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**French Social Theory**

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“French theory” is usually associated with structuralist and post-structuralist philosophers, like Derrida, Lyotard, Foucault and Deleuze, who caused a sensation when their writings crossed the Atlantic and were enthusiastically read and received in the American departments of comparative literature. As such, it is an American invention and part of the prehistory of cultural studies. In French sociology, theory is neither really encouraged nor appreciated. The fact that the Anglophone concept of social theory does not have a proper translation in French is symptomatic of existing strictures against armchair theorising. Is it because sociology was only officially institutionalised as an academic discipline in the 1950’s that the discipline needs to underscore its scientific status? Fact is that social theory with its reflection on the philosophical foundations of sociology, the central concepts of the social sciences and the structural transformations of contemporary societies tends to be considered pre-scientific and relegated to the domain of epistemology, history of ideas or postmodern speculation. While methodological pluralism (fieldwork, interviews, content analysis, etc.) is accepted and advocated, theory that is not rooted in empirical research is seen as not fully legitimate.

Provided one does not associate Auguste Comte’s encyclopaedic proposal for a systematic reorganisation of the sciences with the abstract empiricism of number crunchers, one can observe the existence of a living tradition in the philosophy of sciences that connects Comte’s *Cours de philosophie positive* via Durkheim and Canguilhem to Foucault’s *Archeology of Knowledge* and Bourdieu’s *Craft of Sociology*. As an encompassing alternative to Hegel’s system of logics, the French tradition of historical epistemology insists that social thought only becomes scientific or “positive” if speculation is harnessed to empirical observation. In post-metaphysical science, theory formation and empirical research work hand in glove. Jean-Claude Passeron’s (1996) rigorous demonstration of the inevitable contextuality of any and all social scientific concepts and consequent refutation of the validity of Popperian logics in the social sciences offers the most consensual epistemological justification of theory-driven empirical research and research-driven theory construction in France. As opposed to social theory, which spins on itself and is not concerned with the operationalization of its concepts, most sociological theorising occurs therefore at the middle range on delimited topics of research (like immigration, inequality, social protest, etc.). If, however, one understands social theory not as a rehashing of famous authors and their texts, but as an instance of reflection on the unity of the social and human sciences and their connection to contemporary societies, one will find that most theorising is done by philosophers (like Serge Audier, Vincent Descombes, Marcel Gauchet, Bruno Karsenti, Sandra Laugier, Michäel Foessel, Corinne Pelluchon, Isabelle Stengers, Vincianne Despret, Patrice Maniglier or Frédéric Worms) with an interest in the social sciences and politics.

In the short span of this article, it is unfortunately not possible to do justice to the vibrancy of the French scene. I will therefore have to limit myself to a panoramic overview of the main schools, tendencies and currents of contemporary social theory. Incidentally, they have clustered around three authors who have reached an international audience: Pierre Bourdieu, Luc Boltanski and Bruno Latour. I will assume that Bourdieu’s social theory is well known and will present current developments as attempts to think with Bourdieu against and beyond Bourdieu. The space of French social theory can be described as a progressive descent from a structural analysis of domination in Boltanski’s critical sociology via a cultural analysis of critical moments in Boltanski’s pragmatic sociology to the flat ontologies of Latour’s Actor-Network theory (Vandenberghe, 2006: 153-224).

With Bourdieu against Bourdieu

Up till the turn of the century, the field of French sociology was largely dominated by four schools of thought, each one centered around a master-thinker (from left to right): the critical sociology of Pierre Bourdieu, the theory of social action of Alain Touraine, the sociology of organisations of Michel Crozier and the rational choice theory of Raymond Boudon. Since his death in 2002, Bourdieu’s star has risen worldwide. He’s acclaimed as one of the great social theorists of the twentieth century. Among the synthetic thinkers of the “new theoretical movement” (Alexander, Giddens, Collins, Habermas, Luhmann), he’s the one who stands out and whose work occupies now a similar position to the one Talcott Parsons occupied after the second World War. Almost every one who has developed an original theoretical position has done so in dialogue with Bourdieu’s generative structuralism. This is true for some of his most famous former collaborators in France (Jean-Claude Passeron, Robert Castel, Abdelmalek Sayad, Luc Boltanski, Laurent Thévenot, Alain Desrosières, Loïc Wacquant), but it also holds for some of the major social theorists in the Anglophone world (Axel Honneth, Margaret Archer, Michèle Lamont, Craig Calhoun, Rogers Brubaker, Michael Burawoy, George Steinmetz, Mustafa Emirbayer).

His work is translated and his central concepts (field, habitus, practice) are thought all over the world. Colleagues and students may not know all the philosophical intricacies of his tight system of concepts, but by now every one has a working knowledge of the construction of the object, his theory of reproduction, his theory of fields and subfields of cultural production, the various species of capital, the concepts of field, habitus, practice, etc. Bourdieu’s sociologese has become the *lingua franca* of the discipline.

The publication of his courses at the Collège de France (6 of the 10 volumes have been published so far) will deepen the appreciation of the theoretical sophistication of his work, but unlike the posthumous publication of Foucault’s courses, they are not expected to lead to a completely new view of his theory of the social world. In France as elsewhere, there now exists a vast secondary literature on Bourdieu. The reconstructions, revisions and critiques of his theory edifice by Loïc Wacquant, Louis Pinto, Jean-Louis Fabiani and Bernard Lahire are particularly commendable. The state of the art of Bourdieusian studies can be found in the 1000 pages of *Dictionnaire international Bourdieu* (Shapiro, 2020). Otherwise, the Bourdieusian School has turned into the routines of normal science with historical researches that apply the model of the master to ever-new fields or extend it to other disciplines (history, literature, philosophy). The *Centre de sociologie européenne,* which Bourdieu took over from Raymond Aron, has been fused with another research centre from the Sorbonne. The *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales,* the avant-garde journal created by Bourdieu, is directed by hard-core Bourdieusians and publishes solid, but rather orthodox research articles on the dominant and the dominated, financialisation and immigration, health care and work, etc. If anything distinguishes the French Bourdieusians, it is their political radicalism. They continue the class struggle by other means within the social sciences (and within their own departments).

Bernard Lahire is perhaps the most heterodox among the Bourdieusians. He has radicalised, extended and subverted the theory of the habitus and the field in a dispositional and contextual sociology at the scale of the individual. Coming from the sociology of education, he initially tried to explain how it is possible that children from a similar popular background (or even from the same family) and who, thus, have a similar class habitus, can nevertheless obtain completely different results at school (success or failure). The incapacity of Bourdieu’s theory to explain the intra-class variation of school achievements has led him to question the homogeneity of the habitus and the limits of the field. He does not contest the scientism and sociologism of the Durkheimian tradition; rather, he wants to extend it into a sociological psychology that is able to explain intra-class (differences between individuals of a same class) and intra-personal variations (same individual who acts differently in different contexts). In Lahire, the social production goes all the way down - and into - the individual.

*The Plural Actor* (Lahire, 2001) works with a model of multiple socialisations (in the family, neighbourhood, school, sports, work, etc.) and conceptualises the habitus as a stock of dispositions that, depending on the context of action, may be activated or inhibited, released or put on stand by in observable practices. Lahire is at his best when he transposes the variation of scales of the Italian micro-historians to analyse in detail how the social is “refracted” within the individual. When one turns Bourdieu’s model inside out, the individual appears as a “fold” of the social.

Over the years, Lahire has deepened his socio-biographical approach with in-depth interviews that zoom in ever more closely on the life of a limited number of subjects. In another voluminous book on Kafka, the Bohemian novelist and outsider who did notreally partake of the literary field, he has presented a full sociological portrait of the writer that has more affinities with Sartre’s than with Bourdieu’s study of Flaubert. Of late, in a two-volume work on the sociology of dreams, he has challenged Freud *Traumdeutung* and reworked his dispositional and contextual theory to explain the oneiric life and to investigate it empirically.

Pragmatist and Pragmatic Sociologies

In France like elsewhere, critical theories of generalised domination that fuse Bourdieu, Foucault and the Studies into heavy artillery dominate the field. At the Ecole des Hautes Études, a powerful post-Bourdieusian counter current has crystallised into a new style of pragmatic sociology that systematically dislocates the attention from structures to practices, from signs to meanings, and from explanation to interpretation and description. Over the last thirty years, the “pragmatic-interpretative turn” (Dosse, 1995) in the human sciences has advanced through the incorporation of insights from German critical theory (Habermas and Honneth), hermeneutics (Gadamer and Ricoeur), analytical philosophy (Wittgenstein), pragmatism (Dewey, Mead and James) and American micro-sociology (phenomenology, ethnomethodology and conversation analysis) into qualitative research. For the pragmatists of various stripes and of different generations, “empirico-conceptualism” has become the preferred format of sociological research. It combines abstract theoretical models (*modélisation*) of human capabilities with painstaking ethnographies (*enquête*) of concrete situations of action. The journal *Raisons pratiques* gives a good aperçu of the theoretical sophistication of social theory in the pragmatic style. Otherwise, to get a sense of innovative streams in the sociology of work, health, art, science, social movements, etc. one can only recommend the work of Luc Boltanski, Laurent Thévenot, Louis Quéré, Nathalie Heinich, Francis Chateauraynaud, Nicolas Dodier, Daniel Cefaï and Cyril Lemieux.

Luc Boltanski’s and Laurent Thévenot’s book *On Justification* (1996) offers the template for pragmatic sociology. It formalises the grammar of justification and critique of ordinary actors in public situations and exemplifies the paradigmatic shift from a critical sociology to a sociology of critique. With its insistence on collective representations and social conventions, it continues the Durkheimian tradition of moral and political sociology, but by giving it a pragmatist inflexion, it refuses the “spectator view of knowledge” of an omniscient (Bourdivine) sociologist who has access to social structures of domination that escape the consciousness of the actors. Without epistemological privilege, the sociologist now has to investigate how the actors themselves define the situation as a situation of injustice. They do so with reference to various orders of worth (called *Cités*) that allow for the categorisation of objects and qualification of the subjects that make up the situation. Boltanski and Thévenot make good use of classical texts in moral and political philosophy (Saint-Augustine, Rousseau, Adam Smith among others) and argue that those texts represent ideal-typical social utopias that have become part of the repertories of justification of contemporary societies. In real life, conflicts arise when the actors disagree about the qualification of the persons involved and appeal to different orders of worth. When, for instance, the owner of a plant dismisses a worker for insufficient productivity (industrial order of worth), the latter can defend herself by invoking the illness of her child (domestic order of worth). When the conflicts of valuation are recurrent, a compromise between various orders of worth can be institutionalised at the macro-level, as happened, for instance, when the conflict between the civic, the mercantile and industrial orders of worth was overcome in the post-war class compromise of Fordism.

In *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, Boltanski and Chiapello (2005) extend the model of the Cités to analyse the structural transition from a Fordist to a post-Fordist economy. They argue that capitalism needs a moral justification to motivate its executives to collaborate. When the model of capitalist accumulation entered in crisis in the 1970’s, the captains of industry first negotiated with the workers’ unions; when conflicts did not abide, they started to incorporate the post-modern critiques of capitalism. Capitalism was thus strengthened through incorporation of the criticism that was directed at it. The result was the emergence of new managerial spirit of capitalism and a new order of worth – the “Cité of projects”– in which the demands for flexibility, freedom and authenticity have precedence over the demands for equality, solidarity and security. The analysis of the management literature reveals that the ideal employee is flexible and well networked, without strong attachments and ever ready to engage in new projects. The book traces the effect of the change of normative registers throughout the economy and society and has become a classic reference in the literature on neoliberalism.

In *Qu’est-ce que l’actualité politique?*, Luc Boltanski and Arnaud Esquerre (2022) analyse the formation of public opinion in contemporary democracies. Through an analysis of comments on the webpage of the French quality newspaper *Le Monde*, they investigate how events are serialised into “news” and how readers politicise the news by relating themes and problems (ecology, immigration, Europe, etc.) to political decision makers and to the state who fail to resolve them. In times of uncertainty, the problematisation and politicisation of current events lead to a generalised polarisation that affects everyday life and puts democracy under pressure.

Boltanski and Thévenot’s opposition to Bourdieu’s genetic structuralism was of an epistemological, not of a political nature. If they developed a framework that dispenses with field and habitus to focus instead on short stretches of action, it was because they considered that a situational and processual analysis of society-in-the making should be capable of analysing the great problems of society from the bottom up. The critical turn within pragmatic sociology has subsequently led to fruitful exchanges with the third generation critical theory (Axel Honneth’s theory of recognition and Nancy Fraser’s theory of capitalism as an institutional order).

The new pragmatic sociology is internally split between more orthodox pragmatic sociologists (who want to stay as close as possible to their fieldwork) and sociological pragmatists (who seek theoretical inspiration in American philosophical pragmatism). The work of Nathalie Heinich on values and valuations and that of Francis Chateauraynaud on scientific controversies represent perhaps the most ambitious and innovative developments within the second generation of French pragmatism. Nathalie Heinich, who studied with Bourdieu and worked with Boltanski (before breaking with both of them…), has a vast production in the sociology of art, the sociology of identities, and the epistemology of the social sciences. Of late, she has developed a comprehensive analytic framework for a sociology of values that investigates actions of valuation, describes valued objects and persons, and maps the different axiological principles that are mobilised in value conflicts (Heinich, 2017). Her most recent work uses the models of axiological sociology to theorise the value of persons and to empirically investigate the controversies that followed the burning of the Cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris. Francis Chateauraynaud investigates long-term scientific controversies and accidents in large-scale technological systems (Chateauraynaud and Debaz, 2017). Combining multi-sited ethnographies of ecological vigilance with automated socio-informatic treatment of large corpuses of discourses, he follows the deployment of actors, dispositifs and arguments involved in controversies in a sociological ballistics that aims to keep the future open to indeterminacy and resistance.

Actor-Network Theory

Bruno Latour and Luc Boltanski mutually influenced each other in the 1980’s. That does not justify lumping pragmatic sociology and actor-network theory together, however. Latour has a philosophical and theological background. Nowadays, he sees himself more as a speculative philosopher who theorises the modes of existence and an anthropologist who studies the Anthropocene than as a sociologist of science. He’s neither interested in critical sociology nor in the sociology of critique. Rather, he wants to submit sociology to a critique by problematising its most basic concepts and assumptions, starting with the presupposition that society is made up of people, that nature and culture can be separated or that science supplants religion, politics and metaphysics in modernity. His project is to develop a “reverse anthropology” of the moderns that describes its multiple ways of truth-telling, its sciences and its technologies, its politics, cosmologies and metaphysics.

Latour is highly creative, original and provocative thinker. Continuously on the move, his trajectory is far from linear. It traverses the disciplines and becomes increasingly speculative as he develops his own system of thought and branches out to the arts and philosophy. Initially, he was mainly active in the field of science and technology studies, pushing social constructivism to its limits. In a classic ethnography of a scientific lab, co-written with Steve Woolgar, he showed how scientific facts are literally constructed by “technologies of inscription” that provide a series of graphic representations of reality that are then progressively “black boxed” so as to become unquestionable. Actor-Network Theory (ANT) was fully developed into a rhizomatic sociology that follows the actors or, to use semiotic language, the “actants” through space and time. It shows how humans and non-humans are associated into an expanding socio-technical network that potentially covers the globe.

In *Reassembling the Social,* Latour (2005) aims to “remake sociology and change society,” as the French title of the book suggests. He reclaims Gabriel Tarde as a founder of sociology, redefines the discipline as a science of associations, proposes methodological guidelines to trace connections between actants, and invents a whole new of looking at the social world as a collective in the making.

By the time ANT and its central concepts (actants, matters of concern, flat ontology) had conquered sociology, Latour had already left the field and moved back to theology, philosophy and anthropology - or forward to the arts, the humanities and the geo-sciences. Taking a speculative turn, he has developed a pluralist, processual and metaphysical system in which the modes of existence of the sciences, technologies, politics, religions, ethics, law, economics and literature are described in colourful language. It is as if he had transformed Boltanski and Thévenot’s investigation of Cités into a metaphysical inquiry into the properties of a myriad of irreducible, self-consisting universes, each with its own regime of veridiction. Through a fusion of Whitehead’s process theology and Deleuze’s radical empiricism, Latour’s empirical philosophy has given life to a various elusive post-post-structuralist approaches (like OOO or object-oriented ontology, the new materialism, assemblage theory) that had taken one or all of the turns (the speculative, ontological, animistic, vitalistic) in the human sciences that, supposedly, led all the way back from the dead ends of high modernity to the perennial wisdoms of indigenous people.

Writing against the backdrop of the looming Anthropocene, Latour has thrown himself in the debate about climate change and introduced the Earth (Gaia) as one more actant that talks back and needs to be heard. From the point of view of political ecology that aims to promote life on earth, the Covid-19 crisis appears as a crash-test of a new climactic regime in which the world of life (the world that is exploited by humans) irrupts into the life-world (the world where humans live), and interrupts it. Henceforth, humans will have to learn to live together in a “critical zone” with animals, plants, bacteria and viruses. The new ecology demands a new cosmology, a new sociology and a new politics. It also leads to a new class struggle in which the lines of division have to be continuously rearticulated between those who live in different worlds – those who want to leave the twentieth century behind and the moderns who still believe in economic growth.

Like elsewhere, social theory in France has become more openly political (Durand, 2019). Outside of sociology, in philosophy, in anthropology and in the Studies, a lot of work is being done on social problems (like populism, racism, terrorism), social groups (youth, women, immigrants, refugees), social worlds (like the school, the family, work) and civilisational challenges (climate change, pandemics, war) (Fassin, 2022). If social theory has a vocation and a task, over and above the different disciplines of the social sciences, it is to reorganise political philosophy, the social sciences and the new humanities in a common project that is at once scientific, normative and political (Caillé and Vandenberghe, 2021). Social theory thus understood is broader than sociology. It is the place of synthesis of the social sciences and reflection on society that maintains the dialogue between the various disciplines and social life.

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