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Classification in French Social Theory.

In attempting to represent ‘le modèle politique français’ recently, Pierre Rosanvallon has argued that the exceptionalism of the French political tradition lies in the continuous oscillation between ‘jacobin’ state-centredness and civil society, between ‘political’ and ‘civil’ democracies (Rosanvallon, 2004). Similarly, the French intellectual tradition in the modern period can be characterised as a continuous oscillation between the rationalist a prioriism of the Cartesian tradition and the biological experientialism of Rousseauism. This epistemological oscillation is apparent in competing attitudes towards encyclopaedic classification.

The legacy of Cartesian dualism – the separation of the mind from the extended material universe – made possible the accumulation of objective knowledge by the Encyclopédistes. Diderot’s entry on ‘Encyclopédie’ in Volume V of the *Encyclopédie [Encyclopedia]*, 1755, defined the goal of the venture as being to ‘rassembler les connaissances éparses sur la surface de la terre, d’en exposer le système général aux hommes avec qui nous vivons ...’ (to gather together the knowledge which is scattered over the earth and to display its general system to the men with whom we live). Diderot was not proposing a (Linnaean) classification of objective (botanical) phenomena, nor, like his fellow Encyclopédiste Rousseau, author of *Emile*, was he emphasizing the subjective frame of reference of knowledge construction. Rather Diderot sought to order dispersed knowledge, as a contemporary antiquarian, without claiming either to organise things-in-themselves or to say anything about the principles of organisation with which people operate.

The indigenous French philosophical tradition did not itself generate a Kantian resolution of the relationship between a priori and empirical knowledge. It was Comte – with little interest in epistemological questions - who sustained the endeavour of the Encyclopédistes, commencing, in 1829, the series of 60 lectures which were to be published as the *Cours de Philosophie Positive [Course of Positive Philosophy]* between 1830 and 1842. After offering general preliminary remarks and then giving lectures on Mathematics, Comte provided an account of knowledge based upon a differentiation between the ‘sciences des corps bruts’ (of raw bodies) – Astronomy, Physics and Chemistry – and the ‘sciences des corps organisés’ (organized bodies) – Physiology and Social Physics or Sociology. The principle of organisation of Comte’s classification of knowledge remained objective but it had become historical rather than a-temporal. In past historical periods, humans had had recourse, first of all, to an explanatory frame of thinking that was theological and, next, to one which was metaphysical, and it was only in the present that a comparable frame, based on positive scientific observation, was now in the process of establishing itself. In expounding this ‘law’ of the three states of development of human thinking (to which corresponded systems of social organisation), Comte claimed that it showed that *at every epoch*, some theory is necessary to link observed facts and also that at the *origins of human mental development* it was impossible for theories to be generated simply from observation. At its birth, Comte claimed, the human spirit was saved by theology from the impasse which was the consequence of the need for theory to observe facts and the impossibility of generating theories from facts.

Rousseau’s affectivity had performed a compensatory function to relieve the austerity of the contractual relationship between individual and general wills for citizens in the post-

Revolutionary political state. Born in the revolutionary period of Catholic parents, Comte tried to establish a new social and intellectual order based upon a-theological and non-metaphysical observation. The classification of knowledge required a principle of order. Increasingly, the evolutionism which had enabled Comte to periodise intellectual history and classify developed human knowledge came to provide possible access to universal principles of order underlying the classificatory practices of all historical periods. Lévy-Bruhl was born in the year in which Comte died (1857) and Durkheim was born one year later. Both were influenced by German philosophy as well as by the work of Comte. Durkheim showed no interest in Comte's late attempt to counter social disorder by recommending a 'Système de Politique Positive', involving the establishment of a religion of humanity. Instead, in *De la division du travail social* [*The division of Labour in Society*] (1893) and *Le Suicide* [*Suicide*] (1897), Durkheim identified the need for a new principle of social order – based on 'organic' rather than 'mechanical' solidarity – which was in tune with the bourgeois socialism of the leaders of the Third Republic. This went alongside an attempt to question the 'mechanical' systems of intellectual classification. By reference to ethnographic records of Australian aborigines, Durkheim and Mauss analysed some primitive forms of classification in *De Quelques Formes Primitives de Classification* [*On some primitive forms of classification*] (1903) and Durkheim published *Les Formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse* [*Elementary forms of religious life*] in 1912 in which he made clear in his Introduction that he was attempting to make a contribution to neo-Kantian epistemology. The analysis of primitive classification was an attempt to challenge the dominant assumptions of logicians and psychologists, but, in spite of its superficial interest, instead, in the social constitution of classification, it remained attached to the agenda of Enlightenment transcendental idealism. Lévy-Bruhl was different. From the publication of *Les fonctions mentales dans les sociétés inférieures* [*Mental functions in inferior societies*] (1910) until his death in 1939, Lévy-Bruhl sought to show that 'primitive mentality' involved participatory knowledge acquisition rather than detached, objective classification.

Levinas (Levinas, 1957) contended that even Lévy-Bruhl remained enclosed within the epistemological straitjacket of the Western European intellectual tradition. The reception in France in the period after the 1930s of currents of German thinking – the work of Hegel, Marx, Husserl, Nietzsche, and Heidegger – has tipped the philosophical balance away from objectivist classification. If the binary oppositions of Lévi-Straussian structuralism suggest a mid-century resurgence of classificatory systems, then the postmodern rejection of meta-narratives necessarily entails the enactment of dialogic difference rather than classificatory consensus. Here the work of Lyotard was crucial in the 1970s in *Discours, Figure* [*The discursive and the figurative*] (Lyotard, 1971) and *Dérive à partir de Marx et Freud* [*Derivations based on Marx and Freud*] (Lyotard, 1973) and culminating in *La condition postmoderne* [*The Postmodern condition*] (Lyotard, 1979, trans. 1984), in harnessing his knowledge of the phenomenological tradition as evidenced in his *La Phénoménologie* [*Phenomenology*] (Lyotard, 1954, trans. 1991) to question the dominance of consciousness in the work of Husserl and to question generally the supremacy of objectivist explanatory discourses. This linked with the developing work of Deleuze and Foucault and helped to resuscitate the significance of the work of Bergson so much so that Habermas felt the need to draw differently upon the German intellectual tradition to counter-act, in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (Habermas, 1985, trans. 1987), the anti-rationalist tendencies of contemporary French social thought. In the middle, spanning both camps, is the reflexivity of Bourdieu which seeks to preserve primitive classification by subjecting superimposed objectivist classifications to a form of sociological reduction, deploying sociological discourse as phenomenological practice more than realist explanation – thereby integrating or accommodating the opposed cognitive and affective orientations which have always co-existed in the French tradition from the beginnings of the Western European scientific revolution.

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