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Johan HEILBRON, *French Sociology* (Ithaca & London, Cornell  
University Press, 2015)

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Johan Heilbron's ambitious reconstruction of the history of French sociology from its birth to the contemporary era is the culmination of a research endeavour that began in the 1980s and gave rise to several French-language publications,<sup>2</sup> most of which are made available in English here. The author observed that knowledge of French sociology abroad is quite selective and superficial. He thus set out to correct misunderstandings, re-examine a few forgotten episodes, and shed light on the work of key figures. The book consists of an introduction, seven chapters arranged essentially in chronological order, a conclusion and an epilogue. Heilbron borrows heavily and openly from Pierre Bourdieu and his work. It is therefore unsurprising that the bulk of his argument approaches sociology in terms of field: "Thinking and elaborating thoughts is a fundamentally relational activity that can be understood as a process of position taking within an intellectual field" [209]. For reasons of space, this review focuses on summarising the main stages of the author's argument and formulating a few complementary or critical remarks to open avenues for further discussion.

In Chapter 1, "The Establishment of Organized Social Science," Heilbron shows that the social sciences initially did not emerge as academic disciplines, but as government sciences expected to guide French elites. The chapter's main merit lies in its examination of the Academy of Moral and Political Sciences (1832), whose members actively contributed to the development of the social sciences by commissioning research on poverty, crime and other threats to public order. The academicians were for the most part upper-class liberals. They saw these sciences as eminently moral, based on spiritualist psychology, and in opposition to natural science models. Their activities were driven by a shared effort to replace the revolutionary tradition with a liberal alternative liable to overcome post-revolutionary

<sup>1</sup> The author wishes to thank Jean-Yves Bart for translating this book review from the original French.

<sup>2</sup> See J. Heilbron, 1985, "Les métamorphoses du durkheimisme, 1920-1940",

*Revue française de sociologie*, 26 (2): 203-237; "Pionniers par défaut? Les débuts de la recherche au Centre d'études sociologiques" (1946-1960), 1991, *Revue française de sociologie*, 32 (3): 365-379.

antagonisms and ensure stability in French institutions. Thanks to their close ties with the State nobility, the members of the Academy were for some time able to hold a monopoly over the legitimate production of social science knowledge. However, the model they promoted was eclipsed by Third Republic education reforms, which were supported by a new generation of professors. The nexus of social science moved from the Academy to university faculties, where a system of more independent disciplines came to prevail—each with its own chairs, journals and associations. The burgeoning field of social science witnessed a tripartite division that had lasting structural effects: political science was established at the Free School of Political Sciences (1872), economics developed within the Faculty of Law, and both psychology and sociology found a home in the Faculty of Letters (hence their long-term dependence on philosophy and the humanities).

Chapter 2, “An Improbable Science,” zooms in on sociology’s position in this institutional and intellectual context. Having no roots in moral philosophy or political theory, sociology emerged outside of the academies’ system, following the conceptualisation proposed by Auguste Comte in the 1830s. He developed a differential theory of science in which each basic science has its own models and methods, adjusted to the degree of complexity of the area of research. Under that approach, sociology was conceived as the positive study of the fundamental laws underpinning social phenomena. Despite his originality and his central role in the foundation of French sociological tradition, Comte had no luck with his *Cours de philosophie positive* (1830–1942) in academic circles. The Academy of Moral and Political Sciences found it too scientific, whereas the Academy of Sciences saw it as too broad in scope and critical of the model of mathematical physics. This failure put an end to Comte’s efforts, who according to Heilbron moved away from the academic establishment to focus on an entirely different project: the foundation of a secular religion of humanity. Unfortunately, Heilbron is perhaps too attached to his thesis of Comte’s symbolic death in the academic field and limits his contribution to the foundation of sociology to the *Cours de philosophie positive* (1830–1842), to the detriment of the *Système de politique positive* (1851–1854). Yet, Bruno Karsenti precisely showed that unlike his exegetes, Comte never drew a line between the two works and considered the latter as the natural and logical extension of the former.<sup>3</sup> As he neglects this continuity, which is hinted at by the

<sup>3</sup> Bruno Karsenti, 2006, *Politique de l’esprit*, Paris, Hermann.

subtitle of the *Système (Traité de sociologie instituant la religion de l'humanité)*, the author fails, among other things, to raise the question of the re-activation of theological schemes in the Comtian foundation of French sociology.

In Chapter 3, "Sociology and Other Disciplines in the Making," Heilbron examines the resurgence of sociology in the last third of the nineteenth century, brought on by Third Republic university reforms and the eagerness to respond to greater developments in Great Britain (particularly around Herbert Spencer). It was spearheaded by young academic philosophers, led by Alfred Espinas and Alfred Fouillée. In the 1870s and 1880s, they turned sociology, then a stigmatised positivist project, into a legitimate academic pursuit. They were at odds with the Academy of Moral and Political Sciences, as they strove for higher scientific and academic standards, and the representatives of reform movements (positivists, socialists, reform Catholics), whom they accused of being dogmatic and of mixing up politics and science. In the wake of their pioneering works, the body of sociological writing expanded rapidly and sociology became a fully-fledged sub-field with its own journals and associations. It was structured around the two rival networks of René Worms and Emile Durkheim. Heilbron offers an insightful presentation of the distinction between the two groups in terms of approach, academic strategy, resources and background, which he uses to explain why Durkheimian sociology eventually prevailed as a legitimate model for the discipline. Regarding Durkheim in particular, the author notes that he embraced Comte's conception of sociology against the philosophical idealism associated with the Academy of Moral and Political Sciences and the organicism of Espinas and Worms. Regrettably, Heilbron tends to reduce the Durkheimian shift to the application of observation methods to the phenomenal order of the social world. As necessary as it was, this early positivist gesture tells us little about the meaning Durkheim ascribed to the social; nor does it shed light on the inextricably philosophical, scientific and political dimensions of his programme. As his approach in terms of field leads him to emphasise what makes Durkheim most clearly different from his competitors, Heilbron tends to perpetuate a positivist interpretation of his research agenda, even though its limitations and dead-ends were noted during a general movement of reconsideration of Durkheim's founding work—which was admittedly largely overlooked in France.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> See W. W. Miller, 1996, *Durkheim, Morals and Modernity*, London, Routledge and J. Stedman, 2001, *Durkheim Reconsidered*, Cambridge, Polity Press.

Chapter 4, “The Metamorphoses of Durkheimian Scholarship,” retraces the evolution of the Durkheimian group in the interwar period, at a time when “*Durkheimism became a symbol of all that was rejected as old-fashioned and conservative*” [114]. The group split into two distinct networks, one forming around university professors such as Célestin Bouglé and the other led by academic researchers like Marcel Mauss, François Simiand and Marcel Granet. Heilbron explains the split by evidencing the divergences in positions, trajectories, and theoretical views between the two groups. The university professors, who were mainly in the Faculty of Letters (Célestin Bouglé, Paul Fauconnet, Paul Lapie, Dominique Parodi, etc.), had fairly privileged social backgrounds, were exclusively trained in philosophy, and as such more inclined to address the moral and philosophical dimensions of Durkheimian sociology. They embodied the most official branch of sociology and were eager to redefine its relationship with philosophy. They had political ties with the Radical Party. On the other hand, the researchers worked in research institutes and schools (starting with the EPHE), came from less privileged backgrounds and were more often affiliated with socialist groups. Unlike their counterparts, they produced original research in a wide array of fields and were more concerned with the scientific aspirations of Durkheim’s legacy. Thanks to their work, Durkheimism remained a genuine research programme. Yet, it survived in academic fields other than sociology (anthropology, social psychology, economics, history, etc.), and it generally was not perceived to be part of a sociological tradition.

Chapter 5, “Pioneers by Default?,” addresses the state of sociology in the 1950s. Unfortunately Heilbron does not include a discussion of the critique of Durkheim’s programme during the years of the Vichy regime, marked by a conservative revolution emphasising private schooling, “natural” inequalities, elitism in schools, and Le Play’s idea of family as a “natural” group.<sup>5</sup> In the post-war period, sociology grew essentially within the *Centre d’Etudes sociologiques*, founded in 1946 by Georges Gurvitch. Most of the newcomers to sociology began their careers by conducting empirical research on contemporary challenges pertaining to the country’s reconstruction and modernisation. They often came from working-class families and the extreme fringe sectors of the intelligentsia; only two were graduates from the *Ecole Normale Supérieure* (Alain Touraine and Jean-Daniel Reynaud).

<sup>5</sup> F. Muel-Dreyfus, “La rééducation de la sociologie sous le régime de Vichy”, *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, 2004/3 n° 153: 65-77.

They were united not so much by a vocation for sociological research and a clear idea of what it should be, but rather by their experience of the Resistance and their commitment to the working class. Heilbron stresses the importance of broader field structures in the dynamic of this renewal. Post-1945 sociology developed in the context of an opposition between two groups: an intellectual group dominated by existentialist philosophy and a group of applied researchers in State institutes (such as the INED). The former saw sociology as a suspicious undertaking and associated it with American empiricism. The latter considered it insufficiently professional and lacking established roots. Thus the sociologists had to deal with contradictory expectations, neither of which they could afford to ignore. Heilbron argues that most of the research projects they undertook then were hesitant attempts at securing funds and professional legitimacy from planning agencies without betraying their left-wing political values.

The transformations of sociology from the 1960s to the 2000s are analysed in Chapter 6, "Cycles of Expansion and Field Transformations." Heilbron calls this long period the second institutional breakthrough of the discipline, in the context of a considerable growth of higher education in general and social science in particular. He identifies a first cycle of expansion spanning the 1960s and the early 1970s, benefiting both the university and the research institutions. This era was characterised by strong economic growth, the expansion of planning, policies supporting public investment in research, and the domination of structuralism in the intellectual field. Sociology became a more autonomous field, with its own degrees, research centres and publication outlets. Several research programmes, which Heilbron calls both original and timid, were set up. Some were led by members of the post-war generation (Crozier, Touraine, Reynaud); others by newcomers (Bourdieu, Boudon). This relative professional optimism and working consensus was shattered by the events of May 1968, which triggered lasting scientific and political splits within the field. After a period of economic recession, decreasing funding for research and intellectual reorientation (as the ideology of planning was superseded by neoliberalism), sociology experienced a second cycle of expansion that began in the mid 1980s. This cycle was however limited to the universities; the research sector tended to stagnate or lose steam. Additionally, while student populations and the universities grew, new study programmes were increasingly specialised and market-oriented. Like other social sciences, sociology faced competition from so-called professional disciplines such as management.

Heilbron devotes the seventh and final chapter, “Intellectual Styles and the Dynamics of Research Groups,” to the working groups and styles of four key figures of contemporary French sociology: Alain Touraine, Michel Crozier, Raymond Boudon and Pierre Bourdieu. Based on introductions to these authors, Heilbron offers a classification of forms of sociology that resembles the one proposed by Michael Burawoy.<sup>6</sup> A critic of the French intellectual and administrative elite, Crozier placed his work in interaction with the organisational needs of public administrations, and then private firms. Having found another model of engagement and social organisation in the US, he became the main advocate of policy sociology in France, and founded the *Centre de sociologie des organisations* to promote it in 1976. According to Heilbron, he always situated himself between public policy-making and academic research and between US organisational analysis and French sociology. Alain Touraine was from the same generation. He too began his career at the *Centre d’Etudes sociologiques* and focused on the sociology of work. However, he went on to pursue a radically different path. Touraine was interested in attempts at collective grassroots resistance to the social order and the social change that might result from them. He developed a sociology of collective action in post-industrial societies. He founded the *Centre d’études des mouvements sociaux* in 1970 and the *Centre d’analyse et d’intervention sociologiques* in 1981. Heilbron calls it “public sociology”, characterised by its engagement in favour of the populations under study. Raymond Boudon, who was younger, manifested a very strong interest in Paul Lazarsfeld and Morris Rosenberg’s methodological works. He then developed a broader research programme around methodological individualism and founded the *Groupe d’études des méthodes de l’analyse sociologique* (1971). His output was informed by his opposition to the political and intellectual revolts of the 1970s and to the spread of essayism and fashionable radicalism in the academic field. His sociology, which promoted traditional academic virtues (centrality of the discipline, radicalism, rehabilitation of erudition), is described by Heilbron as a particular form of academic sociology. The chapter unsurprisingly ends with a discussion of Pierre Bourdieu. The author argues that Bourdieu’s areas of research led him to develop an original conception of sociology, designed to overcome a number of traditional splits (objectivism vs. subjectivism, individual vs. society, qualitative vs. quantitative, etc.). According to Heilbron he stood out from his

<sup>6</sup> M. Burawoy, 2005, “2004 Presidential Address. For Public Sociology”, *American Sociological Review*, n° 70: 4-28.

peers by creating new institutions (the *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales* and the publishing house *Liber*) and by his resolutely collective approach to research, promoting interdisciplinarity and drawing on a variety of theoretical underpinnings.

Regarding the content of these researches, Heilbron notes that many research themes (education, culture, science, health, etc.) emerged throughout the second institutional breakthrough of sociology (1960-2000), while others declined (rural sociology and the sociology of religion). The sociology of work, which was dominant for a long time, was split into specialised branches (organisations, professions, companies, social movements). To conclude, two criticisms can be lodged against Heilbron's analyses of this most recent period. First, while he notes the disaffection for grand theories, the growing specialisation and the resurgence of microsociological programmes, he fails to offer a toolkit for a general appraisal of these transformations. Dosse saw in these developments an "interpretative turn" in the human and social sciences, emphasising action endowed with meaning and rehabilitating the actors' intentionality and justifications.<sup>7</sup> Second, readers might be frustrated by the lack of attention to recent innovative research programmes that have appeared since the 1990s, such as ethnomethodology, pragmatic sociology, cognitive sociology, or even cultural studies. Some of these are casually mentioned in passing and lumped with rational choice theories under the label of "individualistic approaches" in a way that falls short of the ambition and comprehensiveness of previous chapters. While Heilbron's analysis of the decades from 1950 to 1980 is convincing, his examination of the following two decades is more uneven. Ultimately, however, *French Sociology* remains well worth reading and provides an excellent basis for further discussion and elaboration.

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<sup>7</sup> F. Dosse, *L'emprise du sens. L'humanisation des sciences humaines*, Paris, La Découverte, 1995.