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The Age of Epigones: Post-Bourdieuian Social Theory in France

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The French do not only produce high fashion, good wine and soft cheese; they also produce fine intellectuals and export their precious thoughts as valuable items for academic consumption and distinction. The highly centralised, elitist educational system of the *grandes écoles* is uniquely suited to produce well-trained cohorts of highly cultivated, polyvalent, original and provocative politicised thinkers, like Foucault, Bourdieu and Derrida, who set the intellectual agenda worldwide. Somewhat envious of the French spirit, sociologists from abroad often think of France as a country where every working sociologist is, by nature, a social theorist who combines elegance with depth and commitment. But, paradoxically, if the republic counts indeed an impressive number of internationally famous social theorists, it knows no social theory as such, at least not if one understands by social theory the relatively autonomous subfield of sociology that aims to construct a unified view of the social world through exegesis of the classics (Marx, Weber, Durkheim) and re- or deconstruction of the contemporary canon (Habermas, Giddens, Foucault, etc.).

In France, the sociologist is not supposed to work on theory for theory's sake. The scholar who submits sociological texts to an ontological, epistemological and ideological investigation is not doing social theory, but epistemology.¹ Wary of the scholastic elaborations of the “idealists without heart” and the speculations of the “materialists without material”, French sociology has remained Durkheimian in this respect. If one wants to tackle the great theoretical questions, one can do so, but only via case studies or investigative fieldwork. Bourdieu's work is exemplary in this regard, but not exceptional. Alain Touraine developed the actionalist perspective on historical action while doing research on working class consciousness in the factories of Renault; Michel Crozier theorized the “vicious circles of bureaucracy” in the course of an analysis of the strategies of power in the administration of two public enterprises; Edgard Morin expanded his systemic theory of complexity in a multidimensional analysis of social change in the

small village of Plozevet and, more recently, Albert Piette (1992) worked out a grand theory of theorizing in the minor mode.

1. Three Generations of Sociology

In spite of the early institutionalisation of sociology around Durkheim, Mauss and the *Année Sociologique*, French sociology remained for a long time under the wings of philosophy. In fact, it is only after World War II that sociology would become fully recognized as an autonomous discipline with its own research agenda and teaching curriculum. Since then, three generations of sociologists have evolved. In the fifties and the sixties, the field was largely dominated (from right to left by) Raymond Aron, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Georges Gurvitch, Lucien Goldman and Louis Althusser. After 1968, Pierre Bourdieu, Alain Touraine, Raymond Boudon and Michel Crozier took over the main field of sociology.² The “gang of four” would effectively control the field up till the end the eighties, leaving the margins to post-modernizing sociologists like Michel Maffesoli, Pierre Sansot and Jean-Claude Kaufmann who gather around Georges Balandier, a political socio-anthropologist, and publish in his journal *Cahiers internationaux de sociologie*.

If Bourdieu’s “genetic structuralism” and Touraine’s “actionalist sociology” are relatively well known abroad, the same can not be said of Boudon’s “methodological individualism”, and even less of Crozier’s “strategic analysis”. In the eighties, Touraine proposed to reconceptualise social movements as Subjects searching for meaning rather than as carriers of “historicity”. Since the nineties, his thinking has taken a personalist turn and a tragic tone. He now conceives of “late” (or “low”) modernity in terms of a dissociation of the system and the actor, while society, which used to constitute the link between both, has disintegrated into a global world of things and a tribal world of identities (Touraine, 1997). “Methodological individualism” represents the French variant of rational choice theory. In order to escape the strict utilitarianism of the latter, Boudon has opened up the concept of rationality. Taking a stand against relativism, his sociology of knowledge explores and explains “wrong choices” in terms of “good reasons”. Of late, the former collaborator of Lazarsfeld has even attempted to reconsider Weber’s value-

rationality along similar lines (Boudon, 1995). While “methodological individualism” appears as a reasonable remake of rational choice, “strategic analysis” represents an application of Simon and March’s analysis of “bounded rationality” to the sociology of organizations. In *L’acteur et le système*, Crozier and Friedberg (1977) have developed a systematic framework for the analysis of the relations of power within organizations. Focusing on the “margins of freedom” that social actors can strategically manipulate to advance their own interests, they analyse organizations as contingent and collective constructs of organized action.

In the eighties and the nineties, a new generation of sociologists, social theorists and political philosophers has emerged on the scene. Reacting against the post-structuralist “masters of suspicion” (Bourdieu, Foucault, Lacan, Derrida), they have introduced a paradigmatic change in the social sciences - from structuralism and the critique of domination to pragmatism, phenomenology and the hermeneutics of interpretation.³ The sociologists who turned to action insisted with Ricoeur, Habermas and Giddens - but against Bourdieu - on the reflexive capacities of the agent. Influenced by the “linguistic turn” that took place in analytic and continental philosophy, they took up the lead of American pragmatism, symbolic interactionism, phenomenology and ethnomethodology, and tried to overcome the opposition between agency and structure through a constructivist analysis of situated interaction.⁴ Even if the new sociologies are rather variegated, they nevertheless display some interesting “family resemblances”: Reaction against the determinism of Bourdieu’s theory of reproduction and, to a lesser extent, the historicism of Touraine’s sociology of social movements; strong influence of Anglo-Saxon philosophy, continental hermeneutics and American micro-sociology; multidisciplinary approach of the social world with particular attention to anthropology, history and economics; grand theory conjoined with minute ethno-philosophical analysis of action; insistence on the ordinary competence of actors coupled to attempts to introduce society, history and politics via a constructivist analysis of the concrete situation of action; political engagement on the left and regular interventions in the public sphere or, at least, in the columns of the main quality newspapers.

Bourdieu is the towering figure of French post-war sociology. His position in the French field can easily be compared to the one Parsons occupied in the American one up till the

sixties. Whether one likes it or not, his influence is such that one has to think either with or against Bourdieu. The most interesting developments in francophone sociology are definitely post-, though not necessarily anti-Bourdieuian. In the following of this chapter, I will first present the posthumous publications of Pierre Bourdieu (2) and, next, I will proceed to post-Bourdieuian sociology as such. In sequence, I will expound the pragmatic sociology of Luc Boltanski, Laurent Thévenot and Eve Chiapello (3), the actor-network theory of Bruno Latour and Michel Callon (4), the mediation studies of Régis Debray (5), the political philosophy of Marcel Gauchet and the sociology of the gift of Alain Caillé (6) and, crossing the Atlantic, I will conclude with the Montreal School of Michel Freitag (7).⁵

2. Posthumous Publications of Pierre Bourdieu

Some people are forgotten before they die, others, like Pierre Bourdieu (1930-2002), expire under the glare of publicity. Although the publication of the quasi-totality of his interventions in the public sphere - from the war of Algeria to the one in Bosnia and from the reform of the universities to his scathing attack on the media (Bourdieu, 2002a) – show that he was always a “political animal”, it is only in the last decade of his life that he willingly assumed the role of the “total intellectual” à la Sartre and became a national celebrity. In *La sociologie est un sport de combat*, a documentary film made by Pierre Carles (2001), one sees the leading sociologist touring the country to criticize the neo-liberal politics of globalization, giving a voice to the “no-no’s” (*les sans*), those who have no voice, no job, no papers, no nothing. Since his death, Loïc Wacquant, his transatlantic interpreter who studies boxing, ghettos and prisons in America (Wacquant, 2000), seems to have inherited the pugilistic habitus of his master.

A few months after his death, Bourdieu’s auto-biography was published, not in French though, but in German (Bourdieu, 2002b). *Outline for a self-analysis* extends the final lecture of the course on the reflexive sociology of science that he gave at the Collège de France (Bourdieu, 2001) with a protracted socio-analysis of his intellectual journey. His ambivalence towards the intellectual world, which expresses itself in a strange, but comprehensible mixture of intellectual arrogance and self-depreciation, appears as a psychic sedimentation of the years of lonely suffering he spent at the boarding-school, a “total institution” that almost broke him. Following his studies in philosophy at the Ecole

normale supérieure, where he came under the influence of the “historical epistemology” of Gaston Bachelard and Georges Canguilhem, the young philosopher from the province went to Algeria to fulfill his military service. During the war of independence, he did extensive fieldwork and became an anthropologist. The catalogue of the exhibition of the pictures he took in Algeria show that he had not only a sharp mind, but also good eye for the details of everyday life (Bourdieu, 2003). Having moved in the fifties from philosophy to ethnology, the young anthropologist “converted” in the mid-sixties to sociology. Throwing himself frenetically in all kinds of sociological researches on all kinds of objects and subjects (photography, comic strips, cultural taste, Heidegger, etc.), the sociological genius developed in the span of a few years (1966-1972) a total theory of the social world. Bourdieu was only in his mid-thirties when he formulated, at the highest level of abstraction and with the greatest conceptual precision, the interrelated theories of “fields”, “the habitus” and “symbolic violence” that form the backbone of his progressive research program into the reproduction of the structures of domination.

The posthumous publication of three texts (Bourdieu, 2002c), written at different times, in which he analyses the progressive exclusion of peasants from the matrimonial market, allows one to follow in detail how he successively developed and integrated his main concepts in a grand theory of social reproduction. In the first text, Bourdieu presents a total description of his native village in the south of France. He explains the celibacy of the peasant through a masterful description of his habitus – “he drags his big wooden shoes or his heavy boots even though he’s wearing his Sunday shoes” (Bourdieu, 2002b: 114) - that can compare with Heidegger’s. In the second text, the same problematic is treated once again, but this time the matrimonial practices are explained in terms of unconscious strategies of reproduction. In the third text, the symbolic dimension of the economic exclusion of peasants is covered through an analysis of the modernisation of rural regions. The book concludes with a violent postscript in which Bourdieu slams the urban representations of the rural and attacks Foucault in a footnote.

Since the nineties, the international reception of his oeuvre has grown into a prosperous cottage industry, comparable perhaps to the field of Foucauldian and Habermasian studies. The publication of Bourdieu’s completed bibliography (Bourdieu, 2002d) thus comes in handy. In France as well, his work is now being seriously studied. Several books have appeared and, by the end of 2004, at least three edited collections had been published as a tribute to the departed sociologist. Whereas most critiques try to think “with Bourdieu

against Bourdieu”, Bernhard Lahire (1998) is more ambitious and tries to think differently from him. Starting with an analysis of the ordinary practices of writing of shopping lists, travel plans, etc., he has introduced reflexivity into the habitus and developed an ambitious theory of plural actors in which individuals appear as the product of multiple, heterogeneous and conflicting process of socialisation.

3. Pragmatic Sociology

Luc Boltanski, a sociologist, and Laurent Thévenot, an economist, are former colleagues of Bourdieu who were working on the social construction of socio-professional categories and groups when they fell out with the master.⁶ Together, they have written *On Justification. The Economies of Stature* (Boltanski and Thévenot, 1991, 1999), a major treatise on the pragmatics of justice in which they systematically link up the micro-sociology of ordinary conflicts to the “economy of conventions”, a heterodox school of institutional economy that analyses the role of social representations in the coordination of actions. Breaking with the structuralist assumptions of Bourdieu’s critical sociology of domination, they have steadily moved towards a more hermeneutic sociology of critique and legitimation that redeploys Michael Walzer’s theory of the spheres of justice in a pragmatist theory of situated action.

The theory of justification analyses short stretches of actions in which actors publicly denounce situations of injustice, and offers a “grammar of disputes” in which different principles of justice are simultaneously at work. Disputes are analysed as conflicts in which the “stature” of persons are at stake. In order to explicate the “logic of inquiry” (Dewey) that allows for a qualification of the persons and the objects that make up the concrete situation of dispute, Boltanski and Thévenot construct a model, known as the model of the *Cités* or Commonwealths, that formalises the argumentative and normative constraints that actors have to take into account if their critique is to be accepted as a valid one. *Cités* are axiological orders, built around a central value, in which a vision of “the good life with and for others in just institutions” (to quote Ricoeur) is systematically worked out. Drawing on classic works of political philosophy (St. Augustine, Bossuet, Hobbes, Rousseau, Saint Simon and A. Smith), they distinguish six orders of justification

and their corresponding values: the Commonwealth of inspiration (grace and intuition), household (loyalty and trust), fame (opinion and recognition), citizenship (equality and solidarity), industry (efficacy and technical competence) or market (competition and economic performance).⁷ The authors do not wish to suggest, of course, that ordinary people have read any of these authors. Rather their argument is that when actors proffer a critique, they necessarily act as practical metaphysicians and implicitly refer to philosophical vocabularies of justification that appeal to a common good.

Moving from the lofty heights of political philosophy to the commonplaces of everyday life, Boltanski and Thévenot follow actor-network theory (cfr. *infra*) and introduce ordinary objects into the model of justification. Unlike humans, who can aspire to greatness in any of the Commonwealths and can thus not be attached definitively to any of them, non humans have a well defined character. A chronometer belongs to the world of industry, a poem to the world of inspiration, and a banknote to the world of the market. Those common objects play a central role in disputes. When they are activated *in situ*, a corresponding register of justification is automatically selected, and the stature of the actor can consequently be evaluated. An empty CV, tended to an employer, is enough to disqualify the candidate as a “small player” in the job market, while one’s appearance on the cover of a magazine defines one as a “big fish” in the world of fame. Protagonists of a dispute also have the capacity to foreground objects, point to them to redefine the situation to their advantage or to clear compromises.

Focusing on micro-situations of conflict, *On Justification* does not really take macro-social structures of domination into account. In *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello (1999) have extended the pragmatic model of the *Cités* to analyse the structural transformations of capitalism since the 1960s. The basic argument of this great book, already a minor classic in France, is that capitalism has successfully co-opted the anti-capitalist critique, with the result that capitalism is stronger than ever while the critique of capitalism seems rather disarmed. Capitalism, or the unlimited accumulation of capital by formally pacific means, cannot function without an ideology that justifies it in terms of the common good. Capitalism needs a spirit. Since the 19th century, three spirits of capitalism have succeeded each other. The “first spirit” corresponds to a predominantly domestic capitalism and focuses on the individual

entrepreneur. The central values are the family and competition. Confronted with the social question, liberal capitalism reorganized itself in the 1930's along Taylorist, Fordist and Keynesian lines. The dominant figure of organized capitalism is the managing director. The forms of justification invoked by the "second spirit" are of a civic and industrial nature and concern mainly security (of employment, promotion, indexed income, etc.). As capitalism could no longer "afford" the neo-corporatist arrangement of the "golden thirties", it started to restructure itself in the 1980's along neo-liberal lines.

Boltanski and Chiapello analyse the "new spirit of capitalism" by way of a comparative analysis of literature of management of the 1960's and the 1990's. They distinguish two forms of critique of capitalism, the "social" and the "artistic" critique, and argue that the neo-liberal turn of the 1980s can be explained in terms of the progressive integration of the artistic critique of capitalism by capitalism itself. Social critique corresponds to the traditional critique of capitalism by the worker's movement. It denounces poverty, inequality and exploitation in the name of solidarity and justice. Artistic critique is post-modern. It criticises the alienating and dehumanising nature of organised capitalism in the name of spontaneity, creativity and authenticity. In May 1968, the two critiques were joined and capitalism was seriously challenged. At first, the employers negotiated with the trade unions about wages. In the 1980s, they started to lend an ear to the artistic critique. Circumventing the unions, they gave a neo-liberal interpretation to the libertarian demands of creativity, introduced flexibility in the workplace, and transformed the organisation into a contractual network. Confronted with insecurity, the flexi-worker became a networker selling his self, his skills and his project on the market. Criticising the injustice of network capitalism, Boltanski and Chiapello call for a renewal of social critique.

4. Actor-Network Theory

Bruno Latour, a post-modern theologian and anthropologist, and Michel Callon, an engineer and sociologist, work at the Centre de sociologie de l'innovation (CSI) of the Ecole des Mines in Paris. Together, they have developed actor-network theory (ANT) as one of the most original, provocative and iconoclastic sociologies currently on offer.

ANT started as a radical offshoot of the social studies of science of the 1970's and the 1980's that aimed to deconstruct the philosophies of sciences through an ethnographic study of science in the making.⁸ Creatively drawing on the philosophy of translation of Michel Serres and the rhizomatics of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, Latour and Callon forcefully introduce objects into sociology, and analyse society in the making as an expanding socio-technical network that associates humans and non humans into a "seamless web". Thanks to the good services of John Law in the UK, ANT is now becoming a global success story in academia.

The main tenets of ANT can be summarised in three sentences:

1) *Science is social* (Latour, 1985). Through a technography of a scientific laboratory in California, Latour and Woolgar showed how scientific facts are literally constructed and fabricated by scientists. Working with "inscription devices" that re-present nature on paper and reduce reality to a flat surface, scientists were busy transforming rats and chemicals into a series of blots, graphs and figures that could be integrated in their articles. As their vision of nature became generally accepted by colleagues, who quoted the article, the scientific representation of nature was progressively hardened and transformed into a scientific fact ("blackboxed"). When the square quotes around "nature" were eventually removed, nature ended up appearing as something that was not made but discovered by the scientist. In spite of the radical constructivist assumptions, one should not conclude too quickly, however, that Latour is anti-science. His work on scientific inscriptions aims to show how scientists construct nature as a scientific fact through a "cascade of representations" that describes nature more and more accurately.

2) *Society is natural* (Latour, 1996). Scientific facts are socially constructed but cannot be reduced to the social because the social is also made up of objects mobilised to construct it. For too long sociologists have analysed society as a commonwealth of humans (subjects), without understanding that society is impossible without non humans (objects) that stabilise social relations and keep society together. What distinguishes baboons from humans is the fact that the latter use objects to give material consistency to the social contract. Thanks to common objects (walls, doors, tables, televisions, etc.) - and contrary to ethnomethodologists, who treat humans as if they were baboons! - the social order does not have to be continuously renegotiated and constantly remade *in situ*. Non humans

do not only replace and stand in for humans – e.g. the traffic light replaces a policeman and the automatic door closer a porter-, but they can be considered as actors in their own right. Drawing on Greimas' structural semiotics, Latour and Callon introduce the notion of “actant” to refer to any actor, human or non human – God, scientists, microbes, scallops, etc.- that intervenes in the construction of society as a heterogeneous network of humans and non humans.

3) *Nature and society are co-constructed in and through socio-technical networks that associate humans and non humans into a seamless web* (Callon and Latour, 1981). Nature and society are not given, but always in the making; neither is a cause, both are a result and emerge out of the network that continuously transforms and performs reality. Mutually constitutive of each other, nature and society are co-produced and constituted in and through the heterogeneous network that associates humans and non humans. Redefining sociology as the science of associations, ANT analyses how micro-actors become macro-actors by enrolling humans and non humans alike in an expanding rhizomatic network. At this point, the sociology of science takes a political turn and science is analysed as politics by other means. Natural scientists (like Pasteur) who represent nature or social scientists (like Bourdieu) who represent society, speak in the name of others and give them a voice. Speaking in their name, they “translate” their interests, associate them to their project, integrate them in a collective, and progressively compose the world as a network among networks that potentially covers the whole world.

5. Mediation Studies

Like Boltanski, Thévenot and Latour, Régis Debray used to be close to Bourdieu, but expelled from the cenacle, he broke with him to go his own way. Former comrade in arms of Che Guevara, former consultant for the Third World of President Mitterand, staunch defender of the nation-state, this polymath, novelist and political theorist is a rather controversial figure. On his own, he invented mediology as the new science of mediations, launched a new journal *Les cahiers de mediologie*, and gathered some of the most interesting philosophers of technology (Bernard Stiegler, François Dagognet, Pierre Lévy, but also Bruno Latour and Antoine Hennion) around his project. Like Latour,

Debray is a follower of Michel Serres, and conceives of technology as a socio-technical construct; unlike Latour, he is not influenced by Deleuze and Guattari, however, but by Paul Valéry (an essayist), André Leroi-Gourhan (a palaeontologist) and the Toronto School of media studies (McLuhan, Derrick de Kerckhove, Harold Innis).

Mediology or mediation studies broadens the notion of media so as to include all material and institutional vectors of communication – from the ways, the canals, the stations, the ports and the portals to the sects, the churches, the schools and the parties. It defines mediation as the totality of interactions between culture and technology that makes the diffusion (through space) and the transmission (over time) of ideas possible. Taunting communication scholars who work in the tradition of Roland Barthes, Debray presents the new interdiscipline as a successor science to media studies that integrates the semiotic analysis of contents in a more encompassing philosophy of the history of the technologies of the transmission of culture across generations.

At the most general level, mediology studies the material and institutional conditions of the symbolic transmission of culture and the (re)production of society. In *Critique of Political Reason*, Debray (1981) analyzed the role of ideology in the structuration of collectives. He argued that religions (which unify) and nations (which divide) are not simply social representations of reality; to the extent that they emotionally move people, they have a symbolic efficacy and a performative force that can transform people, society and history. *Cours de médiologie générale* (Debray, 1991) is the foundational text of the study of mediations. It deepens the metapolitical analysis of ideologies and group formation with an analysis of the techno-social modes of the transmission of ideologies and ideas. Religions and ideologies may grip the masses, but it is only if the prophet and the ideologue can rely on an effective social organisation and a powerful system for the diffusion and the transmission of their ideas that they can possibly intervene as a force in history. Situated at the crossroads of philosophy, theology anthropology, archaeology, history, sociology, political sciences, semiotics, media and cultural studies, mediology is a relatively autonomous discipline that analyses the totality of the processes of mediation that intervene between culture and agency, and transform ideas into a material force.

Following Serres and Latour, Debray conceives of mediation as a socio-technical process of hybridisation that interconnects culture (ideas and texts, such as the *Communist*

Manifesto), people (like Marx, but also intellectuals and workers) and technology (from printing to travelling) into an active network. To understand “how one can do things with words”, one has to open the black box of the medium and analyse mediation as a double process in which ideas are transmitted by technological vectors at the same time as people are organised into groups and societies.

Mediology conceives of the media not so much as material causes, but as formal causes, in the Aristotelian sense of the word. The media are not neutral vectors of cultural transmission, but they impose a certain worldview and configure a certain way of thinking, feeling and acting. In order to analyse the shifting impact of the spoken, the written and the audio-visual media on society and politics, Debray introduces the ecological notion of the “mediasphere” as a masterconcept and analyses the successive development and integration of the logo- (writing), grapho- (printing) and videosphere (audio-visual).⁹ The current passage from the logo- to the videosphere implies not only a shift of predominance from the power of words to the power of images, but this shift is also linked to a commercialisation of intellectual and political life. Somewhat nostalgic of the times when television did not rule politics, Debray deplores and criticises the current state of “mediocracy” in a stream of books.

6. The Recomposition of Society through Politics

Marcel Gauchet and Alain Caillé are both former students of Claude Lefort and critiques of Pierre Bourdieu. Inspired by the critique of totalitarianism of *Socialisme et Barbarie* (Lefort, Castoriadis and Lyotard), they consider “the political” as a fundamental dimension of social life. In opposition to socialism and liberalism, they insist on the potentials and the liabilities of radical democracy, and are looking at civil society to breathe new life into the atomised society of egoist individuals. One way or another, both are exploring the question of the social order from the perspective of comparative historical anthropology and insisting on the importance of symbolic representations for the structuration of society. Finally, both are public intellectuals on the left who animate a journal and seek to stimulate non partisan public debate.

Marcel Gauchet is the editor in chief of *Le Débat*. In spite of his classicism, he might well be the successor of Michel Foucault. Like Foucault, he delves into the archives of the past in order to develop a “history of the present”. What he wants to understand is the coincidence of the secularisation of religion, the advent of historicity and the invention of democracy that marks the protracted transition to modernity, as well as the consequent adventures of democracy in individualist societies like ours where individuals give themselves their own laws. Through a history of psychiatry, which is at the same a critique of Foucault’s *History of Madness*; through the study of the French revolution and the invention of human rights; and, above all, through a political history of religion, Gauchet has investigated the transition from a holist, hierarchical and heteronomous conception to an individualist, egalitarian and autonomous conception of society.

In *The Disenchantment of the World*, a Weberian treatise in political theology, he interprets Christianity as the “religion of the exit of religion” (Gauchet, 1985: II). Following the invention of monotheism during the axial age, humanity projects itself in a transcendent personal God who offers a symbolic representation of the unity of society and thereby founds the social order. With the emergence of the State in traditional societies, the transcendental order becomes progressively “introjected” into society in the form of worldly power. The symbolic representation of society is incorporated at first by the absolute king; later, with the French revolution, power will be democratized and represented by the Law. The democratic revolution marks the breakthrough of individualism and inverts the order of foundation from top to bottom. Henceforth, the coexistence of individuals and the unity of society will be the product of the individuals themselves. Through the democratization of power, societies renounce to the idea of unity, depersonalize power, become pluralist and accept conflict as a fundamental given of social life. While totalitarianism tried to reintroduce by force the unity of holistic and hierarchical societies into individualist and egalitarian societies, liberalism endorses individualism and conceives of the social order as an order that spontaneously emerges from below.

In the long run the successes of liberal democracy and human rights undermine, however, the political foundations of society. Offering a critical evaluation of contemporary politics and societies, Gauchet (2002) points to the contradictions of democracy in

different fields (religion, education, psychology, ecology, social movements, etc.) Convinced that societies cannot exist without a holistic reference, he warns for a depoliticisation and individualization of society. The social order requires a symbolic and normative representation of its unity; without it, it decomposes into an atomized society of egoist individuals.

Less of a republican than Gauchet, Alain Caillé also calls for a democratic recomposition of society and puts his hope in the politics of associations. Caillé is the founder of the anti-utilitarian movement of the M.A.U.S.S. - an acronym for *Mouvement Anti-Utilitariste dans les Sciences Sociales* - and the editor of the *Revue du MAUSS*, a bi-annual journal devoted to the study of the gift in which anthropologists, sociologists, economists and political philosophers on the left explore the contours of an alternative science and society that are not based on self-interest and egoism. Founded in 1981 to counter the hegemony of utilitarianism in the social sciences (rational choice) and society (neo-liberalism), Alain Caillé has worked out Marcel Mauss's classic essay on the gift into a full blown political sociology of associations that considers the triple obligation - "to give, accept and return the gift" - as the bedrock of social life (Caillé, 2000, Godbout and Caillé, 1992).

Reintroducing symbols and agency into the sociologism of Durkheim, Mauss has outlined a generous sociology of social relations that overcomes the opposition between the individual and society. Free, yet obligatory, the "spirit of the gift" is the catalyst of social relations that makes society possible as a primary network of associations out of which the market and the state will emerge as a secondary formation, which is currently being incorporated into a tertiary network of global relations. Caillé does not ignore the agonistic nature of the primitive gift; nor does he believe that contemporary societies are only driven by interest. To the contrary, he defends the primacy of the gift and conceives of it as a "total social fact" that animates all institutions of society. It encompasses conflict and peace, obligation and freedom, interest and generosity. The gift does not only represent a third sociological paradigm between individualism and holism, but institutionalised into a third sector of voluntary associations, it also offers a genuine third way beyond liberalism and socialism. As politics is conceived as the continuation of the gift by other means, the local associations that implement the politics of giving can be

understood as social movements that seek to uphold the moral economy against the market and the state. The associations do not aim to abolish the state or the market, but to rejuvenate the social tissue and to “reembed” (as Polanyi says) the market and the state into the life-world. Against contractualist versions of welfare, the anti-utilitarian movement defends the basic income as a generalised expression of reciprocity that can regenerate solidarity. The idea is that when every citizen receives an unconditional “demogrant”, s/he will do something in return for the community and thereby contribute to the realisation of Mauss’s dream of a cooperative or associative socialism.

7. The Montreal School

Meanwhile, in Francophone Canada, Michel Freitag, an old friend of Caillé and former student of Touraine, has developed a monumental neo-dialectical critical social theory (Freitag, 1986). Freitag’s theory of society has some affinities with Giddens’s structuration theory, but through incorporation of Gauchet’s history of the symbolic representation of societies, it redeploys the synchronic analysis of the conditions of production and reproduction of society into a larger dialectical framework that diachronically analyses the historical transformation of its mediations through the ages, from primitive and traditional societies to modern and post-modern ones. The result is a historical theory of the modes of the regulation of practices and the constitution of society that can easily compare with Habermas’ theory of communication or Luhmann’s theory of autopoietic systems. Be that as it may, the dialectical theory of society culminates in a militant critique of the desymbolising tendencies of the systemic mode of reproduction that characterises postmodernity.

The original project of *Dialectique et Société* comprised five volumes, only two of which have been published so far. In the first volume, the Swiss born sociologist presents a general theory of symbolic practice. Its basic idea is that practice is always already and inevitably caught in a web of symbolic representations and significations that functions as an a priori and transcendental order of determination that regulates and unifies the practices, which reproduce in turn society. By introducing culture as a virtual totality that a priori forms, informs and regulates the symbolic practices that produce and reproduce

society, Freitag has successfully forged a dialectical connection between the regulation of practices and the reproduction of society. This ‘double dialectic’ between agency and structure forms the starting point of the developmental theory of the modes of formal reproduction of society that is presented in the second volume. Analysed in a historical and diachronic perspective, the idealtypical description of a society that is conceived as a community of language reappears now, formally, as the first mode of reproduction of society, the ‘symbolic-cultural’ one, which, “sublated”, will be succeeded in modernity by the “political-institutional” one and, subverted and tendentially abolished, in post-modernity by the “decisional-operational” one. The “cultural-symbolic” mode of reproduction of society characterizes primitive societies. As soon as those societies become aware of themselves through an idealised projection of their symbolic representation in myths and religions (cf. Gauchet), the transition to the political-institutional mode of reproduction has already set in. Following the progressive detranscendalisation of the Divine in traditional societies, modern societies start to reflexively produce their own mediations and regulations in the form of legitimate political institutions. With the transition to post-modernity and the advent of the “decisional-operational” mode of reproduction, the transcendental mediations that give a priori unity to societies are progressively dissolved. As a result, societies are transformed into self-referential social systems that are unified a posteriori through adaptation and accomodation to its changing environment. Luhmann’s analysis of the world system is empirically right, according to Freitag, but normatively wrong.

In a series of lengthy articles that have been published in *Société*, the organ of the Montreal School, Freitag has depicted post-modernity as a systemic decomposition of society that signifies at the same time the demise of culture, subjectivity and politics. His critique of post-modernity is anything but post-modern though. In the spirit of the Frankfurt School, it offers a systematic analysis and critique of the desymbolising and dehumanizing tendencies of the contemporary world.

Conclusion

Since the waning of the “new theoretical movement” of the eighties, European social theory seems to have entered the age of epigones. The U.K. is post-Giddensian (R.

Bhaskar, M. Archer, N. Rose), Germany is post-Habermasian (A. Honneth, H. Joas, U. Beck) and France is post-Bourdieuian. For twenty five years, Bourdieu has dominated the field of French sociology and determined its agenda of research. Coming from philosophy, he introduced philosophical concepts into sociology and put them at work in concrete empirical research. Even Bourdieu's main opponents are influenced by him. Like him they pursue the great theoretical questions of the age by way of empirical research and use their research to make a political point. We can thus conclude this overview of French sociology at the turn of the millenium in the same way as Levi-Strauss (1945) concluded his fifty years ago. The dependence of French sociology on philosophy and its opening to politics may well turn out once again to be its greatest asset.

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Notes

¹ Passeron's (1991) systematic vindication of a non-Popperian, ideographic and illustrative method for the social sciences and Berthelot's (1990) mapping of the sociological “schemes of intelligibility” can be considered as two examples of social epistemology in the strict sense. The *Revue du MAUSS* (2004, no. 24) has recently invited some of the main sociologists (Touraine, Boudon, Latour, Thévenot, Freitag, Quéré, Dubet) to debate about the possibility of a general sociological theory.

² The four names refer, in fact, to four different schools with their own research programmes, centres of research and preferred journals (see Ansart, 1990). Bourdieu and his collaborators (P. Champagne, R.

Lenoir, A., L. Pinto, L. Wacquant) work at the Centre de sociologie européenne of the E.H.E.S.S. and publish in the *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*. Alain Touraine and his associates (M. Wieviorka, F. Dubet, F. Khosrokhavar, D. Martucelli) are members of the Cadis (Centre d'Analyse et d'Intervention Sociologique), also at the E.H.E.S.S. Crozier and his collaborators (A. Friedberg, J.C. Thoenig, R. Sainsaulieu) are affiliated to the Centre de sociologie des organisations, based at the Institut de sciences politiques, and, like the Tourainians, they often write for *Sociologie du travail*. Boudon and other methodological individualists of the Sorbonne, like F. Chazel, M. Cherkaoui and B. Valade, control the Presses Universitaires de France and publish in the *Revue française de sociologie*.

³ For an influential account of French post-structuralism, see Ferry and Renault, 1988. Dosse, 1995 and Corcuff, 1995 present good overviews of the most recent developments in the human sciences.

⁴ The influence of American micro-sociology (Goffman, Garfinkel, Sacks, Cicourel) on the new pragmatic sociologies of action of L. Quéré, L. Thévenot, P. Pharo, B. Conein and M. de Fornel cannot be underestimated. They publish in *Raisons pratiques* and *Réseaux* and, of late, under the influence of the analytic philosophy of action, some of them have rejoined the neo-positivist circle of the methodological individualists.

⁵ In the following, I draw on former work in which I discuss more extensively the writings of Bourdieu, Boltanski and Latour (Vandenberghe, 2005), Debray and Lévy (Vandenberghe, 2001) and Gauchet and Freitag (Vandenberghe, 2003).

⁶ Following Bourdieu's seminal work on classification and classes, the constructivist analysis of social groups (Boltanski), socio-professional categories (Thévenot) and statistics (Desrosières) has become a subfield of research at the crossroads of sociology and history with its own journal *Genèses. Sciences sociales et histoire*.

⁷ The number of *Cités* is not fixed. Thévenot and Lafaye have later added an ecological Commonwealth, while Boltanski and Chiapello (1999) introduced the Commonwealth of projects. Lamont and Thévenot (2000) present a comparative analysis of the vocabularies of justification in France and the U.S.

⁸ For an outstanding account of STS by one of its protagonists, see Lynch, 1993.

⁹ Debray mentions the hyper- or cybersphere, but the analysis is left to Pierre Lévy (1997), a visionary who conceives of the internet as a living megabrain that produces a single, complex, evolving hypertext.