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SOCIOLOGY IN QUEST OF ITS PAST

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In a paper entitled “La sociologie, une science infirme?” (“Sociology, an invalid science?”), delivered on 15 March 1990 before the Montheron Group at the University of Lausanne, Giovanni Busino, the author of so many important works on Pareto and scholarly contributions in many areas of the social sciences, urged sociologists to give serious consideration to the history of their discipline and, explaining why they should do so, stressed that “the history of sociology enables us to understand a great deal about our own problems and to see, beyond methodological convictions, how sociologists have produced knowledge, in what manner they have postulated such knowledge and constructed theories and by what means they have come to create paradigms of “scientific” cognition, making possible the socialization of newcomers and the institutionalization of a social practice in a profession and of professional roles in a system of power, in a sub-culture”. He provided insights into how the study of the history of sociology, “offering us the sole possibility of overcoming the self-centred focus on our own knowledge and society, the sole means of making our scientific beliefs less categorical, frees us from the present and makes us understand why the classic values of identity, order, organization and centrality are giving way to those of difference, disorder, fragment and periphery”.

Throughout the years that followed, histories of sociology have proliferated. There is no point in enumerating them here: some more elaborate and some less so, they are required reading for every student of the discipline. It is more interesting to focus on the *intentions* behind those histories, which are all examined by Benjamin Matalon in his preface to the compilation of articles published in *Communication*, “Les débuts des sciences de l’homme” under the title “Pourquoi faire les sciences de l’homme?” (“What good are social sciences?”)¹. To this should be added a discussion of the *circumstances* which have made possible this examination of the past, the need for which had hardly made itself felt until then. From this point of view, it may at the same time be argued that the opening of a new field of investigation is useful for researchers looking for conceptual objects; that the crisis of sociology has given rise to a return to the origins in order to place it in a clearer context and show how it has become what it is today; that *one* sociological tradition, long imperialist and

1 *Communications*, n° 54, 1992.

dominant, has been rocked by recent social developments and shaken by the challenge to the ideology with which it was associated.

The heightened awareness of the growing gap between the changes currently being experienced and the theoretical models capable of explaining them has no doubt been of overriding importance. For those who have noted that greater play has been introduced into the institutions, a greater flexibility of social arrangements, a relaxation of relations between the individual and the State, authority, his class – *Society* – a reading of the works of Durkheim which show society to be an authoritarian system for the designation of status no longer suffices to explain the social parameter. The shift in interest from structure to processes, from society to sociability, from the individual treated as a statistical unit to the individual treated as the subject of a discourse, goes hand in hand with a “return to Simmel”, part of a vast composite movement to recover the discipline’s past and to seek its intellectual origins.

But it is not, with regard to sociology, the name of the author of *The Philosophy of Money* that is cited in the preface referred to above as an example of an *omission*: remaining in the French tradition, the names are those of Tocqueville, Le Play, Littré. “The positivists and those who after them created university sociology in France, do not seem to have been at all interested in authors who, more than a century later, are regarded as sociologists, but who, like Tocqueville, never used the term [...]. The same holds for Le Play and his school: for a long time, sociology at the university virtually ignored him, only retaining his theory of the family [...]. And who ever heard of Littré referred to as a sociologist?” (Matalon, 1992, 7).

We have already seen (Valade, 1985) how the author of *Democracy in America* was eliminated from the table of references in France: only a few articles were devoted to him on this side of the Atlantic between 1859 and the modest celebration of the centenary of his death². And it was not until the threshold of the 1980s that the first dissertation was defended, by Jean-Claude Lamberti, on the enormous contribution of Tocqueville to the analysis of the democratic society (Lamberti, 1983). We know, concerning Le Play and his disciples, the role played by Antoine Savoye and Bernard Kalaora in bringing back these “forgotten inventors” (Savoye and Kalaora, 1989; Savoye, 1994); their works on the beginnings of empirical sociology resuscitated, by showing its full importance, the effervescent movement of *social reform*. On the other hand, it is less well-known that in September 1993, a doctoral thesis was defended at the Paris Sorbonne University by a young Japanese academic, Massayuki Yamashita, on “La sociologie française entre A. Comte et E.

2 *Alexis de Tocqueville – Livre du centenaire* (1960), Paris: Editions du CRNS.

Durkheim: le conflit entre la science et la morale” (“French sociology between A. Comte and E. Durkheim: the conflict between science and morals”), prepared under the supervision of Raymond Boudon. The excerpt from that work on Emile Littré and his collaborators (Yamashita, 1995), published in *l'Année sociologique*, shows that with the *Revue de philosophie positive* of Littré and Wyruboff, the “Société de sociologie” founded in 1872, and the outline of a treatise on sociology by Guarin de Vitry, the period in question was not a “blank” in the history of ideas in this field.

A sociological tradition was thus constituted by Durkheim and his followers who deliberately eliminated works and currents not in harmony or at variance with a given orientation. The chapter “Sociology and social sciences” published by Durkheim in 1910 in the volume *De la méthode dans les sciences* gives a good idea of how the author of the *Règles de la méthode sociologique* intended to draw upon the past for establishing the discipline. Retracing the birth of sociology, he cites Plato, Aristotle, Campanella, Hobbes and Rousseau in five lines. Montesquieu receives a paragraph, Condorcet an allusion to the *Tableau des progrès de l'esprit humain*, and Saint-Simon and Comte special mention: “It was not until the 19th century, first with Saint-Simon and above all with his disciple Auguste Comte, that a new notion finally appeared”. Tarde is only cited as a foil for his book *Sur l'imitation* and Spencer for the record, as Comte’s successor.

The detailed studies compiled by Philippe Besnard have shown how this historical representation prevailed and how an institutionalization of a Durkheim-inspired sociology was brought about with the team at *L'Année sociologique* (Besnard, 1979, 1981, 1985, 1991). A tradition was received without anyone asking why it did not retain works which today are regarded as essential: Condorcet’s *Essai* of 1785, the great *Mémoires* of Quetelet, Le Play’s *Méthode d'observation* etc. That tradition made use of the authority of the founder of scientific sociology, which can be seen in the sole fact – among many others, but this one is particularly significant – that the work on university life in Paris (*La Vie universitaire à Paris*), published by Hachette in 1918, opens with two chapters – “The history of the university” and “The general organization of the Paris University” – written by Durkheim himself, who had died the year before.

This tradition should be qualified but by no means belittled. It is necessary to study how it was created – and imposed, a subject already given a careful analysis by Terry Clark (1973) – in a context marked by a bitter campaign conducted against the “high education of State” and the methods of the likes of Lanson, Langlois, Monod etc., the condemnation by Agathon of the “spirit of the new Sorbonne” which symbolized Durkheim’s thought, defined as “a

debauchery of logic and frozen abstractions”, a set of “cold deductive reveries” and “foggy analyses of concepts”, and the declared hostility of a Peguy towards the “so-called sociology”, likened to “a so-called reformed history” (Agathon, 1911, 110; Pégué, 1906). This attack culminated in intensity in 1911 with the treatise by Henri Massis and Alfred de Tarde; all their ideological implications were differentiated by Claire Bompaigne-Evesque in an excellent work to which reference should be made more often when studying the resistance to which the institutionalization of sociology gave rise (Bompaigne-Evesque, 1988). It is evoked in all its virulence in the beginning of the study by Wolf Lepenies on the advent of sociology, *Between Literature and Science: The Rise of Sociology*; Durkheim is, however, presented therein in too summary a fashion, almost as a caricature, as the head of a clan with a penchant for “provocation”, “one of those mainly responsible for the evolution of the university towards a cult of science which verged on superstition and did not spare any detail”³.

The reference to the “Three Cultures” of Lepenies, which, one might add, was preceded by the *Main Currents in Sociological Thought* of Raymond Aron and *The Sociological Tradition* of Robert A. Nisbet, makes most pertinent the notion of “point of view” advanced by Raymond Boudon (1992). In the histories of sociology that have been written since *An Introduction to the History of Sociology* by Harry E. Barnes, intellectual and institutional points of view have alternated (Barnes, 1948); sometimes conceptual aspects are stressed and sometimes organizational traits; some works extol a national tradition, whereas for others, *one* explanatory model, deliberately favoured, makes a re-examination of past contributions compelling. For Nisbet, five ideas are placed in the centre of the sociological tradition and two types of values situated at the heart of “the debates on the most fundamental ideas of the past 150 years [...]: community, moral authority, hierarchy and the sacred, on the one hand, and individualism, equality, liberation of mores, and rational techniques of organization and exercise of power, on the other”⁴. But among those who have considered these questions, including “the discovery of elites” (pp. 150–155), Pareto was not mentioned a single time.

A distinction should therefore be drawn between this type of review of the past as legitimating a point of view or tradition and the history of sociology as a way of focusing on how theories are created, what the conditions are for their development, how traditions are born in the social sciences etc. Once it is

3 Lepenies, Wolf (1990), *Les Trois Cultures – Entre science et littérature, l'avènement de la sociologie*, Cambridge, New York: Cambridge Press; Fr. trans.: Plard, H., Paris: Ed. de la M.S.H., p. 47.

4 Nisbet, Robert A. ([1966] 1984), *La Tradition sociologique*, London: Heinemann; Fr. trans.: Azuelos, M. (1984), Paris: P.U.F., p. 11.

acknowledged how much the tradition of the Durkheim school in France has stood in the way – not unlike the revolutionary period of 1789–1799 in French historiography or Freudianism for “depth psychology” – it will be postulated that a theory is equally important for what it excludes as for what it includes. And there we return, beyond the “omissions” and whatever may have motivated them, to the question of origins. “Montesquieu and Rousseau, the precursors of sociology”, Durkheim affirmed, but what about Condorcet and, in the previous century, Graunt and Petty? To cite one example, has not the series “Sociologies”, edited by R. Boudon and published by Presses Universitaires de France, just put out the work of Jacques Dupâquier on the invention of the mortality table? (Dupâquier, 1966)

Among the “points of view” that Raymond Boudon urges us to rate it might perhaps be necessary to give a place to the person who started out from the idea of the dual alternative of interiority/subjectivity and exteriority/objectivity in order to examine how convincing the theories are in terms of which human reality, definitely desubjectivized, exists in its relation to nature and society, but not in the intimacy of conscience. How has society been successively conceived and constituted as a subject of analysis? And who was it “thought up” by? In which context and with what issues? As François Chazel puts it, “to make a useful contribution to the history of a discipline, it is first necessary to define clearly its “intellectual” implications (Chazel, 1993, 267). Ultimately, it is to that “first”, and also to the question of what “discipline” means, that it would be necessary to return before undertaking a “history of sociology”.

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