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SOCIOLOGY: AN INFIRM SCIENCE?*

By Way of Introduction

A discipline with mythical origins, an almost legendary genesis, with indefinite and undefinable boundaries, with uncertain and controversial results, sociology has always claimed for itself the right to be the science of society, the only scientific discipline entrusted with the study of the entire set of intersubjective relationships and the magnetic field they constitute.

The term *sociology* was first used in 1838 by Auguste Comte with the intention of designating "the science of the observation of social phenomena". Since then, the term has been used to characterize empirical analyses and theories having social facts as their object, or all types and species of intersubjective relationships.

Now, the term sociology has two connotations-denotations. The first refer to the systematic study of the laws governing the so-

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cial entirety in all its complexity; the second covers the analytical study of social groups and phenomena, which allows the formulation of general statements.

Both systematic study and analytical study are usually founded on assertions of a philosophical nature which we think to dodge by using various subterfuges, the most important of which is, still today, formalization. Sociology aspires to solve social problems. Its conceptual options give us the vocabulary to present such problems as well as the tools to solve them. The first and most fundamental of its options is this: the *raison d'être* of a society is not found in an exterior reality. It is the result of human interactions. Consequently, any social phenomenon can and must be explained as the product of these same interactions. This is also true for social order, for institutions and for tradition. Of course, the rhythms of development and historical heritage impose fragmented and discordant explanations at present. However, that cannot last for long.[1]

At the "Probable" Origins of the Discipline

Sociology made its appearance at the moment in which the societies of the old order were in jeopardy. At the outset, it aspired to giving an account of modernity, to explain the emergence of new social relationships, as well as the functioning of societies and their social evolution. It also wanted to create the conditions for establishing a rational social life, namely, to shape the emerging social world, to endow it with efficient, harmonious and enlightened institutions, in short, with a stable and sure moral authority.

The proto-sociologists considered themselves authentic scholars but also social reformers, prophets of the "true social order". Thus, from the beginning of its history, sociology manifested a strong ambivalence: science and prophecy, empiricism and reform. Such a situation forced the sociologists to question themselves as to the "scientificity" of the discipline, on its epistemological autonomy, on its independence and on its singularity with regard to other fields of research, notably that of philosophy.

[1] R. Boudon, *La crise de la sociologie,* Genève, Droz, 1971, pp. 9-47.

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In the new society, with former balances ruined, with destabilized living and working conditions, with social rapports and practices overturned by the technological changes arising from the Industrial Revolution—in this society appeared new value systems and new forms of organization that soon provoked questions and perplexities.

In *L'Esprit des Lois* (1748) Montesquieu worked out a synthetic interpretation of society. It would be governed by "climate, religion, laws, maxims of government, examples from the past, mores, manners; from which is formed a general spirit resulting from it".[2] Adam Ferguson (1723-1801) in *The Origin of the Distinction of Rank* (1771) states that society is an integral part of the natural world. It can thus be explained in terms of causal and hypothetical-deductive relationships.

Beginning with phenomena such as the family, the group, self interest, authority, etc., Ferguson induced the existence of natural laws governing society. The dependence of the individual on the group, the social functions of conflict, the role of property, social stratification, functional differentiation, division of labor and anomy were described and explained using the laws of mechanics.[3] As for Millar, he discovered a functional interdependence between commerce, industry and political, juridical and military institutions. Technological, economic and environmental determinisms led him to manipulate factorial analysis, to hunt down social causality, to seek the "univocal" relation between rapports of property and the various forms of power.[4]

All these approaches were an open break with philosophy. What this latter discipline had said on society, in ethics (or in the philosophy of practice) and in politics was now obliterated. The "new scholars", those "social scientists", believed they could explain better than the philosophers the changes engendered by industrial society, foresee the transformations and control the implications and consequences. They were certain that they could

[2] R. Aron, *Les étapes de la pensée sociologique. Montesquieu—Comte—Marx—Tocqueville—Durkheim—Pareto—Weber*, Paris, Gallimard, 1967, pp. 27-76.
[3] H.H. Jogland, *Ursprünge und Grundlagen der Soziologie bei Adam Ferguson*, Berlin, Duncker und Humblot, 1959.
[4] W.C. Lehmann, *John Millar of Glasgow, 1735-1801: His Life and Thought and his Contribution to sociological Analysis*, London, Cambridge University Press, 1960.

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finally give modern man a truly scientific doctrine of social life.

Such a claim was soon attacked by the traditional disciplines and in a particularly radical way by philosophy,[5] which easily showed the specious sides of the reasonings of sociologists, the fragility of their theoretical constructions, the logical and practical difficulties found by social studies to rise to the level of formal or experimental sciences.

We know the answer of the sociologists: there is a specificity of the "social" that renders the sociological process irreducible to that of other disciplines. Now, this specificity is the result of a series of interferences and of contaminations, analogies, metaphors and borrowings from the "concrete" sciences. If geology, for example, has furnished models for social stratification, botany and zoology the systems of classification, it is nonetheless physics that has for a long time given us the essential of our paradigms.

The Mechanists Model

The extraordinary progress made in the seventeenth century by physics and mathematics (Newton, Galileo, Copernicus, Leibnitz, Pascal, Kepler, Bacon and others) encouraged researchers in human sciences to consider social phenomena as the equivalents of physical phenomena explained by mechanics. Hobbes or Spinoza, Descartes or Leibnitz no longer approached the study of man and society in terms of teleology, teleonomy, morals or hierarchy. They tried to discover the laws governing the functioning and production of social data. Society was a machine, an automaton, and had to be studied with tools perfected by physics and, more precisely, mechanics, the properties brought to light by statics, kinematics and dynamics also being at work in society. The law of universal attraction governs individuals and society, and there is a sociological weight similar to physical weight.

[5] W. Lepenies, "Sur la guerre des sciences et des Belles-Lettres à partir du 18e siècle", in *MSH Informations*, No. 54, 1988, pp. 6-17; *Id.*, "Contribution à une histoire des rapports entre la sociologie et la philosophie", in *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, No. 47-48, June 1983, pp. 37-44.

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This approach allowed the study of social phenomena as systems of relationships between connected elements, whose rapports can be measured and transcribed into mathematical terms. Only this latter science would be appropriate to guarantee analyses and coherence of sociological syntheses, thus elevating them to the dignity of a "true science".

Sociology, conceived thereafter as social mechanics, would thus borrow all its theoretic constructions and part of its conceptual schema from the physicists. Naturally, in most cases it made a more or less metaphorical use of them, but the supreme reference remained physics and methodology. The most classic example, relative to space, is that in which all movements must be verified. Let us also take idea of *status* (the situation of the individual, a group, their level in society, the roles that fall to them, their social functions); it is the exact copy of the notion of position in physical space. To the system of reference (abscissa, ordinate) made a correspondence with a system of social coordinates (sex, age, occupation) determining the position of individuals and groups in society.[6] In mechanics, movement is explained through inertia and gravitation. In sociology, all social processes are clarified beginning with the same principles, that then become social attraction and social repulsion. In mechanics they are a function of time and space. This is why sociologists place *status* in social space and time. The *graphs* would then illustrate the social processes. Even individual biographies would be represented by means of graphs, as though it were a matter of descending objects. In mechanic physics, equilibrium is an essential property of all systems; in sociology society is only a system of centrifugal and centripetal social forces in equilibrium. Consequently we confide the study of social equilibrium to social statics, the laws of coexistence, while movement, evolution and the laws of succession are the object of social dynamics.[7]

[6] A detailed reconstruction of the formation of this problematic has been made by P. Dockès, *L'espace dans la pensée économique. Du XVIe au XVIIIe siècles*, Paris, Flammarion, 1969. On the history of social physics, see P. Sorokin, *Contemporary Sociological Theories*, New York, Harper and Row, 1928; *Id.*, *Sociological Theories of Today*, New York, Harper and Row, 1966.

[7] Cf. C.E. Russett, *The Concept of Equilibrium in American Social Thought*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1966, but especially B. Guerrien, *La*

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QUANTIFICATION

The mechanics model forced the proto-sociologists to refer to mathematical formalization and statistical techniques.

William Petty (1623-1687), Hermann Conring (1606-1682) and Gottfried Achenwald (1719-1772) were, with others, the initiators. They applied quantification to all the aspects of social phenomena.[8] Claude-Henri de Saint-Simon (1760-1825) was in this lineage that applied the law of universal gravitation to social phenomena and the mechanics principles of Newton to society.

Saint-Simonism strongly conditioned the later developments of sociological knowledge. Was it not the former secretary of Saint-Simon, Auguste Comte, who proclaimed loud and clear the need to construct "social physics"? If he gave up this label and opted for the term "sociology", it was to mark his distance with regard to the social physics of the Belgian astronomer Adolphe Quételet (1796-1874), to his "bad habit" of probabilities and the law of large numbers to social data, which according to Comte denied man's liberty and freedom of choice.

The adoption of the mechanics model and formalization barely conceals an insoluble difficulty that later developments in sociological efforts never succeeded in eliminating. Sociology believed it had taken on the dignity of science by adopting the processes that had made physics the queen of the sciences. In spite of that, its products appeared as an incongruous medley of practical information and definitively would hardly be more than an art at the service of a prince, a social group or an institution.

ANTISOCIOLOGISM

A discipline producing such meager fruit could only awaken the most severe and spiteful criticism. Philosophy did not hide its

théorie néo-classique. Bilan et perspectives de l'équilibre général, Paris, Economica, 1989, 3rd ed. For some recent developments, see J. Piaget, *L'équilibration des structures cognitives, problème central du développement*, Paris, PUF, 1975, as well as *l'Hommage à Jean Piaget. Épistémologie génétique et équilibration*, Neuchâtel, Delachaux et Niestlé, 1977.

[8] P.F. Lazarsfeld, *Philosophie des sciences sociales*, Paris, Gallimard, 1970, pp. 78-102.

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scorn of the "infirm science", for the doctrines of "incurable infirmities". Literature observed a stubborn and persistent aversion to it and saw in the sociological description of reality a danger for artistic and literary effort, a biased form of competition in shaping the sensitivity and opinion of the public. Beyond scientific projects literature glimpsed an unacceptable ambition in sociology, that of telling the truth about the world, establishing social values and finalities, giving modern society ultimate orientations.

Dickens, Stendhal, Balzac, Flaubert, Zola, Gogol, Pushkin, Dostoyevsky and many others, up to Stefan Georg, Thomas Mann, E.R. Curtius and T.S. Eliot, barely hid their deep hostility to sociology. They claimed the privilege of formulating the "truth", "values", "ends", and "meaning" of the world for artists alone. Science is powerless; it cannot speak "true" on society. Writers affirmed that social novels describe society and problems such as socialism, anarchism, poverty, prostitution, the dissolution of mores, and so on, better than the "infirm science". From this point of view they expressed the same opinion as Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels.[9]

Thus literature saw itself alone qualified to speak of values, from the moment that sociology succeeded in only exposing its impotence and stray impulses.

This dispute, at times virulent—still quite alive today, and of which Lepenies has scrupulously given the historical account[10]—proved highly prejudicial to the development of sociological knowledge.[11] Among other things, it deprived us of the contribution of cognitive esthetics and certain modes of knowledge, fragmentary but useful in the logic of discovery.[12]

Moreover, this dispute helped to further enclose us within a rigidly marked territory where we could only work for the defense

[9] G. Busino, "Marx et la sociologie", in *Actes du Colloque de Neuchâtel, le 16 et 17 décembre 1983. Marx et les sciences humaines*. Edited by G. Seel, Lausanne, L'Age d'Homme, 1987, pp. 138-150.

[10] W. Lepenies, *Die Drei Kulturen. Soziologie zwischen Literature und Wissenschaft*, Munich, Carl Hanser Verlag, 1985.

[11] *Geschichte der Soziologie. Studien zur kognitiven, sozialen und historischen Identität einer Disziplin*, published by W. Lepenies, Frankfurt, Suhrkamp, 1981.

[12] R. Brown, *A Poetic for Sociology: Toward a Logic Discovery for the Human Sciences*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 1977.

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and consolidation of our professional integrity as scholars, convinced like all the others of the unity of all sciences.

THE ORGANICIST MODEL

The borrowings from mechanics physics are still preponderant today. They have undergone various adjustments, sometimes metamorphoses, but we have never denied or rejected them, in spite of the meager results obtained. The great sociologists were able to "play around" with them, manipulate them, adapt them, combine them in an ambiguous way, without however going too far from them.[13] On this subject, Pareto's case remains paradigmatic.

The sociologist from Lausanne constantly held physics as the "queen of the sciences", it alone being able to keep us from the snares of tautology. But he regularly united it to organicism and other epistemological models borrowed from biology.[14] Organicism has fascinated sociologists and continues to have a powerful influence, even when they widely borrow from linguistics and law. In fact, it allows a better treatment of problems posed by immanent forces, such as intentionality and the metamorphosis of the social system, than mechanization. Spencer made it the basis of sociology. Organicism continued to prosper through the different forms of evolutionism[15] and today, thanks to Edward O. Wilson and the doctrines of the "biocultural revolution".[16] Organicism has allowed a conception of society as a biological organism, as a relatively closed system, having a preponderant finality: survive and grow. To realize this end, society must adapt to the environment and set up complex strategies so as to produce and reproduce. The various types of societies (hunting and gather-

[13] D.N. Levine, *The Flight from Ambiguity*, Chicago University Press, 1985.
[14] D.C. Phillips, *Holistic Thought in Social Science*, Stanford University Press, 1985.
[15] T. Parsons, *Societies. Evolutionary and Comparative Perspectives*, Englewood Cliffs, N.J., Prentice-Hall, 1966.
[16] J. Lopreato, *Human Nature and Biocultural Evolution*, Boston, Allen and Unwin, 1984, as well as the sections of the *Revue européenne des sciences sociales*, XXIII, 1985, no. 69 and XXIV, 1986, No. 73.

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ing, pastoral, horticultural, agricultural and industrial) correspond to the stages of development of the living organism. Changes are brought about by the natural laws of development. They rarely happen by chance; they are slow, continuous, progressive, linear, necessary and endogenous. Primitive societies are those in which evolution is only beginning or has been blocked. From this come the analogies, even used by Jean Piaget, between children and primitives. Biological analogies allow the identification in primitive societies of growth factors in modern societies, at an earlier stage of their evolution. They are the presuppositions of most of our theories of change, development and modernization. The borrowings from biology have accustomed the sociologist to come to terms with circular logical constructions and to believe that explanation is possible by means of a reduction of complexity. The strength of sociological borrowings from physics and biology has been such that when it was necessary to turn to economics or other disciplines, we have only done so in order to find in them our basic models, coming from physics.

SOCIOLOGISM

This continual flow of conceptual borrowings, these analogical and metaphorical uses of theoretical constructions worked out within the formal and experimental sciences result in sociology still being a discipline with uncertain boundaries, a nebulous identity and cognitive results that are more or less contestable.

Among the founding fathers (Pareto, Max Weber and Simmel) only Durkheim considered himself exclusively as a sociologist;[17] he alone acted so as to obtain the academic institutionalization of the discipline, to make it completely legitimate as a university science. He was the only founding father to believe that sociology indubitably possessed all the characteristics of an autonomous discipline. He was also the only one to presume the existence of a sociological method. However, Durkheim never succeeded in detaching himself from the charms and ease of the mechanistic

[17] G. Busino, "Raymond Aron et la sociologie", in *L'Année sociologique*, 3rd series, Vol. 36, 1986, pp. 291-315.

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and organistic approach, nor to rid himself of the belief that there is no other way in the study of societies than that furnished by rules, procedures and deductive and inductive reasoning through the models of rationality of the physical sciences.[18] In *Les règles de la méthode sociologique* Durkheim does no more than resume the epistemological statements of Henri Poincaré and Ernst Mach. He tells us no more than what physicists were saying at the time. He gives us no indication on the subject of research procedures proper to sociology. He says and repeats that social data are objects,[19] that they have nothing to do with psychology.[20] At no point does Durkheim succeed in setting up a truly autonomous theory with regard to economic utilitarianism, biological organicism, *Gestalt* psychology, the philosophy of the history of Marxism, the preponderant model of physics. They are scientific models, often transformed into very elaborate metaphors, which are the substance of his bookish sociology. Nevertheless, his sociology allowed the establishment of an academic space, a social identity, and created conditions propitious to the birth of the "profession of sociology".

The New Sociology

In the early '40s Talcott Parsons tried to unite all the many epistemological presuppositions and contradictory statements into a unified, unitary and compact social theory. He set up a rigorously constructed paradigm in a language of dazzling abstraction and hermetism.

In reading *The Structure of Social Action* sociologists discovered that they are the heirs of a great intellectual tradition; that Alfred Marshall, Vilfredo Pareto, Émile Durkheim and Max Weber, recognized descendants of Hobbes, Locke, Malthus and Marx, of utilitarianism, evolutionism, positivism, had given so-

[18] I developed this point in the article "Sociology in Crisis", in *Diogenes* 135, July-September 1986, pp. 79-92.

[19] The emptiness of this affirmation has been proved by J. Monnerot, *Les faits sociaux ne sont pas des choses*, Paris, Gallimard, 1946, 6th ed.

[20] See on this subject the brilliant pages of S. Moscovici, *La machine à faire des Dieux. Sociologie et psychologie*, Paris, Fayard, 1988.

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ciology all the analytical diagrams allowing the elaboration of a unified theory of the social structure, systems of action, a theory capable of giving an account of all the logics of the social. By systemizing and generalizing everything that had until then been scattered among the founding fathers, Parsons settled down to the construction of the great theory presented in *The Social System* (1951).

The basis of this theory is social action, which covers biological, psychical, social and cultural activities, organized into subsystems and together making up the system. Relations between the whole and its parts make up the social organization. Stable elements form its structures (roles, collectivities, norms, values) while the dynamic element is provided by the functions in charge of maintaining social equilibrium. The social system is a four-dimensional space characterized by a general equilibrium and partial equilibriums, real and/or potential. Thanks to Parsons, the physical model finds its most complete and sophisticated formulation. This model, refined and clothed in fabrics taken from the closet of the founding fathers, was the fundamental paradigm in sociology until recently. Neither Marxism nor culturalism succeeded in drawing us away from the ascendency and fascination of the Parsonian construction, an undisputed and dominant sociological paradigm, in the United States but also in Europe, where even the sociologies of action and reproduction were contaminated, to a greater or lesser degree. Since Parsons, all sociologists have been conscious of the existence of a sociological tradition and the importance of the heritage of the founding fathers, without however accepting the idea that the history of sociology can exert the same influence on sociological research as that which the history of philosophy exerts on the philosopher.

Parsons's paradigm, called structural-functional, has required an incalculable number of borrowings from mathematics and statistics and has favored the development of a mathematical sociology, a quantitative sociological methodology and techniques of social research which for many years have favored the means of expression to the detriment of the pertinence of the problematics.[21]

[21] G. Busino, "La théorie et le fait", in *Cahiers internationaux de sociologie*, Vol. LXXI, 28, July-December 1981, pp. 309-319.

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THE MATHEMATIZATION OF SOCIAL DATA

The often illusory or tautological results of quantification in psychology and sociology were analyzed, harshly but plausibly, by Pitirim Sorokin.[22] The implicit assimilation of the social world to the physical world and the faith in the explanatory power of the tools of the "queen of the sciences" have made us transpose into the psycho-social sciences everything that had produced results in the "noble" or "concrete" disciplines. So it is that topology has been used to account for social conflicts; the analysis of concomitant variations to explain suicides; ecological, contextual and dimensional analyses to arrange the orders of preference.

Without going into the lengthy developments, it is certain that we have assured the passage of qualitative facts (the most numerous) to quantification by means of the irrational acceptance of certain formulas that arise from the basest empiricism, especially by a tacit manipulation of the tools of quantification and formal terms. Just one example will suffice to illustrate my statement: the construction of the sociological sample, whose formula is given us by statistics. It is written this way:

$$n = \frac{\left(\frac{t\,S}{d}\right)^2}{1 - \frac{1}{N}\left(\frac{t\,S}{d}\right)^2}$$

where n is the number of subjects in the sample to be determined, N the number of subjects in the field, d the error we decide to accept, t the interval of reliability, S^2 the variance of the variable x which we do not know. To establish the size of the sample, we must know the field of variance to be measured. If the variance of the variable x is large, n must also be large; if the variance is small n must be small. Now S in sociology is always an estimation, and it is on an estimation that we are obliged to base n. In other words, we fix the size of the sample beginning with an estimation made on the basis of the hypothesis, never verified, that the distribution is normal. Then we must ignore the

[22] P. Sorokin, *Fads and Foibles in Modern Sociology and Related Sciences*, Chicago, Regnery, 1956.

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fact that there are several variables which the estimation of S must take into account. Most often we consider these variables separately while recognizing that they have two or more dimensions, which is important for the fixation of *n*. On the other hand, the theory states that the persons interrogated be chosen by chance. Now this is revealed to be almost always impossible in sociological research. To have representative samples, we must correct the random choices by reasoned choices. It is well known that the theory of estimation through the interval of reliability is only valid in the case of a random survey, while all our surveys are empirical. In addition, our sampling by reasoned choice rests on the hypothesis that the variables of control are statistically distributed as variables to be analyzed. Such a hypothesis assumes the strict correlation between the variables of control (age, sex, socio-professional categories, milieu, religion, etc.) and the kind of answer given. It is practically impossible to control such a hypothesis. Therefore, we have no means to evaluate the variability in the estimation.

Thanks to a borrowing from statistics, we have here an important tool, but as far as sociology is concerned, one that is deprived of all theoretical validity and thus of practical legitimacy. I could also mention the determinist models for the analysis of social processes; simulated models as physical realizations of mathematical models, as well as applications to psycho-sociology or socio-demography of the simulated models without a direct mathematical equivalent, but that would add nothing to my thesis. Since there is no isomorphism between the physical world and the social world, all borrowings by sociology from other disciplines must undergo changes, be transformed into metaphors or analogies. After that, they no longer produce the same results as in their original disciplines.

The relentless antagonism opposing sociologists favoring nomothetic explanations to the partisans of ideographic interpretations and the supporters of the quantitative method (participating observation, clinical method, etc.) has its origin in the faith in the validity of statistics in sociology. Even when analyses with multiple variables are possible, can we say that the analysis of discrete variables helps us grasp the entire systems? The collection of the causes into a system obscures the genesis (as well as

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its boundaries and structures) because it is more the sum of the parts and specific causal relations.

In the present situation, the study of events whose frequency is at the same time variable and measurable does not guarantee sociologists the certainty of identifying the variables whose regularity would authorize their codification into laws and then the elaboration of a theory from them.

Stagnation and Conflicts of Today

Thus sociological tradition, borrowings from other sciences, acquired experience and the restrictions arising from the institutionalization of the discipline result in sociology continuing to believe that the imitation of the natural sciences will inevitably earn it the dignity of science. This is why it treats the social, culture and sentiments as though it were a matter of a "natural history" of societies. And the best way to analyze them comes straight from the adoption of quantitative methods, the only means to identify the structures of the phenomena and laws of movement in modern society.

The insistence on imitating natural sciences, to put sociology in the place of metaphysics and religion, cold Reason in that of faith and passions, like the distinction between ends and means, facts and opinions, as well as the opposition between the objective world and the sensorial world of feelings—all this has plunged us into the present stagnation and conflicts.

Convinced that the logic of demonstration remains the only way to produce knowledge, to construct a general conception of the world, a rational substitute for religion, sociologists are now calmly and agreeably installed in universities, teach more or less abstruse specializations, are neither listened to nor influential, barely tolerated by the specialists in other disciplines, producing fragments of practical knowledge, consultations and expertise that are quickly forgotten or received with general indifference.

Waiting to rise to the level of the exact sciences, attracted by reflexivity, interpretation and hermeneutics, today's sociologists continue to borrow more than ever from the most disparate disciplines and the most varied techniques (for example, the theory

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of games, the general theory of systems, cybernetics, etc.). At times we call upon literary and philosophical disciplines when the meaning of life and the logic of a society escape us; at times we find a safe refuge in the imitation of transposition of the attainments of the concrete sciences, and among them our preferences are always on the side of physics, mathematics and biology.

In one case as in another, sociology can continue to cultivate its age-old mythology: to be a science but also a practical activity; to theorize but animate action; explain social behavior but also evaluate it; give an account of social passion and daily life with "participating" objectivity. In short, today's sociology continues to take from elsewhere its theoretic and non-theoretic constructions, which give it the illusion of explaining behavior in terms of finalities or causes, where it can find them. It continues to remain a polyparadigmatic science. Functionalism and experimental empiricism that stress controlled deductions and comparisons, explanations through causal laws, that organize the universe of experiences into formal structures, are the most convincing examples of this situation. However, for several years we have begun to notice openings toward and some borrowings from history, economics, linguistics, philosophy and other disciplines. I am going to list them quickly, without pretending to be exhaustive.

History

Sociologists have always considered that history could furnish the social sciences with an objective knowledge of some isolated events but deprived of solid explanatory elements on the how and why of their unfolding in time.[23] If the study of socio-cultural structures, their structuration and their destructuration, relationships between social facts and the biophysical environment is of great importance for understanding the modalities of production and reproduction in the social system, it remains none the less anchored, according to sociologists, at the level of the ideographic

[23] I have fully analyzed this problematic in the article "De quelques apports de l'histoire à la sociologie et de la sociologie à l'histoire", in *Revue européenne des sciences sociales*, XI, 1973, No. 30, pp. 91-122.

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interpretation of unique situations, particular groups governed by singular rules, motives and intentions. Alex Inkeles resumes the problematic in this way: "The historian takes pride in the clarity and precision of the details that characterize his discipline. The sociologist is more inclined to make reality abstract, to categorize and generalize; he is interested in what is true, not only the particular history of a people but also the histories of different peoples".[24] However, faced with the failure of development and modernization, it has been necessary to borrow from history the techniques to treat (and also identify) the temporal texture of all human experience, as well as the contexts of situation and the transitions from one kind of society to another.[25] The borrowings allowed a sociological treatment of former questions (anomy, generation, the formation of states, the twilight of cultures, emergence and decline of the different forms of welfare state, etc.) and especially to favor the birth of a new sub-discipline: historical sociology.[26]

Economics

As in the past, sociologists call on economics because of its conceptual proximity to natural sciences. Some of them, fascinated by the progress made by economic science, think that the adoption of the economics method will bring sociology out of the impasse where it has always found itself. Since then, they borrow from neo-classical economics its basic postulate: society is composed of individuals in juxtaposition seeking their interests in a rational way. They enter into contact with each other through the intermediary of the market in order to maximalize their in-

[24] A. Inkeles, *What is Sociology*?, Englewood Cliffs, Prentice Hall, 1964, p. 21.
[25] G. Busino, "Le passage des sociétés traditionnelles aux sociétés industrielles. Quelques réflexions pour un débat", in *Bulletin du M.A.U.S.S.*, No. 17, March 1986, pp. 45-69.
[26] P. Abrams, "History, Sociology, Historical Sociology", in *Past and Present*, No. 87, 1980, pp. 3-16, as well as the article by G. Noiriel, "Pour une approche subjective du social", in *Annales*, November-December 1989, pp. 1435-1459. See also the works of Theda Skocpol, *States and Social Revolutions*, Cambridge University Press, 1979 and *Theory and Method in Historical Sociology*, Cambridge University Press, 1983.

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terests. An order is thus created due to the automatic mechanisms of adjustment to the market. Agents seek to attain their own position of equilibrium. Each agent is endowed with will-liberty and capacity-efficacity, qualities that are indispensable for reaching their objectives.

Sociologists extend this paradigm of the market to non-marketing areas, in short, to all the aspects of social life. Gary S. Becker says, "In fact, the economics theory is perhaps well on the way to furnishing a unified framework for each behavior that puts to work rare resources, non-marketing, non-monetary as well as monetary, within a restricted group, as well as concurrent ones".[27] Elsewhere he says "All human behavior may be conceived as putting into play participants who maximalize their usefulness beginning with a stable group of preferences and who accumulate the optimal quantity of information on a variety of markets."[28] What do Becker and the sociologists who are partisans of the economic model want to obtain? The constitution of all the human sciences in a generalized economy of human behavior, from marriage to criminality, from adultery to justice, from non-profit organizations to the religious market, from the electoral vote to assistance to developing countries. Each individual finds meaning in his actions only by maximalizing his usefulness. Producing these utilities in an efficient way is the only, ultimate stake of his choices that have an impact on time, the only truly rare asset.

An example taken from Becker's *A Theory of Marriage* will serve to illustrate these ideas.

According to this author, to analyze the family we must borrow from the economic theory of business, because the family is nothing other than a "small factory". It is organized exactly like a business. The marriage contract is the result of a process of trial and error on the marriage market. The ultimate goal—the choice of a mate—will concretize the maximalization of the joint investments of two individuals. In the family, individuals produce final satisfactions, objects of a function of family in-

[27] G.S. Becker, *The Economic Approach to Human Behavior*, Chicago University Press, 1976, p. 205.
[28] *Ibidem*, p. 14.

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vestment contributing to the transformation of all consumption into production. So it is easy to formalize the production of these investments and state that the function of domestic production introduces time as a rare asset. In a situation of maximalization of investments with restrictions (budget and time) how will the members of a family act? By sharing their time between production of revenue, a salaried job, and the production of satisfactions of non-marketable origin. Certainly, such borrowings allow the treatment of the family as though it were a matter of a business; however, it forces us to consider time in the family as the equivalent of the time of salaried work, to mix the private with the public, to dodge the fact that in domestic work there is a part that cannot be measured, because socially it is invisible, to ignore that exchanges cannot all be transcribed into monetary terms. Behind all that there is, of course, a representation of society as an automatic mechanism of regulation, as a natural order, as physical or organic systems.

These borrowings have brought about an important intellectual current that today is called "theory of rational action" (Rational Action or RAT or Rational Choice). It groups different tendencies, such as "Logic of collective action", "methodological rationalism", "methodological actionalism" and "methodological individualism".[29] All the supporters of this current borrow from neo-classic economy the hypothesis that social actors behave in terms of their preferences and thus behave in a rational way. However, the pure economist tendency excludes solidarity, power and prestige from its rationality; that of rationalism, behavior governed by rules; that of actionalism, beliefs and preferences; that of individualism, totalities. These tendencies do not all produce the same results. For example, methodological individualism can reverse or eliminate its initial economism[30] while

[29] See L.J.D. Wacquant and C.J. Calhoun, "Interêt, Rationalité et Culture. A propos d'un récent débat sur la théorie de l'action", in *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, No. 78, June 1989, pp. 41-60 and especially J.S. Coleman, *Foundation of Social Theory*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1990.

[30] R. Boudon, "L'individualisme méthodologique", in *Encyclopaedia Universalis. Symposium Les enjeux*, Paris, Encyclopédie universelle, 1988, pp. 644-647; "Individualisme et Holisme: un débat méthodologique fondamental", in H. Mendras and M. Verret, ed., *Les champs de la sociologie française*, Paris, A. Colin, 1988, pp. 31-45.

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economic rationalism must break with methodological individualism in order to remain faithful to its corollaries (acting egoistically, exclusively for material interest, being content with "satisfying", various factors affecting the function of service, information is always correct and the environment of the action is always constant and given). Whatever the case, borrowings by sociology from economics have up until now not helped our discipline to give itself a specific identity and limit its province.

Linguistics

This science has intrigued sociologists, especially since the beginning of the century. Pareto, Durkheim and Mead gave an important place in their sociological studies to language as the keystone of culture and thus of society. But for half a century we have also been aware that this system of expression and communication can define social action.

Three sociological schools developed from this realization: symbolic interactionism, ethno-methodology and structuralism. By applying several analytical formulas to sociology, especially those of diachrony/synchrony, form/substance, language/work, logic/language, meaning/sign, sociologists hope to show the systems of rules that govern society, its functioning here and now, to discover the mode of production of meanings as well as the modalities of construction of social reality. None the less, they do not succeed in characterizing the specificity of language through opposition to the social constructions it is able to elaborate. If language organizes and conditions our way of conceiving the world, our social behavior, our symbolic systems, must we then affirm that the social order is language? Must we also say that the knowledge we have of society comes from language? It is impossible to answer these questions, since neither language nor society has a transcendental ontological status, since neither general linguistics nor sociology has concrete units that can be immediately recognized. But linguistic borrowings, transformed into metaphors and heuristic canons, have allowed Blumer and Goffmann, Garfinkel and Cicourel to show how the operations of designation by which social objects and the social system are con-

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structed are put into place. The conversational analysis of Sacks and Schegloff, the argumentative logics of Toulmin and Grize have opened up fine perspectives for us on the persuasion and non-demonstrative logics of communication and, in general, on the connotative representations of the everyday world.[31]

Sociology has drawn two major hypotheses from linguistic research: a) spoken language is one system of signs among others; b) any sign system has a hermetic and autoreferential character. The use that Lévi-Strauss has made of these two hypotheses to analyze the rules of marriage and parenthood, as well as mythologies, is well known. The analysis of verbal and non-verbal sign systems has made sociologists take an interest in hermeneutics, interpretation, the reading of cultural systems, decoding the individual and social behavior governed by rules, actions set up in terms of these rules and governed by the coherence that characterizes any system of rules. It is precisely from that slant that sociology has rediscovered philosophy and its great tradition.

Philosophy

The discovery, or better, rediscovery of the philosophical tradition is too recent to give even a short inventory of it here. Sociologists try at present to familiarize themselves with the techniques used in the history of philosophy and hermeneutics. Thanks to what philosophers have written on self-awareness, intention, the reciprocity of perspectives, we have learned that social action is structured by three kinds of awareness: that of the actors living a situation; that of actors anticipating future actions; and that of the researcher himself. Thus sociologists have begun to realize the importance of reflexivity. Today, some of them hope that the profession will turn away somewhat from empirical research to the profit of the development of reflexive sociology.[32]

[31] See H. Schwartz and J. Jacobs, *Qualitative Sociology. A Method to the Madness*, New York, Free Press, 1979, as well as J.-B. Grize, *Logique et langage*, Paris, Ophrys, 1990.

[32] J. Freund, *Philosophie Philosophique*, Paris, Ed. de la Découverte, 1990, especially pages 312-317.

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To Conclude

After more than two centuries of research and speculation, sociology continues to inquire about its field of study, its specificity, its methodology, its chances for finally setting up a veritable store of knowledge. While the "concrete" or exact sciences bring up fundamental epistemological problems and treat order and disorder, chance and necessity, self-organization and complexity with originality, sociology is still wondering about its own identity and its scientific and social functions, meditating on the rapport between descriptions and the world of norms and values, between science and action.

At the moment in which the "concrete" sciences take into their charge the dynamic complexity of phenomena, at the moment in which they boldly go beyond chance and discontinuity and seek the system that can give a meaning to the universe, what is contemporary sociology doing? It continues its self-satisfied musing. The old themes of subjectivity and objectivity, universality and relativity, qualitative analysis and quantitative methods, society as a system of action, the actor as product of structures that determine him, of intermediary thanks to which the rules of functioning and reproduction are expressed, or of subject able to make choices—all these old themes continue to attract sociologists and make them work with calm, sobriety and method, without getting carried away, determined and meticulous.

The freedom of the subject? An illusion. It is up to society to speak and act. No accidental creativity. Morphogenesis comes from a hidden teleological order that the sociologist will be able to reveal. Values and meanings? Purely impersonal significants. The social transforms values into facts, facts into legitimate power relationships and consequently the cultural arbitrary into subordination and hierarchy. All social rapports are a totality in which society is massively reflected. Intelligibility is then only disengagement from a concealed order, verification of the existence of determinisms. Thus we have believed to re-establish the social in its ontological pre-eminence and its causal self-sufficiency.

This "*Homo sociologicus*", based on empirical subjects, prisoners of time and society, can he escape the appearance of all that he is living? Can he really remove himself from the ex-

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perience of his particular society and its characteristic existence? Can he really conceive the other and the elsewhere?

The history of sociology reveals its principal difficulty: it searches a universal truth in a particular society, identity in diversity, analogy in otherness. This knowledge elaborated within a society, that of generalized exchanges through the industrial system, will only succeed in giving an account of certain functionings of modern society as opposed to other, earlier societies. And yet it claims the right to universality. Sociology hierarchizes societies with regard to a primordial, original state. The distance in regard to the original state characterizes the progressive order in the following.

Societies near the origin are primitive societies; they are the object of study of the ethnologists. The study of societies in time, societies passing from one stage to another, is left to the historians. Present society, a veritable conclusive consubstantiation of human society, belongs to the sociologist. It is to them that is confided the construction of the science of society. Beginning with a particular society, they hope to give us a social theory with a general validity, a universal and general claim.

Such a conception of modernity has two important omissions: it is given as an absolute novelty, detached from genealogy and chronology, therefore without duration and history; it is conceived as a system of functioning, without genesis but still reproductive. It is time that sociology dropped history and claimed its autonomy and disciplinary specificity, its experience of universal meaning.

Now, the present is the product of the past, whose permanence assures the configuration of the present, makes it what it is. This permanence of the past in the present is the framework of our consciousness, our social identity, institutions, values, norms; it constitutes the armature of social structures, indeed, the process of social structurations.

Men create a world of objects, meanings, restrictions in duration. They assure its stabilization and permanence with institutions. These gradually become subjects that transform their creators into objects. We create rules, values, signs; we act through them. Institutions condense and sometimes crystalize social experiences. The almost automatic recourse to these experiences

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facilitates individual and collective action, orders social life, makes interaction easier, fixes the field of the possible, preserves energies and stimulates motivations and orientations.

This constructed world presents itself to us, throughout the years, as a world independent of us, implacable in its own autonomy, with a destiny at times different from that of individual subjects. From this comes the duality of social action; it is choice and obligation at the same time, but in time. That means that action depends on historical situations with which the subject is confronted. Our historical condition gives us the framework of our experiences, shapes our conduct and facilitates certain behaviors. Our actions and all that we can construct or destroy happen in time and with time. The rapport between the social structure and social action is tied to temporality. Between the individual-actor and society conceived as a restrictive environment of laws, norms and values, there is reciprocity. Even this reciprocity has a history and remains the history of the present. It is useless to separate sociology from history. The disciplines make up the two faces of the same medal. They are occupied with the same realities; they must give an account of the same process, in other words, the reasons for which men live together, produce meanings, give sense to things that otherwise would have none, create the mechanics for legitimizing and validating arbitrary choices, perpetuate them, change them, exchange them, to give an *order* where there was only insignificance, indifferentiation, inconsistency and contingency.

Even though it is constitutionally impossible to extract sociology from history, what brought about the separation and competitive evolution of these disciplines? Assuredly, the vision of a radically new society, the mirage of modernity and the illusion of indefinite progress. The latest stage is a long evolution, modern societies have become universal and exclusive paragons.

As long as sociology only had to produce information to renew existing meanings, broaden and complete them, account for classes, class struggle, bureaucratization, its weakness was not immediately perceived. Sociological studies served to nourish arguments, give the varnish of rationality and scientificity, even the technical nature of its projects, choices and decisions often purely superfluous. The sociology of education or modernization, that of

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mass communication or work spoke in vain; all these efforts, in their agreeable insignificance, have admirably confirmed the observation Henri Michaux made in a different context: "The philosophers of a nation of hairdressers' assistants are more profoundly hairdressers' assistants than philosophers." Then came the crisis and the illusions were quickly swept away. After having been a shaman, the sociologist was considered as a creator of smoke. Since then our inability to escape wordiness is made fun of and our work is ridiculed as a derisory effort to finally demonstrate what the world already knows.

Such a shock could be healthy. In fact, it forces us to ask real questions, to come closer to history, to make sociology a historical discipline, to get around the difficulties of throwing the observer off center with regard to his own society, to become aware of the historical character of our categories. There is still much work to be done, but there are already pioneers: Elias, Abrams, Tilly and many others. However, among the most urgent tasks to be accomplished, the reflection on the history of sociology, at the same time sociological history and sociology of sociology as well as historical sociology of knowledge is imperative.

Only the study of the history of sociology can make us understand the reasons for the considerable difficulties already present when Auguste Comte gave a name to our discipline. Since 1830, sociologists have attacked each other on the finalities of their science, on the role of the sociologist. They persisted in asking if it was first of all necessary to do empirical social research, produce information, reveal what is dissembled or analyze words and objects and leave to social actors the possibility to draw lessons from them and make the desired social use of them. What can we offer that is solid to the social actors when in sociology there are no universal procedures, conventionally accepted, allowing the validation through proof of the true and the false?

Of course, the founding fathers foresaw that sociology essentially treats meanings and that these are almost always manifested in words. Some of the founding fathers understood that language determines the classification of ideas and things, from which comes the careful attention given to questions of taxonomy and classification. But they hesitated to admit that the words of sociology rarely correspond to real objects, to relations objectively

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observable by all in space or in time. The cognitive model borrowed from the exact sciences kept them from recognizing that the knowledge produced came from adopted conceptual divisions, that they exist due to the "arbitrary" cutting carried out on reality and that it is exactly this cutting that is the basis of sociological knowledge. Social reality has no other existence than that attributed to it by words. The sociologist can never refer to things to express signs. It is the cutting that guarantees the existence of the thing, never will the thing succeed in validating the sign.

All these original contradictions make us understand why there is always disagreement with regard to the birth date of sociology. For those who considered that sociology is a reflection on the principles of life in society, the discipline identifies with social philosophy, with social theory and with social doctrines. It was born with the Greek philosophers. On the other hand, sociologists who attribute to sociology the task of making positive and empirical research on the organization and functioning of society, place its origin shortly after the industrial revolution, when new phenomena were calling for prerogatives and the concession of new meanings.

The disagreement on the origin of sociology is also fed by contrasting social practices. Some sociologists reflect on the phases of life in society, on social order, on what life in common should be, and this without any other concern than to understand, explain and grasp the nucleus of things the way artists do. On the contrary, other sociologists are exclusively concerned with the modalities of observation, question of verification and control, procedures of generalization and everything they think could found a store of knowledge with the dignity of science.

Philosophical and literary sociology seeks its precursors in Aristotle and Balzac; scientific sociology in Achenwall, Conring or Quételet. Macro-sociology prefers Ferguson, Montesquieu, Comte or Saint-Simon. Micro-sociology refers to the political arithmeticians, to the *caméralistes*, to Villermé or Le Play. The history of sociology thus allows us to understand many of our own problems and to see, beyond methodological credos, how sociologists have produced knowledge, in what way they axiomatize it and construct theories, from what point of view they have succeeded in putting paradigms of "scientific" knowledge into

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place, making possible the socialization of the newcomers and the institutionalization of a social practice in a profession and professional roles, in a system of power, in a subculture.

In addition, the study of the history of sociology allows us to relativize our claims and prepare ourselves to work with historical material. Contrary to what happens in economics, where we distinguish the history of economic doctrines from the history of economic analysis and history of economic thought, in sociology the history of sociology integrates in itself the sociology of sociology, sociology of knowledge and social history. Why? Because sociological practices are simply sociological practices.

The study of the history of sociology, reflection on the sociologies of the past, has yet another function, that of allowing us to construct new knowledge with the aid of the practices of translation, combination and repetition. The sociologies and sociologists of the past have much to teach us about the societies that they have represented conceptually, and still more about the unsaid, the empty places, about suspended time, about differences, about ambiguity and the intangible shadows of the present.

The history of sociology offering us the only possibility of decentering with regard to our knowledge and our society, the only means of relativizing our scientific beliefs, frees us from the present and makes us understand why the classic values of identity, order, organization, centrality are giving way before those of difference, disorder, fragment, periphery. The history of sociology invites us to live the present as history and history as genealogy, duration, structuration of differences.

To the degree in which we are able to recognize the permanence of the past in the present, we reject as inauspicious the distinction between history and sociology, between sociology and anthropology, and we will be able to elaborate true knowledge about man.

The reaffirmation of our identity as researchers in human sciences passes through a return to memory and history. Sociology will take on its cultural importance if the sociologist admit that history is at the same time our memory, our tradition and our one and only reality.

Lacking such a reconversion, sociology will not come out un-

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scathed from the crisis that is severely shaking the human sciences of our era.

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But what structure? We must be careful of seeing false parallels. A mosque is not a university, no matter what the tourist guides may say. The instruction given in mosques in the Middle Ages was always private instruction, perhaps supported by the sovereign but never officially institutionalised. The mosque was not autonomous and it could not be so because Islamic law, the *chari'a,* recognises only the individual and never developed the concept of an institution as a legal entity that could possess independent rights. The mosque was, par excellence, the meeting place where master and disciple could engage in their scientific exchange near a pillar. Moreover, the mosque was not the only site of instruction. If one wished to learn medicine, one sought a teacher in the hospital; to enter the government one entered into contact with a civil servant. For sciences or mathematics, one turned to a specialist whom one visited in his home or in a public library. The choice of location was determined by the practical goal of education, and the practical goal was in turn determined by the ideal that one endeavored to pursue. There was the ideal of the man of letters current among civil servants and men of the court; the ideal of the useful scholar such as the doctor, astrologist or alchemist; the code of honor for kings and the rules of applied politics expounded by the "mirrors of princes". And finally there was the training of the religious man, above all else exegetical and legal. Competition between these ideals led to social tensions often expressed in stereotypes and prejudices that were applied mutually. The balance that ultimately was established varied according to the regions. The Muslim world is too complex for us to be able to present a monochrome image. Given the immense geographic expanse of the region we are discussing, from central Asia to the North African Maghreb, we always run the risk of giving to Islam an "essentialist" definition that never really was true. But we can hazard the affirmation that it was jurists who came out best over the centuries and that religious instruction produced the newest models. The mosque was not a university but it did come to resemble one a great deal more than did the church or synagogue.

Why? The Muslim world was heir to two civilisations, that of Iran and that of Antiquity. But Islam contributed something new, a revelation. This revelation manifested itself in a language, Arabic,

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which was the language of neither Iran nor of the Greeks. It took shape in a sacred book that was the word of God in the strictest sense of the term—not only as example and admonition but as a decree coming from the very mouth of God. It was there, in language and religion, that Muslim identity resided. In these two domains no outside influence was accepted, at least in any direct or conscious manner. It is true that the Iranian academy of Gundesapur, in the Khuzistan very near to Iraq, had an influence on medical instruction in Baghdad. But the philosophical academies that had flourished in Antiquity were never revived, despite all the interest in translations of Aristotle and Galen; and Christian academies (of Nisibe, for example) or Jewish academies (of Sura and of Pumbedita in Iraq) disappeared without a trace. From the beginning the mosque was the center of intellectual life for Muslims. This was so because Muslim civilisation was an urban civilisation and it could be so because the mosque, unlike the church, was not opposed to profane activities. The *qādī* rendered his verdicts there, a foreigner could spend the night. One could take a nap or just sit and talk—within certain limits—and one could teach. Theoretically one could teach anything as long as there were students and if the subject chosen was not considered heretical. At Qarawiyyîn there were courses in astronomy, geography and medicine, almost up to the end of the last century. And Leo the African tells us that in the sixteenth century even alchemists met in the mosque in the evening. In general, however, it was religious sciences that were taught there: exegesis of the Koran, the prophetic tradition, jurisprudence, along with their ancillary lexicography, prosody, sometimes history, above all the life of the Prophet. There are some notable absences here: theology among the religious sciences, at least in certain regions and after a certain time, and philosophy among the ancillary sciences. Unlike Christianity, Islam ultimately placed the emphasis on canon law rather than on theology, and canon law had no use for philosophy other than logic.

The central place occupied by jurisprudence was due to the fact that the word of God manifested itself as decree. God is the supreme legislator, and determining his Will requires an exegesis. But the Koran is not a code of laws; it presupposes, and complements, an already existing legislation. Following generations were

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obliged to reconstruct this foundation upon which revelation had been superimposed, and they did so by drawing inspiration from the example of the Prophet, of what he had said and done, especially at Medina when he had the opportunity to create and form a community according to his own concepts. This is why, along with the Koran, the prophetic tradition became the primary subject of teaching in the early centuries. But it was first necessary to assemble it, for it existed only in the memory of those who had lived with the Prophet and of those to whom the first generation had communicated it. This was a gigantic operation, full of risk. There were only fragments that had to be stitched together, and these fragments were often contradictory and had to be verified. At the beginning even some fundamental reservations were expressed. Assemble it, yes, but does one have the right to put this oral tradition into writing, to "put it in chains" as some said? For tradition should remain flexible, adaptable to ever-changing situations; only the Koran, the "Book" in the true sense of the word, could be set in writing. The caliph Omar is said to have feared that Islam would produce a new *mishna* like that of Judaism. It was known, from the very fact of the new revelation, that the children of Abraham who had received the Word of God previously, namely the Jews and the Christians, had ultimately distorted it by replacing it with the verbiage of theologians and the speculations of casuists. Thus, exegesis, yes, to avoid petrification; but not in writing, in order to avoid making permanent what could only be but a passing need.

In the first centuries at least, teaching always stressed the oral aspect; often professors depended on their memory and sometimes they forbade their students to take notes. The mosques in general did not have libraries; the great libraries for which medieval Islam is so justly famous were founded by sovereigns and located in separate buildings, frequently attached to the palace. But western Islamology was wrong to think of the situation in terms of an antithesis between oral tradition and written tradition. Even a professor who preferred to teach by heart generally had handbooks that served to refresh his memory, and students succeeded in producing "books" that were nothing other than a collection of notes taken during or after the lessons. Muslim civilisation was a highly literate civilisation, and the replacement of papyrus by

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rag paper using the production methods that Arabs had learned from the Chinese (in the second half of the Second/Eighth century) encouraged, in an unexpected manner, the spread and democratisation of knowledge. Ultimately the means of transmission was no different from that used in Antiquity; in Greek the professor's notes were known by the term of ὑπομνήματα, (*hypomnémata*) which corresponds exactly to "memory aid". There were books based on these ὑπομνήματα, but these were clearly distinguished from what was called the συγγράμματα *(syngrammata),* which were finished literary works. The ὑπομνήματα varied depending on the course that the student had attended; this explains why many Arab books dating from the first centuries of Islam, those recounting the life of the Prophet, for example, have come down to us in several versions that we are unable to reduce to a single archetype or to an unaltered text.

Fundamentally this primitive Muslim teaching already had more points in common with our own than we think. Still today, more than five hundred years after the invention of printing, our university education is still essentially oral, and sometimes a professor will expound on a text that he is about to publish as a handbook or that the students themselves publish before or after his death. As everywhere and always, originality is reduced to notes added to tradition; and what happened to the lessons of Aristotle and Hegel, namely that they were changed from ὑπομνήματα into canonical books, happens to many a lesson or lecture today thanks to magnetic recording tape. The professor "reads", and in Germany the professor *liest nicht* if he is retired or taking a sabbatical. The student "listens"; he is a *Hörer* in German. The Arabs used the same vocabulary. The professor—or an advanced student—read the text *(qava'a)* and, at the end of the course, the students received a certificate called *samā'* ("listen"), which not only proved their presence at the lessons but also permitted the "listeners" to pass on what they had heard. With the *samā'* the student himself also received permission to teach, the *ijāza*. This permission was not linked to a discipline; it concerned only the specific subject that he had studied, the text he had heard. The *samā'* was not listed by the professor in a transcript of studies, a *Studienbuch,* (as was still the case when I was a student), but in the very book in which he had studied, the book he recopied

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and which in fact was composed and corrected by the professor who was its author.[1]

This method was not limited to the study of prophetic tradition; generally speaking it was valid for all subjects. Disciplines were not yet specialised at that time, and teaching was very individualistic; the professor taught all that he knew, and everyone could be master and disciple at the same time. The *samā'*, permission to transmit knowledge learned, and the chain of transmitters that resulted from it guaranteed verification of the contents, significant in a culture that placed emphasis on spoken testimony rather than written documentation and that was obliged to do so because of the ambiguity of Arab writing where there is the risk of confusing many consonants if the appropriate diacritical marks are not added, not to mention the absence of vowels. By receiving the *samā'* the disciple became a master, but since he was but the *lector unius libri*, he could still not be considered a scholar. He had to acquire other books by listening to other professors so that he could teach the subjects of an entire library and not just the same course all the time. This need made itself felt first of all in the prophetic tradition, for sacred knowledge was not useful unless it was complete. Jurists were casuists, and some of them dreamed of finding a prophetic maxim for every situation. Certainly there were some who immediately recognised that this was illusory and that it would never be possible to weave a casuist net without recourse to other means, particularly analogy. But those who persisted—and many others who collected the heritage of the Prophet because they knew of no task more noble nor more rewarding for their salvation—had to expand the range of their studies. They then began to travel. By going to other cities they could be sure of finding new sources of knowledge. But they could also teach, for they were themselves bearers of an unknown knowledge. The institution of the "visiting professor" was born, and with it a considerable exchange of

[1] It should also be noted that the term *qara'a* has a slightly different meaning. This is not only a professor who "reads" but also—and more frequently—the student who reads a text in the presence of the professor. The terminological usage of the word *qara'a* originally referred to the reading of the Koran, whose name *al-Qur'an* is but an infinitive (or one of the infinitives) of *qara'a* in the sense of "recitation, reading".

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experiences and knowledge, possibly also a certain propensity for appearing tolerant of foreign customs that one did not espouse.

However, these travels cost money, and there were no public patrons like today. Medieval scholars paid for their own travels, and they were capable of doing so because the majority of them were also merchants. Max Weber was wrong in stating that the warrior was the Muslim's "ideal type". Instead it was the merchant who characterised this essentially urban and individualist civilisation. There was no clergy in Islam; religious knowledge was "administered" by laymen who, at that time, were generally not paid by the government (except for the judge and, sometimes, the *imām* of the mosque). At the most basic level there were many small craftsmen who were proud of having been authorised to transmit a few snatches of the prophetic tradition, over which they held the monopoly. But those who did this on a larger scale could not allow themselves the luxury of pursuing their studies without certain financial guarantees that often were enough to make it possible for them to go and see teachers or colleagues elsewhere. Moreover, travelling was practically required by the cathechism: the pilgrimage to Mecca is an obligation that every Muslim is required to perform at least once in his lifetime. From the beginning Islam was predisposed to a certain internationalisation. However, for a merchant, travelling is basically a professional necessity. By seeking knowledge "even in China", as a famous expression of the prophet put it, he could also establish commercial contacts. Along the way he would stop in caravanserais, the *khāns*, where he taught if invited to do so by students in the group. Alongside the mosque, the inn was also a place of instruction, and the *stabilitas loci* of the scholar, just as today, risked giving way to a nomadic existence.

Ultimately, however, this was but a transitional phase, for by the Fourth century of the Hegira, the idea was formed to reserve certain inns for scholarly activities in order to spare them the inconveniences of regular trade. Such establishments were then given the name *madrasa* (plural, *madāris*), "a place of instruction" (*Lehranstalt*; the form *medersa*, found in French, comes from Moroccan dialect). This practice first appeared in the East in Iran, where there were the large cities of Bukhārā, Samarkand and especially Nēšāpūr, a metropolis that disappeared during the Mongol

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invasion. It was wealthy, bourgeois families who founded these new institutions, not the government. The *madāris* were thus private; they provided lodging for visitors, but it was primarily the founder himself who taught there. Many of these buildings were centered around a mausoleum, with the family in this way combining their pious intentions with a desire to immortalise themselves. There was another idea as well. People were seeking to protect their fortunes from the dangers of the times, the random dispersal of their possessions through hereditary succession or their confiscation by the government. In order to achieve this goal they used a legal expedient prescribed in Muslim law: the pious foundation or *waqf*. With the *waqf* a property owner left his goods to the benefit of charitable works. But if these charitable works were devoted to education, he could himself occupy the position he had created and afterward pass it on to his descendants, at least according to the law applicable in Iran at that time.[2] He needed to have a little luck, however. If he had only daughters, for example, he would have to marry at least one of them to a jurist capable of teaching. And naturally everything depended on the general political situation. He could only succeed if the existence and survival of bourgeois society were not in danger.

Indeed the political climate changed after several generations. With the arrival of the Saljŭqides, urban nobles were shunted aside in favor of a military caste of Turkish origin. From then on it was this caste that appeared as sponsor, particularly in the person of a minister nursing large ambitions, Niẓām al-Mulk (assassinated in 485/1092). Despite this change, the *madāris* became neither governmental nor public. As I have already stressed, the law did not allow it. The government was not conceived of as a legal entity; only the sultan or his vizier were recognised. The major institutions that were then being founded in Baghdad, in Nēšāpūr and in other places in the Saljūqide empire thus remained private foundations. But they no longer served the interests of a single family; Niẓām al-Mulk and his sons were not professors of jurisprudence but administrators and civil servants. They did

[2] That is, according to the Hanafite school. Malikite law, applied in Morocco, did not allow a benefactor to benefit himself. For this reason the *madāris* appeared rather late in Fez and were usually founded by a king.

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not create positions for themselves but used the *waqf* to pay a salary to those scholars they wished to assist. The *madrasa* became an instrument of power; it ensured the preservation of orthodoxy while at the same time serving as barrier to a certain legal tradition.

Moreover, the simple fact of its expansion changed its nature. The number of positions increased; there were now several professors at the site who could form a hierarchy and set up competition. The founder of the *waqf* could appoint them or dismiss them at his pleasure, and he had the possibility of attracting them with money. Certainly professors were now civil servants, but compared to the merchants of earlier times, they had lost much of their independence. On the other hand they could play the role of *prima donna*; they could occupy two positions or more at the same time and receive the corresponding salaries; and they could also assign them to a teaching assistant (*nā'ib*), naturally after retaining a part of the salary for themselves. They also had assistants who were responsible for the elementary courses and "tutors" (*mu'īd*) who gave tutorials or remedial courses for slower students. Students could live free of charge in the *madrasa* and received a stipend (generally quite modest); however, it was not long before they were accused of being parasites. The fact that the *waqf* took care of everything brought about inevitable changes in the way of life of everyone concerned, both professors and students.

And this also changed the style of teaching. The prophetic tradition had been codified in the meantime; the period of assembling was finished. Professors and students no longer travelled; professors remained at the place where they were paid their salary, students where they found housing and—with the help of God—a stipend. The time of the visiting professors had past. On the other hand, in the second half of the Fifth century of the Hegira, the practice of an inaugural lecture can be found. Permission to teach was no longer provided simply for a single book but for the entire discipline; it now corresponded to the *licentia ubique docendi* in the West. But this fundamental change occurred only in jurisprudence; the new diploma was, at it was said, an *ijāza lit-tadrīs wal-iftā'*, which means a permission to teach and offer legal advice (*fatwās*). Instead of accumulating knowledge

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it now was necessary to make a methodic selection. Jurisprudence, as everywhere and always, was a hermeneutical science. Experts had to weigh up the value of divergent opinions choosing from a variety of material. In order to be able to defend the chosen solution, they were obliged to learn a large number of *quaestiones disputatae* which they could then use to their advantage in debates. These debates or *munāẓarāt* (*disputationes* in Latin) now made up the heart of the system. They took the form of tournaments, and apparently they often replaced an examination.

There are a great many details in all of this that recall the Middle Ages in the West. Islam everywhere seemed to have preceded Europe by several generations. But there was also one boundary that Muslim civilisation never crossed. Even though a *madrasa* might house a large number of professors, it never had a faculty just as it never benefitted from a franchise granted by the city or by the king. It remained simply a place where professors and students could live together, nothing more. Sometimes several legal schools might be housed in the same building, and occasionally, in Cairo for instance, students were separated according to their "nationality". But there never was any kind of legally independent institutions. Nor was the *madrasa* any more a university than the mosque had been; it functioned more like an English college. The informal and "personalist" structure had its disadvantages; the diploma remained a private certificate provided by one of the professors. The Muslim world never developed anything comparable to the doctorate as it was conceived in the Western educational structure. The personal *ijāza* even survived; it can be found (although rarely) in modern publications.[3] And naturally there was never a Ministry of Education before the arrival of European administration. But this same absence of formalism offered an opportunity to preserve a freedom of education (in the sense of *Lehrfreiheit* and *Lernfreiheit*) that, at that time, was not self-evident. Doctrinal authority was not exercised from the outside, by a bishop or pope for example; there was no Church in Islam. Authority belonged to the professors themselves, individually. Within the limits created by tradition and by the Koran, they could

[3] For example, in a work published in Qom in 1979 (Hussain b. Sa'īd al-Kūfī al Ahwāzī, *K. az-Zuhd*, Irfāniyān, ed. P.C., page b of colour pages).

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express personal opinions without running the risk of heresy. Control was exercised by the community of scholars; the Iranian system for the Ayatollahs has retained certain traits of this even today. In jurisprudence truth was defined *a posteriori*, by unanimous agreement, the consensus of the *'ulamā'* and not *a priori* by a dogma derived from a profession of faith. At the beginning of Islam it was possible to say that anyone rendering a judgment, and who was qualified to do so, was considered to be right. Later, for the period we are discussing, we can no longer make such a broad statement; but the conviction remained that God rewarded even one who might be misguided because he had taken the trouble to reflect.

The priority given to jurisprudence was not without provoking negative effects. The manner of thinking became dialectical, sometimes formalist. Argumentation was dominated by a quest for the perfect definition, a veritable obsession that led scholars to become lost in ever more subtle distinctions. Whatever was gained in precision was lost in creativity. The literary sciences declined, and there was no Renaissance to revive them. Certainly the Arabs, like western humanists, had a classical Antiquity they wanted to imitate, but it was a purely Arab one (pre-Islamic poetry), and they were totally uninterested in teaching foreign languages and literature. Only colonialism would force them to learn a language other than their own, and they went no further than learning English or French. Even today Chinese and Russian literature have not found a place in Arab universities; and even Persian or Turkish studies, that still are part of the Islamic microcosm, have hardly more success, without mentioning Urdu or Indonesian.

The only defect perceived in the system at that time was of a different nature. There was an awareness that legal teaching was not concerned with moving the heart. This criticism came from mystics, and it was aimed at the content of knowledge as much as the manner in which it was transmitted. Wisdom could not be reduced simply to defense capabilities and strategies, and it was necessary to avoid an elitist arrogance based on a simple accumulation of knowledge. What the disciple had to learn above all, was humility before God, virtue, rather than how to manage the affairs of this world. The teacher, however, was more than

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just a scholar; his role was that of a psychagogue. His authority came directly from God; what he knew he had learned from inspiration and from inner experience rather than from the intellect and reading books. In every country and every period, teaching consisted in imitation. But imitating here meant obeying without asking any questions. Through self-annihilation the disciple was to achieve a transformation of his personality. In a civilisation based on religion, the power of persuasion of such an ideal could not fail to have an influence on minds, and the *madrasa* found itself threatened by the creation of monasteries by the mystic orders. In Cairo for example, al-Azhar lost a great deal of its influence during the Ottoman era. From that time on there were two systems of religious instruction, a legal one and a mystical one, both of them private and with the mystical system deriving in a certain manner from oral method and from the strictly individual contact of the first centuries of Islam. Fundamentally the two systems were not irreconcilable, and in fact they were combined, at least on an individual level. At the social level, combination of the two ideals did not offer only advantages. For purely practical reasons, in order to survive politically, it was finally necessary to introduce a part of European education, such as science and medicine. The time of synthesis had past, and a painful process of acculturation began, one that has not yet ended. But that is another story.

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