



What's new in French Sociology?

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New Column!

International Perspectives

What's New in French Sociology?

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In the United States, French sociology has traditionally been encapsulated in the label, "French theory." From France, such a label is often considered as a distorted picture of past French debates through a contemporary American mirror. This reflects neither the actual history of French debates in the late 20th century, nor the more contemporary state of the art in social sciences in France.

According to a number of popular handbooks in France, sociology was organized— between the 1970s and the 1990s— around four schools. Each of these, headed by a leading figure, was distinct both in its methods and conceptual frameworks: Raymond Boudon's methodological individualism; Alain Touraine's sociology of social movements; Michel Crozier's strategic analysis; and Pierre Bourdieu's marxism-oriented structuralism. Although this canonical presentation may help to capture the main divides in French sociology, it offers an over-simplified view that excludes historically prominent authors such as Edgar Morin, Jean Baudrillard, Henri Mendras, or Jean-Claude Passeron. Moreover, it is too static a picture: the four paradigms were never clearly settled but were continuously reworked by their leaders and subverted by their followers on the basis of internal and external criticisms.

Sociological Innovations

Several elements played an important role in this process of conversion. Some research was inspired by symbolic interaction, the reception of which increased at that time. Starting in the 1980s, the introduction of ethnomethodology, social studies of science, and philosophical pragmatism led a number of French sociologists to develop new notions. These included the multiplicity of the self (Pollak, Dubet, Lahire), the reflexive capacities of individuals (Boltanski), the role played by objects and material equipment in the agency (Latour, Callon), or the importance of a situation's constraints compared with the overestimated weight of socialization (Friedberg, Quéré, Thévenot). Simultaneously, French sociologists, even when they remained within one of the four original paradigms, became more open to international (mostly American) sociological innovations and to advances in other social sciences.

The opening of the sociological mindscape was amplified by institutional evolutions in the discipline (i.e., the increase in the number of sociologists, their professionalization, the development of international cooperation, the multiplication of interdisciplinary research programs and journals). This encouraged sociologists to engage in new paths, change their concepts and methods, and work with other disciplines. A good example is the fruitful dialogue engaged between political sociology and history: "Socio-history" has renewed the reflection on the genesis of political institutions (Noiriel, Offerlé, Lacroix, Ihl, Déloye). Another example is the interaction between some sociologists and economists in developing critical perspectives on neoclassical economics. Original approaches in economics, inspired by the sociological point of view, have emerged as "regulation theory" (Aglietta, Boyer) and

“theory of conventions” (Favereau, Salais, Eymard- Duvernay). Meanwhile, in sociology an “anti-utilitarian” movement, referring to *The Gift* by Marcel Mauss, has explored empirical data in the third sector economy (Caillé, Laville).

A New Generation

The new generation of French sociologists (to which the authors of this article belong) is thus confronted with a complex landscape. The challenge for this third generation is to build sociological approaches based on a critical discussion, not of Boudon, Touraine, Crozier or Bourdieu, but of their followers and critics (e.g., Latour, Boltanski, Dubet). To achieve this task, and renew theoretical frameworks in French sociology, the new generation is involved in three intellectual orientations:

- It refuses to confine its work to conventionally defined objects. In economic sociology, for example, studies are not only about objects linked to the market sphere but also explore how economic constraints are produced and managed in other settings such as organizations, accounting, professions or public institutions (Benamouzig, Chiapello, Dubuisson, François, Godechot, Muniesa, Zalio). In cognitive sociology, as well as in moral sociology, studies are no longer restricted to relationships between humans but also with animals (Guillo, Rémy, Servais).
- The new generation displays a renewed interest in institutions—an issue partially neglected by the second generation. However, it tackles institutions less as functional organizations than as theaters for the management of conflicts, frameworks for the establishment of rules, repertoires and identities, and targets of external criticisms. Particularly in political sociology, where studies focus on public administrations, firms, or media, the new generation examines the forms and the arenas of their public criticism (Roussel, Bezes, O. Henry, Lemieux), including anti-racist or feminist criticisms (Spire, Mathieu) and violent forms of claiming like terrorism (Linhardt). The politics of risk has also become a promising field of research, both in environment and health, in which organizational transformations and regulatory processes are discussed with the emergence of controversies (Barthe, Borraz, E. Henry) and the mobilization of victims or patients (Barbot, Dodier).
- The building of European institutions and the process of globalization have stimulated international research programs based on a comparison of social phenomena between different countries. Consequently, the new generation of French sociologists adopts an international comparative approach on “domestic” objects. Studies on cities, urban segregation, school performance, poverty, welfare, or security policies, are systematically situated in an international comparative perspective (Le Galès, Muchielli, Oberti, Palier, Paugam). The international circulation of cultural products and political ideas (e.g., “affirmative action” or “sexual harassment”) is another important issue (Sabbagh, Sapiro).

French sociology is in a state of transformation, yet some traits of the past still remain, particularly a style of research characterized by robust empirical studies. This style uses different methods: Quantitative ones of course (Chauvel, Vallet) but with an overall preference for qualitative methods; conceptualization within a traditional philosophical dialogue; and theory building, either at the intermediate or the general level. Such a combination is a distinctive feature that needs to be promoted in an international context and within the general standards of evaluation (sometimes seen as threatening), particularly the emphasis on quantitative methods and the priority given to the production of empirical data

over analytical frameworks. Beyond the often significant differences and mutual analytical incompatibilities between contemporary French sociologists, the *empirico-conceptual* style of sociological research remains a unifying principle inherited from an author considered the founding father of the French (and beyond) sociological tradition: Emile Durkheim.

Editor's Note: Complete bibliographical references are available on request to the authors; contact Cyril Lemieux at clemieux@msh-paris.fr. 

[Back to Front Page of Footnotes](#)