Neither French sociology as a field, nor the sociological profession as it is practiced in France, have been systematically studied as sociological objects. Although other disciplines such as philosophy and economics have been the focus of numerous analyses (for instance those developed on economists by Frédéric Lebaron and Marion Fourcade), there is no overall examination of our own discipline as a national field.

However, we have several monographs or biographies on sociologists considered among the most creative, intellectually speaking, and/or important organizational figures: for example, Georges Friedmann and Georges Gurvitch who, although largely unknown by non-francophone readers today, played key roles in establishing sociology within French academia in the post-war era, drawing links between the students of Émile Durkheim (Marcel Mauss, Maurice Halbwachs) and the cohorts that followed. Moreover, there are also many autobiographical pieces, ego-histories or auto-analyses by some of the most influential French sociologists of the last half-century: Raymond Aron, Georges Balandier, Luc Boltanski, Pierre Bourdieu, Michel Crozier, François Dubet, Henri Lefebvre, Henri Mendras, Edgar Morin, Pierre Naville, Gérard Noiriel and Dominique Schnapper, among others. Together with less formal statements and reflections by other colleagues, the official histories of certain departments and research centers, and our direct observations, these references allow us to sketch in broad strokes the general evolution of French Sociology over the past few decades.

The first main transformation is the progressive weakening of the oppositions between schools of thought, and their replacement by a more thematic organization of scholars. While schools of thought were organized around a strong theoretical paradigm, a leading scholar and a research center, almost always in Paris, thematic organization favors collaborations between specialists
of a given topic. Today, for instance, there is no equivalent to the once dominant quadrumvirate Bourdieu-Touraine-Crozier-Boudon, which structured much of the French sociological field from the mid-1970s until the second half of the 1990s (i.e. during the period following the academic decline of historical materialism and the success of structuralism). Of course scientific controversies and rivalries between the respective heirs of these traditions have not completely disappeared, and other – new – theoretical formulations emerged with strong national and international acceptance. However, nowadays, instead of grand theoretical dispute, we mainly see a reorganization of scientific debates around grand themes: urban sociology, economic sociology, political sociology, sociology of education, sociology of migration, etc.

This trend towards specialization is driven, in part, by a large increase in the number of researchers and teacher-researchers over the last decades of the 20th century, a trend which pushes individual researchers to seek differentiation through more precise research objects, and foster the creation or the reinforcement of thematic subfields, each of them having now enough members to secure a certain autonomy. In addition, easier access to scientific literature from all over the world brought an international scientific opening, but the borders between subfields have also been reinforced by the growing opportunity costs of mastering and establishing a dialogue with international references, i.e. the Anglophone literatures, which is now required to publish in the main French journals, as well as, of course, in English.

Over the last fifteen years, some of the most prestigious research universities in the social sciences – including Sciences Po and the EHESS (The School of Advanced Studies in Social Sciences) – sought international attention and impact, thus indirectly exacerbating this trend towards fragmentation; similarly, the organization of the French Sociological Association (established in 2002) in thematic sections directly reinforced the trend. Moreover, thematic specializations are largely compatible with the widespread interest in French academia for interdisciplinarity within the social sciences and humanities, in line with the lasting project of the École des Annales to unify them. Finally, this evolution is also encouraged by the various institutions seeking sectoral expertise.

Indeed, since the beginning of the 21st century, the three roles usually adopted by French sociologists – scholar devoted to research, advisor to decision-makers, and/or critical intellectual – went through several changes. The first role was supposed to be reinforced by recent reforms to render French research more internationally “competitive.” However, a shortage of research and teacher-researcher positions (see text by Musselin in this issue of Global Dialogue), the generalization of the funding of research through competitive calls for proposals, and the expansion of a bureaucratic apparatus of managerial evaluation, on top of the numerous instances of peer review (see text by Lebaron in this issue of Global Dialogue), reduced the individual and collective autonomy of sociologists, as well as of scholars in other disciplines.

At the same time, the role of French sociologists as advisors has not increased. Although many participate in national and local consulting commissions, in think tanks, or in operations of intellectual communication or aiming to structure public debates, sociologists have little impact on the actual development of public policies. Their expertise is often treated as a (limited) complement to the analyses developed internally by high-placed technocrats in government
(while the main school in charge of training these public officials, the École Nationale d'Administration, gives scarce attention to sociology); and economics is also regarded as a much more legitimate and effective science of government. Nevertheless, in some instances, both the public sector, when confronted with “social questions,” and the private sector, when concerned with managing human resources, consider sociological insights necessary (see text by Neyrat in this issue of Global Dialogue).

Finally, the critical dimensions of French sociology – its ability to denounce inequality, and the mechanisms of exploitation, domination, discrimination and social reproduction, as well as its capacity to endow social movements with conceptual tools and alternatives to the current social order – have also changed in recent years. Since Pierre Bourdieu’s death in 2002, no social scientist in France has attained comparable recognition as a critical intellectual. But the trend towards specialization has favored the multiplication of engaged sociologists and collectives as “specific intellectuals” (in the sense used by Michel Foucault), and their analyses and political positions are often displayed on the opinion pages of the main national newspapers, in critical journals read inside and outside academia, and in small essay collections. Moreover, in France, as elsewhere, an increasing trend toward reflexivity encourages reflection on the difficulties of producing critical thought and critical sociology; sometimes with an impact on the regulation of the sociological profession, as was the case when the national association refused to adopt a code of conduct (see text by Pudal in this issue of Global Dialogue).

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