11 The Place of Sociology

One theme that has run through this study has been the undermining of traditional disciplinary barriers by structuralist and post-structuralist modes of thought. We have seen how philosophy, literary criticism, linguistics, history, and psychoanalysis mingle in the key texts of the period, to produce what Richard Rorty has described as the ‘new genre’ of theory.1 Almost entirely absent hitherto, however, has been the field of sociology – a surprising omission considering that in Britain (at least until theory made its major impact on literary and media studies, in the mid-1970s) it was probably the most important area of left-wing intellectual activity. Why has its influence in France, until recently at any rate, been so much less?

One reason is the dominance of the concours system (agrégation and CAPES) within French universities. The subjects that figure in the agrégation tend to be those taught in secondary schools – literature (classical and modern), foreign languages, philosophy – since the rationale of the competitive system is after all to fill vacancies as they arise. Possession of the CAPES or agrégation is the best guarantee of material security for a French academic, which means that to pursue a career in a non-concours area involves either considerable financial risk or an often complex process of self-recycling. Thus, many lecturers in non-concours areas such as psychology or sociology began their career by taking the philosophy agrégation, and only then moved into another discipline.

This in turn has tended to mean that the restructuring of French academic life since 1968 has taken the form of a redistribution between and within already existing subject-areas, rather than of the multiplication of new ones. Pierre Bourdieu in Homo Academicus illustrates the wider political implications of this through the ‘demotion’ of philology after 1968 and the corresponding ‘promotion’ of linguistics.2 The already-mentioned attempt under Giscard to reduce the amount of philosophy taught in schools likewise shows how academic subject-areas could become the focus of political conflict. Such a climate was obviously not favourable to the promotion of sociology or psycho-

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analysis. There is a further reason for the comparative eclipse of sociology in the first part of our period, which has to do with the totalising claims made by (or on behalf of) Theory. Their thrust was inevitably antiempirical, for the construction of conceptual models (and, later, their deconstruction) was of prime importance. Obviously such models had referents out in the ‘real world’ of human social, economic, and psychic life, but the stress on the non-transparency of language, and the necessarily contradictory and opaque relationship between signifier and signified, or one signifier and another, tended to marginalise the importance of such referents. This is what lies at the root of, for example, E. P. Thompson’s savage criticism of Althusser, grounded as it is in an intellectual tradition for which pragmatic inquiry is of the essence. When Theory, in the work of Derrida and others, began to turn back upon itself, one at first sight unexpected consequence was the re-emergence and re-instatement of pragmatism. This is because deconstruction, to quote Jonathan Culler, ‘offers a similar critique of the philosophical tradition and emphasises the institutional and conventional constraints on discursive inquiry’; it is thus no longer possible to speak of the Theoretical text as the key to scientific knowledge, for such a text can only exist in (a number of different) context(s), and cannot by hypostatised as the bearer of truth.

Between the deconstructive work of Derrida and the exhaustive empirical inquiries mounted by Bourdieu, there seems at first to be very little in common; but both currents in different ways arose out of the disillusionment with Theory already discussed, and both in different ways re-inscribe pragmatism into their practice. The two other important sociologists we shall look at here, Alain Touraine and Jean Baudrillard, appear to have very little in common either with Bourdieu or with each other, and one may begin to wonder what the disciplinary coherence of French sociology is, if indeed it exists. One answer to this is simply that such a coherence is nowadays as illusory as that of philosophy, literary criticism, or any of the other old disciplinary bottles into which the new, post-1968 wine was poured. Another is that Touraine’s preoccupation with the ‘new social movements’ (like that of André Gorz, who provides a valuable point of comparison), Bourdieu’s stress on the primacy of the body and the need for empirical inquiry into cultural practices, and Baudrillard’s post-Nietzschean, post-Deleuzian nihilism are all part of the general disillusionment with Theory. It is not difficult to see how the claims made on behalf of Theory, as what Lyotard would call the ultimate legitimising narrative, necessarily tended to reinforce an attitude of aristocratic condescension towards more pragmatic domains