

Zeitschrift: Schweizerische Zeitschrift für Soziologie = Revue suisse de sociologie
= Swiss journal of sociology

Band: 23 (1997)

Heft: 1

Artikel: The place of the history of sociology in French sociology

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-814606>

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THE PLACE OF THE HISTORY OF SOCIOLOGY IN FRENCH SOCIOLOGY

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Must the sociologist take an interest in the history of sociology? By arguing in *Eléments de théorie et de méthode sociologique* that, in the words of Whitehead, “a science which hesitates to forget its founders is lost”, Merton apparently gives a negative response to this question. Even though, as Pierre-Jean Simon points out, Merton himself has made it clear that Whitehead’s warning should not be taken literally, that it is not memory which is dangerous, but the way it is sometimes used, this view is nevertheless widely shared and in fact reflects the practice of most researchers (Simon, 1991, 21, footnote 30). Even today, at French universities (and this is not necessarily the case in other countries), the teaching of a given discipline focuses little on its history. It remains a special subject, set aside for historians, philosophers of the sciences and epistemologists, who find in it material for their analyses. For the specialist of the discipline it constitutes what may be a gratifying activity, albeit somewhat unjustified as compared with the central issues of scientific development. That applies of course to the so-called natural sciences, where the only role left to historians by the cumulative process of knowledge is to explain obsolete theories. But this notion is also found in disciplines that are close to sociology, for example law and economics. In France, the history of these disciplines constitutes a recognized specialty, but one which is marginal compared to the heart of the discipline as such. Hence, it plays only a very limited role in the training of future jurists and economists. Disciplines in which history has a relatively central position are of another kind, such as literature and philosophy, in which strictly speaking there is neither obsolescence of part of the production nor a genuine cumulative process. A reading of Kant does not render superfluous a reading of Plato, and a reading of Zola does not make unnecessary a reading of Balzac.

What about sociology? If we confine ourselves to the analysis of the place of the history of sociology in French sociology and more particularly in the training of sociologists, we can, roughly speaking, distinguish three periods: the first extends from between the two world wars until the end of the 1960s, the second draws to a close at the end of the 1980s and the third has only just begun. In the first period, the position of sociologists vis-à-vis their discipline’s past appears as intermediary between that of scientists *stricto sensu* and that of

philosophers or philologists. They do not make the history of their discipline, which in any event is rather short, the centre of their interest, but sense a need to look backward to try to find out who their founders, or at least who their predecessors were, much in the way Durkheim did by showing the importance that he attached to Montesquieu and Comte. Very soon after his death, Durkheim himself began to be regarded as one of the founders, whose works became required reading. Thus, in 1927, Georges Davy published for a student public *Emile Durkheim: Choix de textes avec étude du système sociologique* (1927). After the second world war, Gurvitch and Raymond Aron also chose to give some attention to the history of sociology. Gurvitch devoted part of *Traité de sociologie* and *La vocation actuelle de la sociologie* to the subject. Raymond Aron, for his part, published *Les étapes de la pensée sociologique*, a gallery of intellectual portraits which were to mark an epoch. This interest in the history of sociology or, more specifically, as Aron said, in sociological thought, is not surprising. Defectors from philosophy, these sociologists kept their intellectual practices, ways of thinking associated with their initial training. It is no accident that the term “system” flows naturally from Davy’s pen when he discusses Durkheim’s sociological works. Gurvitch criticizes Durkheim’s thought in the same way as he might have criticized that of Fichte, and the portraits sketched by Aron differ little from those of Emile Bréhier in his *Histoire de la Philosophie*. The end of the 1960s saw the start of the second period. The university context had changed. Sociology had become an important field of study, in any event judging by the number of students. Sociologists had to be trained, and, as in other disciplines, the history of the subject did not receive special attention. Published in 1968, *Le métier de sociologue*, which relies on texts, is a new discourse on method (Bourdieu et al., 1968); the objective is not to constitute a tradition or transmit a heritage, but to spell out the rules that must be followed to produce scientific sociological knowledge. The *Eléments de sociologie* of Henri Mendras sets out to provide, as the title indicates, the basic elements of the discipline, and the three-volume work of Guy Rocher (1968) clearly has a synthetic and cumulative goal (Mendras, 1967). The point of referring to the founders is to appropriate part of the heritage and achieve a new synthesis. For example, the “conciliatory” epistemology of Pierre Bourdieu, Jean-Claude Chamboredon and Jean-Claude Passeron combine the contributions of Marx, Durkheim and Weber. Sociology thus seems to adopt with regard to its history an attitude very similar to that of most other disciplines, which does not rule out the development of a history of sociology as a specialized field that also includes the works of the sociology of knowledge, the sociology of institutions and the history of sociological thought¹. The third period, which

¹ Cf. as examples Besnard, Philippe (1987), *L’anomie*, Paris: PUF; Hirschhorn, Monique (1988), *Max Weber et la sociologie française*, Paris: L’Harmattan; Besnard, Philippe, Ed. (1985), La

has just begun, is the start of a new stage. Far from giving the history of sociology a marginal status, the sociologists now seem to be infatuated by it. There has been a proliferation of works for the general public². The question is no longer whether or not to focus on this history, but to try to understand the reasons for the interest and to analyse its effects. One of the reasons worth citing is editorial demand. Clearly, there are many students of sociology, and the “handbooks” sell well. But that does not explain why their content is so often centred on history, even though we can mention the mechanical effects of the inclusion in certain collections specialized in the history of sociological thought.

While not wishing to embark upon risky hypotheses, we can nevertheless say that this taste for a historical presentation of the subject makes it possible, if not to resolve, then at least to avoid a number of problems. This satisfies the predominant relativist pluralism. There is no longer any need to draw up a list of the accomplishments, there is room for all theories and thought. Although it is possible to have a less categorical judgment on this than Whitehead, who in any case was a historian of ideas, it is at least necessary to consider how the history of the discipline can contribute to its development. In this connection, an initial question immediately arises. The use that is made in sociology of the history of the discipline depends first and foremost on its content. Which history is at issue? As we have seen, for the first period the answer is rather simple. The history of sociology was based on a method quite similar to the history of philosophy or the history of ideas. This category includes, among recent publications, the writings of Pierre-Jean Simon or Bernard Valade. But the history of sociology as currently undertaken often goes beyond this framework, which some find too confining. Here we see emerge a composite category in which the history of institutions and the history of ideas mix, with unequal results and often based on a selection of authors and periods that is arbitrary or at any rate rarely explained. Manifestly, this second category, in which the works that form part of the history of sociology as a field of specialization are of course not included, hardly meets stringent scientific requirements. It has its supporters, because through these writings, a common

sociologie française entre les deux guerres, *Revue française de sociologie*, n° spécial; Lamberti, Jean-Claude (1983), *Tocqueville et les deux démocraties*, Paris: PUF; Valade, Bernard (1990), *Pareto. La naissance d'une autre sociologie*, Paris: PUF.

2 See, to refer only to French authors whose works explicitly centre on the history of sociology: Simon, Pierre-Jean, op. cit.; Berthelot, Jean-Michel (1991), *La construction de la sociologie*, Paris: PUF, *Que sais-je?*; Meter, Karl van, Ed. (1992), *La sociologie*, Paris: Larousse; Cuin, Charles-Henri and François Gresle (1992), *Histoire de la sociologie*, Paris: La découverte, 1 and 2; Lallement, Michel (1993), *Histoire des idées sociologiques*, 1 and 2, Paris: Nathan; Dubois, Michel (1993), *Les fondateurs de la pensée sociologique*, Paris: Ellipses; Valade, Bernard (1996), *Introduction aux sciences sociales*, Paris: PUF.

knowledge is gradually constituted which, if it does nothing else, at least promotes the creation of disciplinary identity. The real sociologist is not just someone who is versed in the theories, concepts and techniques, but is also someone who knows how Mauss is related to Durkheim, is familiar with the young sociologists who went to the United States after the war, and has heard of Le Play. All in all, the history of sociology presented in this fashion provides for the past the equivalent of what in the present is referred to as the knowledge of a milieu.

The first category, which falls under the history of sociology practised like the history of philosophy or the history of ideas and ties in with the history of sociology as a specialized field, clearly has a completely different impact and poses a much more important question. What does its survival and even its development signify in connection with the sociological discipline? Is it an admission of sociology's inability to set itself up as a science that would lead to this parody of an inwardly turned "philosophia perennis", or is it, on the contrary, the awareness that in the discipline's heritage, whose contours are still not sharply defined by scholars, resources lie that are waiting to be tapped, if we may phrase it in this way. The successive rediscovery in France of Weber and Simmel would certainly appear to point in that direction. In the way they are used, for example by Raymond Boudon, the point is not only to sing the praises of these scholars, but also, in drawing on elements of their thought, to draft a new analytical framework. This is where the history of sociological thought finds its justification, which is not to be an end in itself, but to serve the development of the discipline.

8. Thus, the list of founders varies according to the authors. Whereas Tocqueville has a prominent spot in the work of Bernard Valade, he is absent from that of Pierre-Jean Simon. For some, it is necessary to start in antiquity, while for others, it is sufficient to begin at the French Revolution.

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