

A CONTESTATION OF SOCIOLOGY

E come veggion le terrene menti
Non capere lo triangol due ottusi,
Così vedi le cose contingenti,
Anzi che sieno in sè, mirando il punto
A cui tutti li tempi son presenti.

Paradiso, XVII, 14-18.

A vast subject, as you see. Rather than enumerate doctrines or problems, it would be better to devote ourselves to one point, only one, but the one that, right or wrong, we hold to be central. This is the relation between history and sociology. It is not precisely a new point; but what if, before beginning to compare, we undertook to ask ourselves if one of the terms of the comparison even exists? If there is such a thing as Sociology? Suppose that sociology is nothing but a word, a homonymous word, under which one traditionally classes various anomalous activities which are, at bottom, history that is not recognized as such? Suppose that sociology is no more a human science than is history, that it is not a science? But first, what is a science?

Let us leave aside quarrels about words. It is permissible to

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call science a history more penetrating or more critical than another just as it is permissible to call sociology what others might call the history of contemporary civilization, or *non-événementielle*, non-narrative structural, or generalized history. The problem is that science so understood has nothing to do with physics or with pure economics. Let us try, therefore, to make the distinction between words correspond to a deep-rooted distinction in things. What, then, is science in the strong sense of the word, the 'science' that is divided by a clear break from all that is not science? (But which is all the same knowledge as true, objective, rigorous, critical, intelligent, penetrating as you wish, knowledge through causes, activities which are disinterested and purely intellectual; in fact, history is all these). To say what is science in the strong sense, a thousand answers are possible: it is the formal in opposition to the experienced; it is that which is hidden in relation to that which is simply true; it consists in passing from an ontology of substance to an ontology of relations; it presupposes measure, or experimentation... All these definitions are so many partial or exterior criteria. Economics¹ is no less a science because it does not have a stable unit of measure, a unit of utility. The system of Ptolemy is not less "formal" (and mathematically more refined) than that of Copernicus, but it is false; it is a recipe which proves successful, but it is not knowledge through a true cause; it "saves the phenomena," but it is not etiological. To say that science is that which is hidden means that scientists are researchers who devote themselves to what has always been known, and that the necessary is less visible than the contingent.

There is another reply that is of no more value: history devotes itself to an individual fact, to that which "we shall never see twice;" to satisfy history, it would suffice to know that "Jean sans Terre passed that way"... Few replies are so time-honoured and so confused. First of all, the *facts* of the physical sciences are exactly as individual as are historical facts: the fall of a body takes place at one point in space and in time, it is an individual fact; reciprocally, an historical fact is unthinkable without reference to the universal: what is a tumult when looked at as

¹ On the problem of a unit of measure of utility, see Walras, *Éléments d'économie politique pure*, 4th edition (reprint, 1952), p. 74.

an individual fact becomes a revolution in the universal context. In brief, all facts are individual, but we only conceive of facts, be they physical or historical, by means of universals. There is indeed a difference between the scientific and the historical, but it is between the disciplines that this difference lies: science is a body of laws, and history is a body of facts. Science does not describe facts (the fall of a body, in such a place, on such a day), science establishes laws, *necessary relations among* facts (the relation between a space traversed and the time needed to traverse that space). But since the fall of a body, or two falls of the same body, are both scientifically knowable, in the sense that in them one rediscovers the same relation (the law of Galileo), why, in theory, would one and even two “individual” passings of Jean sans Terre be any less explicable? There exists the body of physical laws; there also exist collections of problems in physics; history, in theory, could be considered as a collection of problems in the human sciences. The only question remains that of knowing if these problems, or all of them, would be susceptible to a scientific solution.

If science is not that which is opposed to the individual, but a type of knowledge which bears upon the individual, what, then, is science? The answer has been made more precise since the *Posterior Analytics*, but it has not changed essentially: science exists where there is understanding of the necessary. In the world as we live it, where key ideas ordinarily open to the void, where one never finds that which Wittgenstein calls “the hard of soft,” a scientific discovery is like a key that functions, that suddenly locks into something, something usually miniscule (the spaces traversed by falling bodies are proportional to the square of the times) and abstract (if these bodies fall in a vacuum). The universal character of these scientific truths is the consequence of their necessity, and recourse to measure is the physical expression of this same necessity, through which the phenomena “fall into place.”

In a word, the necessary is the infallible; the necessary is universal, for we only transpose, we only extrapolate, and we only generalize infallibly about that whose cause or reason we know. To predict an eclipse with certainty, we must have understood the mechanism of the eclipse; “the great merit of the universal is that it lets us know the cause” (Aristotle,

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Posterior Analytics, 1, 31, 88 A 4). If we know only that an eclipse took place at such or such a position of the stars, without knowing its necessary cause (or reason), which is that one of these stars formed a screen, we do not predict an eclipse, because we do not understand its “reason why.” For the positions of the stars are an index which may be mistaken: we may be the dupes of a coincidence. We only predict or generalize with certainty that which we can deduce (Plato, *Meno*, 96 D-98A); for example, if, when speaking of that empirical economist disguised as a theoretician whose name is Keynes, we were to take literally the word “law” relative to the propensity to consume, we would be in for some strange disappointments. This so-called law (by whose terms consumption grows less quickly than revenue) is nothing but an empirical statement, true in England during a period of the 20th century, but since then belied by the facts.

To tell the truth, the would-be “law” of Keynes could have remained true *de facto* much longer, and even through all the time that the human species has endured and will endure; it would have no more value for all that. Its sempiternal truth would prove only that economic circumstances haven’t changed over a long period of time, as long as one could wish, but it is always situated “in time” and therefore is always menaced by change. At any moment this “law” *could have* been contradicted by a reversal of circumstances; it is thus not true “eternally,” for only that whose “reason why” can be expressed is an eternal, necessary, truly universal truth. For even if, *de facto*, this truth ceases to apply, thanks to our knowledge of its “reason why,” we can tell or predict under what conditions it ceases or will cease to apply. Things may change, but the necessary truth remains true eternally, for the conditions of change are themselves deductible from the hypothesis. If we knew from what hypothesis to deduct the “law” of Keynes, we could also specify when it would cease to be applicable, the hypothesis in question not being realized; we would thus be right in every case, in every hypothesis, that is to say eternally, thanks to our knowledge of the cause.

If there is no science but that of the necessary (prepared by an understanding of the general), the question of knowing if history is a science (and what connection it can have with the

authentic sciences) is formulated as follows: what is there of the necessary in history? We understand very well that all of history, the nose of Cleopatra included, is necessary: the nose in question was determined by the chromosomes of Cleopatra, and the love of Anthony by his character and up-bringing; even a monster is "necessary by accident" (*On the Generation of Animals* V, I, 778 A 30). Determinism is a universal truth, a rational necessity, for nothing exists that is not determined. But this very truth remains Platonic, for to have science we must do more than recall that there *is* a determination: we still have to know *which* determination; now the scope of this type of knowledge is considerably more limited than is knowledge of the necessary.

Historical necessity we flee, for it is the necessity which rules individual sequences, the nose of Cleopatra; it is a material necessity, a speck of dust, an infinite diversity of combinations that refuse to limit themselves like those good, stout types of manageable and monotonous combinations that have the generosity to repeat themselves, and through whose repetition we are able to fix their position in the midst of the world's glittering: these are the things which make up all our science and it is in this sense that there exists no science except that of the general. Material necessity, that of accident, of individual particularity and of chance, escapes our science. The nose of Cleopatra could not have been other than it was, but, in practice, no one could say what confluence of circumstances and of causes made it so; this nose has of course a cause, but we do not know *which* cause; with this historical nose we do not have science. The foundation of science is the necessary, but this science is only realized where the necessary is also general.

If this is so in the sciences of nature, when we deal with sequences of natural events, why then should it be diverse in the "human sciences," when we deal with sequences of historical events? The old dissertation subject "science and history" calls for neither more nor less attention than another, less often presented, "science and nature;" in both subjects, the range of our learning is much more limited than is that of either necessary or general knowledge. Physical science is incapable of predicting a rainfall at the Antibes on a certain Sunday in February, or the movements of the suspension of an automobile on a bombed-out road (phenomena so complex that the differen-

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tials which express them are no longer manageable); it is even incapable of explaining precisely the functioning of the telephone, a phenomenon which necessity has made so wide-spread that our know-how has learned to reproduce it at will, even if our knowledge is still ignorant of the "reason why." The human sciences may be as exciting, modern and promising as you wish, they could not promise any more than the physical sciences: to understand, to disentangle, some small knots of a rather general necessity, which are lost here and there in the *continuum* of phenomena and which are always the same; to interpret a few, uncommon, isolated words that repeat themselves monotonously here and there along the lines of the long pages of history. When all is said and done, in the flux of physical and psycho-biological events that is called the reign of king Pyrrhus, the physical sciences explain only one thing: if this king had his head split open by a tile that an old man threw at him, it was because of kinetic energy. Likewise, of the entire history of the Popular Front, human science will explain, or will contribute to explain, two details: the "deep-rooted" reason for the economic defeat of Blum, the "deep-rooted" reason for the defeat of the coalition of the Popular Front. For that, it is enough to suppose that the mathematics of non-zero sum coalition games will one day be real knowledge, rather than mere know-how, a collection of recipes more or less secure and reasoned-out.

To tell the truth, in speaking of the "deep-rooted" reason for the defeat of Blum and of the Front, we have used quotation marks, for "deep-rooted" here means theoretical. So theoretical that it becomes platonic. When one already knows that the Front has fallen, one can without absurdity recall the theorem corresponding to the theory of coalitions; but the Front could have not fallen: a different politics could have put oil in the gears of the coalition, or circumstances less difficult could have allowed it to endure, after a fashion. Likewise, despite the fact that Antibeian meteorology has just announced rain, the worst is still not certain. Science is so eternally true that it could be mistaken at almost every turn without ceasing to be true in its manner: its failures would prove only that the hypotheses established as conditions for its truths were not realized, that the rest of the determining context had thwarted them. In brief, a science, that is to say a hypothetic-deductive knowledge, only

presents abstract truths, valid as functions of given conditions which science separates and abstracts from the whole of reality as hypotheses. A sociologist and a physicist with a theoretical soul venture to predict, the one, the results of the forthcoming elections, the other, the movement of a pendulum; both of them fail, the first as the aftermath of a scandal which changes the disposition of the electors at the last minute, and the second because the cord of the pendulum breaks: physics and electoral theory remain no less platonically true.

II

History, we have said, is a body of events, and science (physical and human) a body of laws. Now these laws, being necessary and general, can only concern a minimal part of the body of events, which necessity usually offers in too large a material variety. Thus, the points of contact between history and any science existing or to come are and will be few and far between. Certainly, the physical sciences allow us to resolve physical problems, but that is because those problems are cut to measure for the physical sciences; they do not set themselves the problem of "the age of captains," for example. History does not intend to be at the beck and call of any human science, it will not limit itself to the pattern of such a science, it wants to say everything; it says, therefore, a great number of things which are extra-scientific. But if the human sciences were to make such thundering progress that their points of contact with the historical flux were multiplied to an almost complete coincidence? In this case, determination would only become complete by ceasing to be manageable. If, to establish that Bismarck could not do other than send the Ems Dispatch, we must begin by establishing, thanks to molecular biology, "praxeology" and depth-psychology, that there was no chance of his suffering a crisis of apoplexy or of mysticism the night before the expedition of the Dispatch, a whole library would not suffice.

The physical sciences explain certain physical processes, they do not explain *en bloc* all the physical processes that take place within a defined perimeter of the earth's surface. The description of all that occurs within this perimeter will inevitably have the look of a narrative, because the encounter of processes, each one

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of which is governed by a law, occurs along the time-line and depends upon "chance" in the sense of Cournot: each process has its laws, but no law governs the encounter of processes.² Likewise, one aspect of the Popular Front is governed by a law of macro-economics, another by the mathematics of non-zero sum coalition games; but if the sum of these two processes and of all the others involved is determined, it is all the same not a law and cannot be expressed except in the form of a narrative. For the narrative (in opposition to elementary processes, cut to measure for a law) is the initial framework of the historical genre; it is also its terminal limit. Within this framework, the historian strives to explain the greatest number of processes, calling upon the sciences in doing so. The situation is very similar in geology, where "the study of landscapes" is completed by "the study of processes." The explication of the model of

² The theory of chance is protracted by Cournot into a distinction between natural entities and those which are "manifestly artificial": "In the evolution of phenomena, one part follows permanent and regular laws, and one part is left to the influence of prior facts. To suppose that this distinction is not essential is to admit that time is nothing but an illusion" (*Essai sur les fondements de la connaissance*, p. 460). Hence, "a nuvola which the telescope resolves into a mass of stars irregularly grouped is constituted fortuitously, accidentally; whereas the constitution of a sun and planets in a flattened spheroid follows a law or a necessity of nature" (*Considérations sur la marche des idées*, Boivin, 1934, vol. 1, p. 2). A river is a "system" and cannot be reduced to "a collection of drops of water" (*Essai sur les fondements...*, p. 242); in contrast, what geographers call a river-basin is carved out artificially by them. One would likewise say that a glacier is a system, a natural object, which has a "reason" and which depends on a glacial system, whereas a mountain, fearlessly carved out by the hazards of erosion, and isolated from the rest of the chain only by the on-looker who regards it as an individual thing, is an artificial object which only has causes (on the difference between reason and cause, cf. *Matérialisme, vitalisme, rationalisme*, p. 219). The finest passage is in the *Essai sur les fondements de la connaissance*, p. 97: "Natural phenomena, linked one to another, form a network all of whose parts adhere to each other, but not in the same manner nor in the same degree. So that one sees the design of a leaf perfectly determined as to its principal ribs, whereas for the last ramifications and for the agglomeration of cells which fill up the intervals and compose the parenchyme of the leaf the fortuitous game of secondary circumstances gives rise to innumerable modifications and to details which are no longer fixed from one individual specimen to another. One strays alike from a faithful interpretation of nature both in failing to understand systematic coordination in those fundamental traits where it is clearly revealed, and in wrongly conceiving the bonds of coordination and of solidarity in the cases where collateral series, each of which is governed by its own laws after it branches off from the common trunk, no longer share anything but accidental similarities and fortuituous parallels." Cournot here sheds light on a limit of historical nominalism.

a given region has the look of a page of history, a conjunction of accidents. The problem is to reconstruct a past whose only trace is provided by the relief that remains in the present; but this relief is itself the effect of elementary processes of erosion which one strives, if only in principle, to quantify and to express mathematically, at least where these processes lend themselves to mathematical expression: the equilibrium-profile of a *thalweg*, the more or less distant removal of the solid deposit of a water-course used as a guage of floods.³ Furthermore, geologists attest that the study of the landscape is far more advanced than that of elementary processes; this gap is certainly even greater in history.

But in history, even when the study of a greater number of elementary processes should be far more advanced than it is now, even when numerous resolved scientific problems should be inserted within the framework of the narrative, this framework and its major articulations would not be overthrown. The framework of history would always be a plot made up of individual actions, of "material" data and of accidents (in the sense of Aristotle and Poincaré, this time):⁴ the lived world is made of individual "freedoms" which act upon objective data (natural and human) if chance does not enter in to meddle; these "freedoms" act upon the objective data, which are the subject of their action, but, at the same time, the data also limit the action (a capitalist has something of the spirit of enterprise or he is merely routine, a proletarian is what the proletarian condition makes of him and he defines himself within this condition—he joins the union or he becomes a strike-breaker). One recognizes the old peripatetic tripartition of nature, will and chance, which was accepted from Aristotle to Guillaume de Humboldt; it has since been replaced by Hegelian, Marxist or "scientistic" problematics, but it remains the most economical formulation of what

³ P. Birot, *Les méthodes de la morphologie*, P.U.F., 1955, p. 2-17 and 167 (along the same order of studies, cf. R. Brunet, *Les phénomènes de discontinuité en géographie*, 2^d edition, C.N.R.S., 1970).

⁴ Chance, according to Aristotle, is a determinism which imitates an intention (the "game of nature," the monkeys which, by dint of batting a typewriter, end up by chance with the *Iliad*; chance according to Poincaré is a determinism whose result could have been reversed by a minimal variation in the initial conditions ("if Cleopatra's nose had been shorter...").

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historians actually do, in whatever vocabulary they use and whatever doctrine they lay claim to.

Even if one reduced the historical world to a universe composed of atoms called Prussian armies which jostle against atoms called Austrian armies, these atoms would occur as agglomerates of objective data, individual actions and accidents, and these agglomerates would be so many *centers of decision*. Scientific analysis of elementary processes would enter to take its place; the objective data of the economy would be so many mechanisms which the individual undergoes without knowing their explanation or which, on the contrary, he knows how to utilize or avert. Even if psychoanalysis had to be taken seriously, if it reduced final causes and the individual character to a causal explanation, it would still be only one individual who is thus explained. This individual, Bismarck or a proletarian, would remain one center of decision, one substance; and even if the great man, Napoleon or Lenin, were the product of a depth-psychology wherein he did no more than profit from a revolutionary situation that needed him as mid-wife, the fact remains that the future great man could have been still-born and that in consequence the expected revolution would also have been aborted.

It is amusing to see how more than one doctrine of history leads back to the peripatetic tripartition. When Lucien Febvre explains, in *La terre et l'évolution humaine*,* that there is no geographical determinism and that the region furnishes certain possibilities which men may utilize in a thousand different ways, he revives the old analysis of the material cause and the final cause; when Toynbee declares that all civilization is a "response" to a "challenge" that the physical or social milieu launches, what is he doing, if not translating into an enlightening vocabulary the words nature and will? But the most beautiful example, and the most interesting, is the *Critique de la raison dialectique* of Sartre. It is curious to see Sartre, setting out from the Marxist starting-point which he felt himself obliged to take, struggle to make that doctrine more supple, to bring it closer to reality, and finally to end up with certain propositions in which one

* (Translator's note) See also the English edition: *A Geographical Introduction to History*, translated by E. G. Mountford and J. H. Paxton. New York, Barnes and Nobles, 1966.

rediscovers the Aristotelian tripartite and the ontology of the individual substance: "When we say: there is nothing other than men, things, animals and concrete relations among men, we only wish to say that the support of collective objects must be looked for in the concrete activity of individuals... The rapid and schematic explanation of the war under the *Assemblée Législative* as an operation of *the* commercial bourgeoisie effaces the men we know so well, Brissot, Guadet, Vergniaud, or it constructs them as purely passive instruments of their class... The human act traverses the social milieu and transforms the world on the basis of certain given conditions.

Understand us well: there is nothing here of "savage nominalism;" this ontology of the individual substance does not oblige us to deny that the social is more than the sum of individuals; it only obliges us to explain how the social can be more than individual substances *from the moment of departure*. No more does the affirmation that the lived is concrete and without depth oblige us to deny that the unconscious, structures, the *episteme*, the visual grammar of an epoch, designate incontestable realities; we merely decline to substantialize these abstractions, to make of them autonomous and impassive realities. At bottom, we still have the old debate between Averroists and Thomists: only individuals think, said Saint Thomas, and to affirm that there exists a collective intellect, common to all humanity, is to say nothing. The *episteme* or the visual grammar of the Baroque are not the product of a separate intellect, extra-individual and extra-historical; they are abstractions drawn from concrete intellectual or artistic activity; they are produced or conveyed by intellectuals or artists, who both make the abstractions and are made by them. The excesses of structuralism, otherwise known as realism, are so extravagant at this moment that a bit of nominalism is not too much.

In brief, an ontology is not a sociology or a psychology. To deny Marxism to the advantage of nominalism does not constrain us to deny that the state may be "the instrument of the ruling class;" it is only to affirm that the state is not necessarily so, that this is not "a law of history," but a mere factual truth that obtains under certain circumstances (or even at all times, in practice) but always as the mere resultant of an encounter of given causes—it remains to say which. The state is not born as

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an instrument of the ruling class (the indispensable function which it fulfills, and continues to fulfill, is the maintaining of order, or rather an order, and the defense of the national collectivity); but beyond this *telos* it can also become the instrument of the ruling class. For it is in the interest of the state, for the practice of its proper function, to lean upon the strongest, whosoever that be; to secure order, it is easier to defend the domination of a powerful class against its weaker opponents than to maintain an equal balance; to secure the solidarity of the nation against external threats, the reflex of the state is also to maintain the existing order. To which may be added other, more subtle reasons (instinctive respect for wealth and power) or more anecdotal ones (private dinner-parties); there are also corruption and pressure-groups, which surely must be the least important of causes. In whatever manner, the state becomes the instrument of the possessing class in virtue of contingent causes, and not by some necessity or because of some property of its essence.

III

If there is no science but that of the necessary and if besides, as Durkheim and Marrou have said, nominalism is the most historical of philosophies, it appears that sociology is impossible, that it is history without the name.

Here we must pay serious attention. That sociology is one of the great "myths" of our century is nothing that should trouble us: we have already seen the entire intellectual activity of whole centuries devoted to specious or vain tasks. Why should sociology not be as hollow as faculty psychology, which filled volumes and occupied eminent minds, and which has no more value for all that? There is no science except that of the necessary and the general, of that which offers some kind of constancy. Now history is nothing but contingency; nowhere does it present that "hard of soft" which would permit us to come to grips with all of history by starting with one of its aspects (for example, by starting with accounts of economic production). There are certainly laws *in* history, for facts cut to measure for these laws (in the narrative of an historian a body that falls obviously does

so according to Galileo's law), but there are no laws of history (the fall of Napoleon is not governed by a law). If there can be no scientific history, how could a scientific sociology be any more possible? Of what could this sociology even speak? If it does not lead to necessary propositions (and how could it?), nothing remains for it but to result in historical or philosophical propositions. In fact, one may affirm that under the word sociology (for sociology is nothing but a word) we gather several anomalous activities that have as their single point in common the fact that they have for a long time remained on the margin of the historical disciplines. Sociology is sometimes a part of political philosophy which ignores its real nature and its past to pose as Science itself,⁵ sometimes diverse forms of historiography, namely: (a) the history of contemporary civilization, especially if it uses, with a justifiable predilection, the sources which gain it its contemporaneity (the sample survey); (b) the study of procedures and methods (surveys, statistics, content analysis) which, whatever be their mathematical apparatus, never lead to

⁵ A sociological treatment of esthetic or political problems, whether it be right-wing or left-wing, dresses up sophistry in scientific clothing. It was Koyré, I believe, who said that Protagoras (of the *Protagoras* and the *Theaetetus*) was the ancestor of sociologists. To confront historicism and sociology, we have seen and today see once again the resurrection of the grand tradition of political philosophy, with Leo Strauss, *Natural Law and History*, University of Chicago Press, 1953; S. Landshut, *Kritik der Soziologie und andere Schriften zur Politik*, Berlin, Luchterhand, 1969 (reprint of the studies which have appeared since 1929); W. Hennis, *Politik und praktische Philosophie: eine Studie zur Rekonstruktion der politischen Wissenschaft*, Luchterhand, 1963; W. Hennis, *Politik als Wissenschaft, Aufsätze zur politischen Theorie und Regierungslehre*, 1968; C.J. Friedrich, *Prolegomena der Politik, politische Erfahrung und ihre Theorie*, Duncker und Humblot, 1967; E. Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics*, University of Chicago Press, 1952. One hardly hesitates any longer to think that sociology is only a denomination that arbitrarily groups diverse activities, and not an element in the system of the sciences, when one remembers that, until about 1850, another classification reigned over the same pack of goods. According to this classification, one distinguished history, political philosophy (Aristotle, Hobbes, Spinoza...), the *Fürstenspiegel*, and lastly "statistics" (one intended by this word the political, geographical, economical, military, psychological, etc. description of contemporary States; Tocqueville would not at that time have been styled a sociologist, but a political philosopher and a "statistician"). In the contemporary atmosphere these old denominations do not appear expert enough; today, a "mirror of princes" would be as old-fashioned as the *Henriade* or verse-tragedy. We have thus changed words, in place of changing things: sociology is old wine poured into a modern bottle. It remains true, however, that the bottle gives flavour to the wine, and that what one does under the name of sociology has a scientific and sophisticated after-taste.

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anything but history, to propositions of value for one place and one time; (c) "general" history, in the sense of "general" geography, which selects its object out of the *continuum* of the past and not according to the *continuum* ("revolutionary messianisms of yesterday and today"); (d) a history that the French would call *non-événementielle*: to relate the history of the favourites of Louis XIII or of the fall of ministers under the Third Republic is in their eyes to perform "treaty-and-battle-history," wherein one considers that what a favourite is is rather self-evident, that it was only natural for kings to have favourites, and one therefore comes down to the level of details of facts and to anecdote. On the contrary, to study the immediate and distant reasons for the ministerial instability of the Third Republic, or to exercise psychology and sociology upon the favourites of the *Ancien Régime* is to practise the same history, but to go further than the anecdote in doing so: it is to understand better each fall of a minister or each favourite. One may call this *non-événementielle* history, but one might just as well call it "historical sociology or simply sociology (if this history is contemporary). (e) Finally, another variety of sociology, called general sociology, a formula of contingent propositions which are good for a long period of history, even for all known history, and are therefore almost philosophical. This type of sociology studies the attitude of men towards their roles, their functions, their institutions; do they prefer to conquer themselves rather than fortune? Do they take on the mentality that their interests would suggest? What are the social frameworks of their memory, of their culture? This is a "literary" sociology, in the sense in which one speaks of the literary psychology of the French moralists who describe the human heart, or at least the heart of modern man.

Sociologists are thus very capable of writing vivid or sententious phrases about roles, social control, the multiplicity of temporalities and the collective memory. They can enumerate types of grouping and of sociability, as the psychology of 1800 enumerated the faculties of the soul; or rather, just as every French moralist has his personal vision of Man, likewise every sociologist indulges himself in a general sociology to his taste. Sociologists are also very capable of inferring the proportions of responses that an entire population would make to a questionnaire by starting

from the responses made by a representative sampling of the population; this is not "science," it is merely a statistical recipe, but it is very useful. They can next assume with optimism that these responses express well the intentions of the persons interrogated, that these persons have the same attitude before an investigator as they have in the real situation before the urns, and that they will not change their minds the day they go to vote. Sociologists are equally capable of writing the history of contemporary civilization; just as an historian might study Italian villas of the Renaissance or Auxerre in 1850, they study, and very well, too, Middletown or Auxerre in 1950. Finally, like everyone else, they have a political philosophy, which they may express in their publications. But what they are incapable of doing is to announce that the event "A" being given, the event "B" will follow, or to say what mental or political structure necessarily corresponds to a given social structure; to say, in that which concerns what the wisdom of nations calls social equilibrium, precisely where lies the point of equilibrium and where the threshold of rupture.

For sociology to be something other than history without the name, for it to be a science and to justify its bearing a name different from history, it is not enough that it studies "the" favourites rather than a single favourite; by this reckoning, to study "Greek cities" or "the Greek City" rather than Athens first and then Sparta would be to exercise science. Nor is it enough that sociology describes man as he is since the Pithecanthrope rather than since the French Revolution: to be a science, sociology must lead to necessary propositions. As an example of the confusions existing in this matter, let us take the interesting book of Norbert Elias on the society of the Court.⁶ According to this author, to study the facts and anecdotes relative to a king, Louis XIV, is history, but to study the role or the function of the king or kings of the *Ancien Régime* in the context of the political and social system of the time is sociology. This is merely a dispute of words, or rivalry between disciplines, for in our day historians readily study "the" Royalty of the

⁶ The title is significant: Norbert Elias, *Die höfische Gesellschaft, Untersuchungen zur Soziologie des Königtums und der höfischen Aristokratie, mit einer Einleitung: Soziologie und Geschichtswissenschaft*, (Luchterhand, 1969, 456 pages).

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Ancien Régime. Beyond words, it remains true that the psycho-social “organigram” of the monarchy of the *Ancien Régime* is an aggregate of facts in time and space, an historical given, whereas one would only have authentic science if one discovered *necessary relations among these facts*. It is this relationship that would be eternal and scientific. If one were to establish that without any doubt the logic of organizations is such that a concentration of decisions at one point necessarily entails a given consequence for the rest of the “organigram,” and one were to apply this relationship, this law, to concrete things (a certain king with his courtesans, or several kings, or even all the kings of modern times), one would then have a science, which would certainly have the right to take its own name. To tell the truth, this science exists (in the form of deductive economic theory) or begins to exist (in the form of the theory of organizations, game theory, operational analysis): it is even beginning to have a name, which is not sociology, but “praxeology.”

Compared to such necessary knowledge of man (knowledge which is also, we may add, abstract to the point of being at times unusable), the difference that separates history from sociology is superficial and specious, even if we are speaking of general sociology, which describes man in an apparently non-historical manner. Disregarding the enormous part of verbiage that sociology includes (I hope you will pardon me my school-boy frankness), let us reduce it to what it contains of positive value. From the point of view of epistemology, general sociology and history are not distinguishable: they are both *descriptions* of humanity. It is not important that the former describes what is less transient in man and the latter what changes more often; both describe states of fact without establishing necessary relations. As everyone knows, this “Man” is an unreliable creature, and it is difficult to form a fixed judgment upon him. When general sociology describes Man and says that he is aggressive, that he willingly takes on the attitudes inherent in his role, or that his memory rests upon a social foundation, does it give us verities more “eternal” than an historian who reports that the Romans often preferred to entrust their taste for paternity in the offspring of one of their slaves rather than in their own children, or that the Italian Merchant of the fifteenth century at the end of his life ceased to aspire indefinitely for gain

in order to consecrate his profits to pious and charitable works? The only difference between these two orders of affirmation is that the first describes man as he is "in all ages," since his history is known, whereas the second describes man as he was for a more limited period of time. The difference hangs on whether there is more or less time, but neither of these truths is eternal; they refer to states of fact, to empirical data which, being empirical, are located within a time-span, evidently more or less long. The man of the fifteenth century is not that of the fifth, just as one living species distinguishes itself from another species, or just as the same species has seen its instincts vary, however slowly, in the course of the Quaternary era. To our eyes there is a great difference between man "in our day" and man in the fifteenth century, between sociology and history; but this is because we know sociology starting with ourselves, whereas we know history thanks to historians; this is a difference more egocentric than epistemological. Certainly, history and general sociology are not taught in the same departments and are not studied in the same textbooks. It remains true that they are built on the same plan; better yet, let us say that history is but a *particular case of general sociology*. Let us cease to look at things egocentrically and let us suppose that an intelligent being, come from another planet, undertakes to describe the spectacle of the human species. He would do as our zoologists, when they describe the titmouse and specify that certain titmice, those of New York, distinguish themselves from their fellows in Europe and from all their ancestors in that, after ten years, they have learned to pierce with blows of their nose the aluminum caps of the milk-bottles left by the milkman before the door each morning; or when they report the arrival in Europe of the black rat towards the Twelfth Century, its battle against the grey rat and its adaptation to European houses. Likewise, our extra-terrestrial visitor would make a global description of the human species (he would say that man lives in inegalitarian societies and that he makes war, at least up to the present hour), but in a number of particular cases he would have to give nuance to his description by making distinctions according to time and to place. Verities of fact, true during a century or since the pithecanthrope, what difference does it make? It is amusing, under these conditions, to see general sociology put itself on a

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different footing from history, adopt a pompous language, elaborate concepts falsely scientific and pretend to the "grand theory."

So, then, quarrel of words or quarrel of things? Both at once, for a word is not separate from the *aura* of the things that it designates. When, therefore, one bestows the name of sociology on that which could more economically be called history, one credits history written under the name of sociology with all the scientific or scientific prestige that sociology, wrongly or rightly, draws from the other activities that are practised under its confused name and that enjoy great prestige in the eyes of our contemporaries. (Sociology is modern, mathematical, it predicts the results of elections, it is a powerful *instrumentum regni*; one even fears that sociologists play the role of strike-breakers and appeasers of the proletariat, a fear which would be justified if only they had the means to perform this miracle). Here we have a sociologist who *describes* university education in France (the social selection of students, the bent that the French university gives them) and sketches a *philosophy* of this education (the university as instrument for the reproduction of moral traits which assure the domination of the ruling class from one generation to another). He will assure us that in his analysis he has never practised anything but *science*. Which only means that he considers he has spoken truly and has proceeded in a critical manner—which is, in effect, the least that one by right should demand of him, but it is exactly what an historian would say. A contingent truth, established critically, is history; it is not science.

IV

Thus, a complete understanding of man includes a science of the necessary and the general for those aspects of human affairs that witness the repetition of knots of regularity. But it also presupposes that we apply ourselves to the contingent aspects, where universal determinism does not appear in the form of regularities. We pass, therefore, from explanation to the description of what has been or what is: to history or "sociology." But how ought we to conceive of this description? According to two possible ways of dividing the material, which

we have elsewhere⁷ proposed to call description according to the *continuum* and description by *items*, a duality which corresponds exactly to that of regional geography (“the American continent”) versus what is called general geography (“the climate,” “the glacial and nivial relief”). In history the same duality exists but it is less generally recognized, and its denominations vacillate more. “The history of France from its origins to our day,” or “the sixteenth century in Europe,” or “the world in the age of Christopher Columbus:” these are history according to the *continuum*. “Revolutionary millennialism throughout history,” “the collective memory,” “ideology, its role and its evolution,” “collective resources: from the free gift to direct contributions” or “the great types of political authority:” these are history by *items*, which we more often call sociology (general or historical), generalized history, typological history, or comparative history. These two orientations, whatever be their names, both belong to history. The one is as empirical, as descriptive, as the other. They complete each other, or rather, they are the one and the same history carved into two directions of inquiry which nurture one another. Who reads the texts relative to the revolutionary millennialism of the insurgent slaves of Roman Sicily without knowing what is “Revolutionary Millennialism” (that is to say, what are the other millennialisms) would not have even an idea of what questions to put to the documents. To study the *item* “millennialism” is simply to understand better *each single* millennialism. It is evidently not to arrive at some essence of millennialism—that is only a matter of labelling, or even less, of stitching and binding the book. Similarly, it is known that regional geography nourishes the “general” and general geography clarifies the regional.

Let us take then a historical event, for example the Revolution of 1789. If one narrates the French Revolution from 1789 to 1799, one writes history according to the *continuum*. The Revolution then becomes an episode in the history of France, it takes on all its flavour in relation to the rest of French history, or in relation to the history of the bourgeoisie—in brief, in relation to the rest of passing time. How could the reader not

⁷ P. Veyne, *Comment on écrit l'histoire, essai d'épistémologie*, Editions du Seuil, 1971, chap. XII.

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be curious about what became of his heroine, France or the bourgeoisie, after 1799, and what there is to be known of her before 1789?

But in other respects the Revolution may be considered as a source of material for an historiography by *items*: the historian who is interested in the avatars of millennialism, in the phenomenon of double power through revolutions, or in the connections between social disequilibrium and revolution shall extract from the events of 1789-1799 certain data for the study of these *items*. Thus, the Revolution furnishes an indefinite number of data, each one of which "enters in series" in some study of history by *items* (or comparative history). To study a single trait of the Revolution is to be drawn to study all the rest of the series; to study the series is to understand each fact. Only out of comparison is light born: *qui vidit unum, nihil vidit; qui vidit mille, vidit unum*. Just as each individual event stands out against the background of the whole *continuum*, likewise each *item* stands out against the background of the whole series.

But then we come to a curious problem: is the description of an historical event ever finished? Does it not go on enriching itself indefinitely by retroactive claim, seeing that the passage of time brings to light without cease new *items*, in relation to which an event of the past takes on a new significance? After May 1968 the study of medieval heresies takes on greater relief; after 1917 we see more clearly certain aspects of 1789. We see them, to be sure, but did they already exist before we took notice? or, indeed, is time the creator that has introduced them in the event?

One recognizes the old problem of the ontology of relation.⁸ Is relation of resemblance or of difference a real accident of the subject, or a mere relation between two subjects? If it is a real accident, the subject is enriched in its being by every resemblance or difference that it has with new beings which arise in the course of time; it "renews itself" without pause, its essence is infinite. One recognizes here a widespread and seductive idea, which was especially seductive for Bergson.⁹ Nevertheless, we

⁸ Gottfried Martin, *Leibniz, Logik und Metaphysik*. Kölner Universitätsverlag, 1960. (English edition: *Leibniz: Logic and Metaphysics*, translated by P. G. Lucas and K. J. Northcott. Manchester University Press, 1964).

⁹ *La pensée et le mouvant*, p. 16: "If there had never been a Rousseau, a Chateaubriand, a Vigny, a Hugo, not only would Romanticism never have

must agree that it is difficult to admit, and that the “argument of the third man” is valid here: for if one makes a difference an accident of the subject, it becomes necessary to invent a second difference which lies between the the difference and the subject, and so on... To put it otherwise, if one attempts to reduce all relationship to being, the relations that one chases out the door reenter through the window; we cannot dispense with relationship and reduce it to being. Moreover, if we tried to do so, the event would run on into infinity: each appearance of a new fact would highlight new aspects, and the event would no longer be determined.

This just objection may be disappointing, for the impression subsists that our knowledge of the past is enriched with the passing of time, that events grow with humanity like words of love engraved in the bark of young trees (*crescent illes, crescentis, amores*). A true sentiment, but a confused idea, which we must disentangle rather than deny.

To disentangle this confusion we should recognize behind every event a governing idea towards which historiographical activity tends—a knowledge of all of history. The event is not enriched, it is the background of the event, which is all of history, that is enriched. Suddenly the event, while remaining what it has always been, takes on a greater interest, insofar as it resembles or differs from other *items* to which the passing of time gives birth in the course of history; the event does not change, but it stands out more vividly against its background. At the very most it could change in its “meaning,” that is to say in the relation that it has with subsequent history: the life of Christ is an anecdote heart-rending and banal or one of the great events of history, according to whether or not Christianity

been discerned among the Classicals of the past, but it really would not even have existed. For Romanticism only comes into being among the Classicals when we carve out of their work a certain aspect, and our carving, with its particular form, no more existed in Classical literature before the appearance of Romanticism than in a passing cloud exists the amusing design that the artist sees there while organizing the amorphous mass to the liking of his fantasy.”

The transformation of the historical perspective according to the issue and sequel of an event is entirely another problem; cf. Raymond Aron, *Introduction à la philosophie de l'histoire, essai sur les limites de l'objectivité historique*, N.R.F., 1948, p. 133-136. (English edition: *Introduction to the Philosophy of History: an Essay on the Limits of Historical Objectivity*, translated from the revised Franch edition by George J. Irwin; Boston, Beacon Press, 1961.)

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becomes a great religion, but none of the acts, none of the intentions of Christ is modified by the future. In itself, this life remains the same. Only, approached from the life of other founders of religions whom the continuation of time will bring, such as Manes or Mohammed, the life of Christ takes on greater relief, offers more lively contrasts or more striking analogies. It may even be that these analogies or contrasts permit us to make out some aspect of the life of Christ that we have not yet brought to light. Certainly, this aspect is not introduced by the comparison; the comparison causes it to be known, it does not cause it to be. In theory, a rather perspicacious intelligence could have perceived all the nuances and all the aspects that, in practice, only a comparative study, enriched by subsequent history, permits us to grasp; in theory, Herodotus and Thucydides could have written the religious or social history of ancient Greece as we know to write it after two and one-half millenia of experience of human affairs. In theory, then, the total description of a given event is finished and not unlimited (apart from the infinity of nominal "slicings" that are possible, which is, however, quite an inoffensive infinity).

And yet, we are left with a very strong feeling that comes from what is most deep-rooted in the spirit of the historical genre. For this feeling we do not speak beside the point when we say what an event *is not*, what it could have been, and what are the other events of the same series. For example, in speaking of the obligatory tax, it is not irrelevant to say that this is not the only way which a collectivity has to procure the resources necessary for public life, that there exist other ways, namely the free gift or the liturgy of the Athenian type. Nor is it irrelevant to the history of the French revolution to say that a revolution "by days" (July 14, June 20, August 10), in the French manner, is not the only type of revolution known. The event, tax or revolutionary day, takes on more meaning if one opposes it to its possible variants, that is to say, to other possible solutions that History has given to the problems of "collective resources" or "revolution"; so to place an event within the plan of historical nature adds nothing to the essence of the event, but it adds much to its interest. To know that the vertebral column is not the only solution that Nature has given to the problem of the construction of the bodies of animals, that other solutions

exist—articulated carapaces or rings—adds something to our knowledge of vertebrates.

An historical event only takes on all its intellectual zest if one places it in a descriptive inventory of the events of the same series that have occurred up to our own day; its essence does not change with the times, but its interest increases indefinitely. In brief, historians study two objects in one: an event, of which the description is finished, and history, which is infinite. Likewise, the space that a naturalist describes only takes on all its interest when seen within the plan of Nature. The “faculty of judgment” has tried ceaselessly to make of this plan of nature something more than a nostalgic metaphor and to take it literally; similarly, it has tried to believe that history is more than a governing idea and to make philosophies of history, or anthropologies. And if sociology, in its turn, appears more intelligent, more explanatory, more powerful than the old-fashioned narrative history that focuses on events, if it is a continuously reborn temptation, this is because sociology is really history sliced up by *items* and because the study of an *item* only reaps its complete significance within a study of the plan of the History relative to that *item*; to make a theory of the types of grouping or of the ideal types of authority is to hope to grasp, in the absence of the essence itself, the complete inventory of the incarnations of this essence; or, in other words, to hope to know the plan of History as it is realized in matter.