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Nathalie HEINICH

WHAT DOES « SOCIOLOGY OF CULTURE » MEAN ?
NOTE ON A FEW TRANSCULTURAL MISUNDERSTANDINGS

Last year, I decided to change the presentation of my English CV, turning “*sociologie de la culture*” into “*sociologie de l’art*”. The reason is that, obviously, the first term is misleading for some anglo-american scholars, who seem to give it another meaning.

These differences between the French and the anglo-american academic world are what I would like to address in this short note, according to what we use to call “sociology of art” or (but this “or” is already a problem, as we shall see) “sociology of culture”.

Sociology of art(s) or sociology of culture?

When I have to decline my speciality as a researcher, I use to say: “I study sociology of art” (*sociologie de l’art*), or “sociology of arts” (*sociologie des arts*): the plural is more and more used in our French world, in order to assert a more democratic interest for the whole spectrum of artistic activities, not only for the traditionally more “legitimate” ones (visual arts, literature, music)¹.

I may also say “I study sociology of culture”, which means a more extended spectrum of objects, including mostly what we call “cultural practices”: museums, concerts, opera, ballets attendance, reading books, and also watching TV or reading comics, if not (but this still remains very controversial) leisure activities such as watching football or having picnics². Though slightly different according to their extension, “*Sociologie de l’art*” and “*sociologie de la culture*” are both studied in the sociology departments of our universities.

As far as I understand the rather mysterious world of my colleagues working in the UK or in the US, they may also use the terms “sociology of art” or “sociology of culture” in quite a similar way as we do in France; and the discipline is also grounded in the sociology departments of their universities. But behind this apparent similarity, a first problem arises.

Sociology of art or aesthetic sociology and/or cultural history?

The problem is that a big deal of what they mean by “sociology of art” refers to what we would rather call “cultural history” (“*histoire culturelle*”), “aesthetic sociology” (“*esthétique sociologique*”) or “social history of art”. All three focus on art works, and belong to humanities: they do not actually need the concepts of sociological discipline (e.g. “social stratification”, “professionalisation”, “interaction”, “frame”, “anomy”, “rationalisation”, “civilisation process”, “configuration”, “field”...), nor its methods (e.g. statistical surveys, representative samples, in-depth interviews, observations, corpus analysis, typologies...)³. Cultural history is a global description of the collective set of representations governing the relationship to art in a certain society (e.g. Burckhardt, Panofsky); aesthetic sociology is a more or less theoretical reflection on the way “art” reflects “society” (e.g. Adorno, Hauser, Francastel); social history of art is a more empirical inquiry into the actual contexts in which art works are produced and appreciated (e.g. Antal, Baxandall, Haskell).

¹ The first noticeable occurrence of this use could be found in the title of the international conference organized in Marseilles : cf. Raymonde Moulin (éd.), *Sociologie des Arts*, Paris, La Documentation Française, 1986.

² For a discussion and commented results of the surveys on « cultural practices », cf. Olivier Donnat, *Les Français face à la culture. De l'exclusion à l'éclectisme*, Paris, La Découverte, 1994.

³ I tried to define and present the traditions of “cultural history”, “aesthetic sociology”, “social history” and “survey sociology” in N. Heinich, *La Sociologie de l’art*, Paris, La Découverte, collection Repères, 2002.

In our present French academic world, the term “sociology of art” would rather bring out other expectations: that is, empirical surveys on art reception (cultural practices, categories of aesthetic perception and taste, modes of valuation, private collecting...), on art production (economic, social and juridical status of creators, artists’ careers and curricula, role of age, gender, training, social origins etc. in the relationship to creation, collective representations of creators and creation...), or on art mediation (circles of recognition, role of gate-keepers such as publishers, gallery-owners or curators, critics, agents...). These three directions have been dramatically developed in the last generation of French researchers, in the path opened up by Pierre Bourdieu⁴ and, after him, Raymonde Moulin⁵.

Sociology of culture or cultural sociology and/or cultural studies?

Although “*sociologie de l’art*” and “*sociologie de la culture*” differ but slightly in our French sociological world, I use to avoid the latter term in front of anglo-american colleagues, because I happened to realise that, when using the word “culture”, one risks to be understood as a specialist either of “cultural sociology” or, more likely, of “cultural studies”. Both are misleading – the latter much more than the former.

As I understood through the interesting presentation offered by Janet Wolff in Inglis and Hughson’s *The Sociology of Art*⁶, the anglo-american “cultural sociology” is mostly taught in the departments of sociology and anthropology ; it has to do with education, law, habits etc. – that is, the anglo-american meaning of “culture”, which is not spontaneously associated to “arts” as it is in France. This does not mean that such issues are not present in our academic courses; but they rather appear as “*histoire culturelle*”, at the crossroads of history, sociology and anthropology. It has been a leading trend in the last generation of French historians since the famous “École des Annales”, owing to such authors as Alain Corbin, Antoine De Baecque, Arlette Farge, Pascal Ory, Jean-Pierre Rioux, Daniel Roche, Jean-François Sirinelli... But it is clearly grounded in history departments.

Actually, the higher risk would not to misunderstand “sociology of culture” as “cultural sociology” in present time anglo-american world: it would be to understand it as “cultural studies”, given the dramatic increase of influence that such a trend obtained in the last generation. But, believe it or not: “cultural studies” does not exist in France - at least, not yet (“Thanks god!”, I would add).

Three anecdotes

Here is an anecdote. Last time I was in the US (too long ago: about ten years), as well as last time I was in England (two weeks ago) I visited a few bookstores, as we all usually do abroad. There I desperately searched the shelves “sociology”. As I could not find it, I asked the salesmen. “You mean cultural studies?”, they said.

⁴ See P. Bourdieu (éd.), *Un art moyen. Essai sur les usages sociaux de la photographie*, Paris, Minuit, 1965 ; P. Bourdieu, Alain Darbel, *L’amour de l’art. Les musées d’art européens et leur public*, Paris, Minuit, 1966, 1969 ; P. Bourdieu, « Eléments d’une théorie sociologique de la perception artistique », *Revue internationale des sciences sociales*, XX, 4, 1968 ; P. Bourdieu, « Disposition esthétique et compétence artistique », *Les Temps modernes*, n° 295, 1971 ; P. Bourdieu, *Le Marché des biens symboliques*, *L’Année sociologique*, vol. 22, 1973 ; P. Bourdieu, « Les fractions de la classe dominante et les modes d’appropriation de l’oeuvre d’art », *Information sur les sciences sociales*, 13 (3), 1974 ; P. Bourdieu, « L’invention de la vie d’artiste », *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, 2, mars 1975 ; P. Bourdieu, *La Distinction. Critique sociale du jugement*, Paris, Minuit, 1979 ; P. Bourdieu, *Les Règles de l’art. Genèse et structure du champ littéraire*, Paris, Seuil, 1992.

⁵ See R. Moulin, *Le Marché de la peinture en France*, Paris, Minuit, 1967 ; R. Moulin (éd.), *Les Artistes. Essai de morphologie sociale*, Paris, La Documentation française, 1965 ; R. Moulin, *L’Artiste, l’institution et le marché*, Paris, Flammarion, 1992.

⁶ J. Wolff, “Cultural Studies and the Sociology of Culture”, in D. Inglis, J. Hughson (eds), *The Sociology of Art. Ways of Seeing*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.

Here is another anecdote. A few months ago, I attended a conference organised by the sociology department in a French regional university. When driving me back to the station at the end of the day, the organiser told me that two new members of the department had proposed a teaching course entitled “*études culturelles*”. It had been accepted without problem, since everybody in the department thought it would consist in the study of “cultural practices” (see above). They eventually realized (too late!) that “*études culturelles*” was the translation of “cultural studies” (gender studies, queer studies, post-colonial studies etc). They are now trying to dyke the wave...

Here is a third anecdote. In 1999, when the Boekman Foundation in Amsterdam offered me its three years chair of sociology of art at the university, the staff wanted to know my teaching program. After hearing my presentation, they gently asked: “And don’t you plan to teach French theory?” As politely – I hope – as I could, I immediately answered: “But I teach sociology, not philosophy!” And it was OK. But who was the most astonished: me, by their question; or them, by my astonishment at their question?

“French theory” as an American export commodity

As far as I know, in American campuses, “cultural studies” rather belong to the literature departments, together with what we, French people, call “philosophy” (but we use to restrict it to recent continental philosophy - Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze etc. –, merely including analytical philosophy). Our own literature departments teach history of literature, and sometimes (marginally) “*sociologie de la littérature*”, which is mostly an application of Bourdieu’s field theory.

The items covered by the term “cultural studies” seem to be finding a place in French campuses, but dispatched under a variety of issues, in sociology, anthropology, history, political science, philosophy, literature. They are closely akin to what some of us call Bourdieu’s “critical sociology” (“*sociologie critique*”), since they share the same will to demonstrate that everything is “socially constructed”, and that the sociologist’s task is mainly to dismiss the actors’ “illusions”, their belief that the world as it goes is natural, universal and unchangeable. However it is difficult to assimilate “*sociologie critique*” and “cultural studies”: not only because Bourdieu’s fans use none of these two terms, but also because Bourdieu himself never considered himself a “cultural studies” or a “postmodern” scholar (he even strongly refused such a categorization) - no more than a philosopher, as he was very eager to demonstrate the superiority of sociology onto philosophy⁷.

(By the way: “post-modernism” used to be a fashionable trend in french philosophy one generation ago, after Lyotard ; today, it seems quite outdated. If it may still be used in art theory, it is almost absent in the human and social sciences. When one hears “post-modernism” in France, one immediately thinks: “American”, as for “MacDo” and “Coca-cola”)

French scholars are always astonished when hearing that Bourdieu is included in the so-called “French theory”. First, such a thing as “French theory” does not exist in France : we know the structuralist trend of the 1960’s, with the anthropologist Lévi-Strauss, the psychoanalyst Lacan, the philosopher Foucault ; we know Derrida’s “deconstruction” and Deleuze’s philosophy ; we know Bourdieu’s “*sociologie de la domination*” or “*sociologie des champs*” – but nothing like “French theory”, in spite of some recent efforts to import it from the US⁸.

Second, the authors included in this category are either dead or very old (Lévi-Strauss is quietly going on his 100 years): their major works appeared in the 1960’s, that is, more than

⁷ See N. Heinich, *Pourquoi Bourdieu*, Paris, Gallimard, 2007.

⁸ See François Cusset, *French Theory. Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze & Cie et les mutations de la vie intellectuelle aux Etats-Unis*, Paris, La Découverte, 2003.

forty years ago. For the presently working researchers, this is the past: so many new things and innovative authors appeared in our disciplines since the last thirty years! Should we ignore these new and exciting roads, in order to confine ourselves to authors that we used to read so long ago, when we were students? No: our debates are not there anymore.

Anglo-american vs French debates

Let me ask a last question: what are our present debates in both “cultures”, concerning the sociology of art(s) and/or culture?

Seen from France, the main debate on the anglo-american scene appears to be that between post-modernism and positivist science (it was dramatically illustrated by the so called “Sokal case” – “*affaire Sokal*” in French). It partly pertains to the opposition between “theory” on one side, and empirical or fact-finding surveys on the other.

In France, the latter issue is rather addressed as an opposition between “humanities” and “social sciences”; in sociology, between qualitative and quantitative methods, and even sometimes between comprehensive and explicative sociology (very roughly said).

Another quite vivid opposition among French sociologists is that between those who practice and foster a politically involved social science (after Bourdieu), and those who plead in favour of Max Weber’s “axiological neutrality”, that is, the avoidance of any normative assessment, in order to limit the scientific discourse to a strictly descriptive and analytical level⁹. The issue is all the more relevant that the model of the “*intellectuel engagé*” (the politically committed scholar) is very strong in our modern academic culture. Useless to say, “cultural studies” and “postmodernism” are, in the eyes of their opponents, but one of the most common ways to foster value-laden discourse, to confuse research with ideology, and to load social sciences with political or “critical” issues by repeatedly aiming at “deconstructing” and thus dismissing traditional hierarchies and categories (but only on campuses, which might somehow limit the efficiency of the program). This is why I disagree with Janet Wolff when she calls for “a growing dialogue between sociology and cultural studies”¹⁰: as a fervent supporter of the “scientific”, “neutral”, unpolitical, empirically grounded (as well as qualitative and comprehensive) conception of sociological research, I do hope that “cultural studies”, “post-modernism” and “French theory” will mostly remain an anglo-american speciality.

Our French sociology of art also includes two other still ongoing and rather acute debates. The first one has something to do with the said opposition between humanities and the social sciences: it opposes, on one side, the sociology of art works (mostly consisting in learned commentaries) and, on the other, the sociology of artistic producers, consumers, mediators (based on empirical surveys, be it through quantitative or qualitative methods)¹¹. For the supporters of the former conception, the supreme goal of sociology should be to enlighten the social stakes of art works, whatever they are: a position which, in the eyes of their opponents (to which I belong), is but an old, pre-sociological way of thinking, which desperately tries to re-assemble “art” and “sociology” after having treated them as if they were two different entities, reproduces the academic privilege traditionally granted to art works, claims the hegemony of sociology over art history, and remains entangled in unending debates on whether one should focus on their “internal” or “external” determinants. In my eyes, the methodological and conceptual resources of sociology as a scientific discipline are much more appropriate to the study of activities, representations and values related to arts

⁹See N. Heinich, *Ce que l’art fait à la sociologie*, Paris, Minuit, 1998.

¹⁰J. Wolff, “Cultural Studies and the Sociology of Culture”, *art. cit.* p. 96.

¹¹The debate appeared in R. Moulin (éd.), *Sociologie des Arts*, *op. cit.*, and was re-opened in the special issue of the journal *Sociologie de l’art*, “Sociologie des oeuvres”, n° 10, 1997.

than to the works themselves, for which art historians and cultural historians provide quite interesting insights. The discussion is still on...

Our last debate in the sociology of art pertains to the opposition between “legitimate culture” and “popular culture”: should the sociologist focus on “major” arts, because they are considered as such by the actors, and thus more important in our societies? Or should he/she try to dismiss this hierarchy by privileging “minor” arts in his/her research agenda? Although Bourdieu himself seems to have been somewhat ambivalent, he was strongly accused to foster the first option by some of his previous collaborators, who referred to the “Birmingham school” (in particular to Richard Hoggarth’s *Uses of Literacy*) in order to sustain their critics¹². There also, the debate is not closed yet.

Translation problems: the handicap of dominants

As for the present state of the sociology of art, there appears to be a certain dissymmetry between our two cultures: we, French people, seem to know a little more about you, anglo-american scholars, than you know about us (even if we may mistake or misunderstand a lot of things, as some readers of the present article might have probably deplored...). How could it be different, since we are forced to read and write in English (as I am just trying to do now - please forgive me - so clumsily) whereas you can rely on your native English without having to practice our language?

But the problem is not so much a matter of dissymmetry than a matter of temporal discrepancy, due to the delay in translations. Lets us take a well-known example: nowadays, no anglo-american bibliography in our disciplines (be it sociology of art, sociology of culture, cultural sociology, cultural studies...) ignores the name of Pierre Bourdieu. But he is quoted and discussed as if he were a today author, embodying the avant-garde of French production, whereas his major contributions to the field occurred between thirty and forty years ago. Among all the publications coming out of the younger generation, be it his/her followers or his/her challengers, very few have been translated yet in English. By the way, Bourdieu himself was translated in English long after many other languages: except one small book at the beginning of the 1960’s, his major english translations started during the 1980’s and exploded in the 1990’s, that is, one generation after he began to publish; and most of his books and articles were translated in German, Spanish, Italian etc., long before English.

This last remark provides an interesting but somehow ironic contribution to the sociology of domination: to be a dominant may become a handicap in that it avoids the effort to go and see what happens among the dominated. Reshaped according to the temporal dimension, such a property may generate what is considered a major shortage in our intellectual world: that is, delay.

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¹² See Claude Grignon, Jean-Claude Passeron, *Le Savant et le populaire*, Paris, Gallimard-Le Seuil, 1989.