embedded', that is to say their 'social networks' which are framing economic reality, rationality, etc. The development of social network analysis methods, is also a way for sociology to oppose a both formal and statistical approach to the now very technical theoretical and empirical developments in economics. But the philosophy of this methods and theoretical works can be described as 'interactionist': the links between two agents is to be found in the type of interactions they have with each other. The social construction of economic reality lays in the frame produced by actors themselves. The 'field' conception does not deny any empirical interest to such tools and approaches, but, in opposition to the interactionist philosophy it implies, the 'field' approach holds the invisible social structures in which agents are located (the fields) for explanatory frames of their practices. This theoretical conception is in affinity with other methods, especially the multiple correspondence analysis, developed by the French school of statistics (Rouanet, Le Roux 1993). Pierre Bourdieu describes the firms (which are also fields) as 'structure makers' which create the economic environment around themselves. But they do it from a certain position (they possess certain types of capital, in a certain quantity, etc.): the field gives birth to strong constraints for any of its members and, at the same time, some of its agents are able to transform it thanks to the amount of capital they possess. Another application of the field approach about economy underlines the symbolic power of economic discourse producers and describes their field (esp. the field of economists) as part of the field of power. Economists competing in a field also contribute to create economic reality, but their force also depends on the volume and types of capital they possess (Lebaron 1997). This general hypothesis is also being applied to economic discourses, strategies and practices about the reduction of working time and the discourse about 'exclusion'. Economic reality of work, working time, working conditions is at the

moment being redefined in France, first by the law and the negotiations in sectors and enterprises. The Aubry law on the 35 hours has led to a broad bargaining process between unions and *manager* organisations, but also to a large symbolic and scientific struggle between social scientists, lawyers, economists, consultants, etc.

Another aspect of this renewal can be found in the analysis of 'state intervention' in the economy and society as a condition for individual's activities. The state itself is to be seen as a field: agents in this area compete to create laws and administrative decisions in response to variate social demands and interests. Sociologists themselves are often implicated in this struggles, especially in the "medico-social" sector of administration, in family and demography (Lenoir 1992). At the moment in France, some sociologists are strongly engaged in the debate about family, with the project of "*Pacte d'association civile et sociale*" (PACS), a contract for heterosexual and homosexual couples.

Bourdieu has put into light the existence of two hands of the state: the right one (economic and financial constraints, monetary stability...) and the left one (education, social care, social security...) (Bourdieu 1998). Scholars are now trying to specify what kind of state will emerge with the neoliberal shifts, asking in particular if the growth of the 'penal state' can appear to some political and social responsables as a solution for social diseases due to the market economy (Wacquant 1998a, 1998b). This 'solution' is sometimes seen as an alternative to the social state in European countries, as it was in the United States in the 80s. These different sociological works are original in the sense they do not naturalize the globalization process: 'globalization' can be oriented in different directions, depending on various social factors. If the construction of European social institutions is far from being as developed as their economic counterparts, it is due to social obstacles, which have themselves to be analysed: national embeddedness of unions and social movements, conservative political coalitions in the major European countries, conversions of social-democratic leaders and intellectuals to neoliberalism, etc. Perhaps the new situation in the

world economy and the European politics will soon be confirming this sociological analysis of the 'globalization' process.

Presence of Durkheim and the 'Durkheimians'

As a last part, I will ask if it makes sense to try and determine similarities and differences between today's French sociology and the Durkheimian project of the 1890s. One hundred years after, could we say French sociology is 'Durkheimian'? A linked question could be: are both these '*sociologies fin de siècle*' completely heterogeneous after so many social transformations, historical and political crisis, intellectual innovations and controversies? As Christophe Charle points out in his last book *Paris fin de siècle* about the general intellectual climate in the two 90s periods (Charle 1998), aren't there many obvious similarities? First of all, we can mention the strong presence of Durkheim and may be still more the Durkheimians in today's French sociology: compared to Marx and Weber, this presence is not only easy to see in certain types of researchs inspired by Durkheim and his team (for example about suicide, Baudelot, Establet 1993) or in the use of ethnography as a model of rigour in collecting and interpreting data (Beaud, Weber 1997). This presence is obvious through the publications of many books about Durkheim, Mauss, Halbwachs, Simiand (for example de Montlibert 1997).

This presence may be more obvious if we analyse rapidly what is happening now in the field of French sociology and larger in the intellectual field. After the post-68 period, sociology continued to 'professionalize' (as Anglo-Saxon sociologists used to say) in the universities and research institutes: growing number of students, specialization of disciplines, new diplomas, new kinds of pedagogy, new methods, etc. But it also became more dependent on social, economic and political demands through public commands and social uses of sociology and social sciences. In that context, the present

revival of Durkheimism could be the expression of a growing aspiration (especially for young incomers) for scientific autonomy and for the integration of coherent theories with broad empirical results. At the same time, as in the 1890s, sociology appears today in a context of ideological and historical crisis as a science which helps not only to know some laws of the social world but also which enables to act in accordance with a specialized knowledge and a specific competence. As the recent publication of *Ecrits politiques* by Marcel Mauss shows (Mauss 1997), the 'Durkheimians' have also invented a certain kind of "*intellectuel engagé*" ("committed intellectual"), quite different from the figures imposed by the literary and philosophical traditions (Sartre and Foucault in the 60s-70s). This figure is forever present during one hundred years in the French intellectual field, through Mauss, Simiand, Halbwachs, and, later, Levi-Strauss (who committed into public debate about race and racism) and now Bourdieu (but also the social scientists of the group "*Raisons d'agir*" created by him). The specificity of this type of intellectual resides in the fact that he conceives social sciences nor as expertise for political and economic responsables neither as another name for political romantic *avantgardism*, but as a certain way of being a citizen. The sociologist does interfere with public decisions but only from the point of view of his specific knowledge.

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