

Introduction

Cours camarade, le vieux monde est derrière toi!
(Run, comrade, the old world is behind you!)

Sorbonne 1968

The purpose of this sociological study is to examine the social and semiotic process whereby a unique form of theoretical and political radicalism (later labeled “French theory”) was forged in France or more precisely Paris in the second part of the 1960s. A cultural revolution provided the background for this radicalism. This cultural revolution undermined the old social conventions and social relationships of authority and power (Hobsbawn 1999: 334) and created new types of intellectual identities. This development was embedded in broader social and economic transformations that affected key social institutions such as the university (Bourdieu 1984, Kauppi 1996). All parts of French society were touched by these developments. Some major transformations took place in French culture with the *nouveau roman* in literature, the new wave of French cinema, and intellectual production with radical ideas that were later labeled “French theory.” In part, this radicalization was due to the rapprochement between leftist political and intellectual radicalism, the French Communist party and its networks and the intellectual movements later known as “structuralism” and “poststructuralism.” This radicalism was an integral part of the collective Weltanschauung and style of thought of a generation of students and young intellectuals who had a predisposition to rebel against authorities of every kind. The symbolic effervescence that followed the sociological reorganization of the producers and consumers of intellectual goods was, however, only seemingly chaotic. Just as the organization of symbolic revolution was surprisingly orderly, so was the dismantlement of radicalism at the end of the 1960s and the restoration of the symbolic order that went with it. Rebellion and integration were state sponsored activities, as many of the protagonists worked or would work in the French public university. A minority, like the leader of the irreverent Tel Quel¹ group Philippe Sollers, worked for private publishing houses. These cases demonstrate that the successful French iconoclastic intellectual of the 1960s was comfortably employed and could devote his whole time to the production of outrageous ideas. The prophetic moment was a window of opportunity that enabled, for a certain time, innocent students to become domineering radicals and political judges in one of the most creative intellectual moments of the twentieth century (Reader 1987, Jameson 1996).

1 In this work, I use italics to refer to the journal and plain type to refer to the intellectual group.

An invisible pattern draws together most studies dealing with French cultural radicalism in the 1960s. It is the genius of certain individuals that have been elevated to intellectual stardom that explains these theories (see for instance Coward and Ellis 1977, Ferry and Renaut 1985, Starr 1995, Sjöholm 2005). These studies tend to reduce intellectual creation to individual creation and to minimize the role of semiotic and social factors that influence intellectual innovation. For their part, sociological approaches often see a more or less external link between social location and intellectual production (Debray 1981, Lamont 1987, Bourdieu 1988, Kauppi 1994, Frickel and Gross 2005). Because of their structural approach, they are incapable of taking into account unique historical circumstances, personal impulses, and more importantly the logic of ideas as ingredients of innovative thinking. In this study, I will seek to avoid Carlyle's "Great Man Theory of History" and sociological institutionalism by focusing on radicalism through the prism of the social force of ideas.

Unfortunately, in the division of labor between disciplines, sociology has been assigned the analysis of the links between ideas and social and cultural contexts. This has meant that sociologists have not bothered with analysis of textual productions or ideas (exceptions include Bourdieu 1982, 1991b). For their part, specialists in literature or philosophy have concentrated on internal (interpretative) readings of texts and intellectual production. This way, a sociological, internal reading of texts that would examine ideas relationally inside out so to speak, has not developed. One of the aims of this study is to further an internal sociological analysis of ideas and styles of thought. I will argue that the defining but largely neglected feature of what has become "French theory" was a collective style of thought, an explosive but fragile mixture of scientific and political radicalism that promoted an alternative intellectual value hierarchy that rather quickly watered down to academic orthodoxy. For some time, some intellectuals succeeded in producing ideas that were perfectly in tune with the lifestyle requirements and self-conceptions of the consumers, mostly the young university audience (and aspect not enough emphasized by sociologists, see Lamont 1987). Ideas were used as part of a radical, exciting "rock 'n' roll" posture that was set in opposition to the establishment and "those in power." Faced with a system that was felt as being archaic, youth was eager to change everything. There was a social demand for heroic, iconoclastic revolutionaries to produce what students needed. Ideas could not be too empirical or verifiable, and they had to shock and be outrageous. Pretentious erudition and jargon was part of the game. It is not surprising that a slew of new sciences and concepts were invented to indicate this radical posture.

Instead of analyzing all the theories developed in France in the 1960s, I will concentrate on some avant-garde intellectual production of the moment, both well-known, successful theories and forgotten, or failed theories (see for analysis McLaughlin 1998). I will analyze the theories developed in the networks of the famous review *Tel Quel* and, as a contrastive case, the sociological theory of Pierre Bourdieu. I understand ideas in a very broad sense as thoughts or suggestions about a possible course of action, as mental impressions, as belief and as aims

and purposes. Although they are the result of logical reasoning, ideas do not just consist of concepts and theories as combinations of concepts. When infused with emotions and combined with other ideas to form a style of thought (Fleck 2008), ideas leave the purview of logical reasoning. Some of these “paper bullets of the brain” (Shakespeare) can then be transformed into power-ideas (Fouillée 1908, Belin 1939, Bakhtin 1970, Bourdieu 2001, Llobera 2003, Kauppi 2005) that attract other ideas, dominate them and through dissemination of this semiotic bundle displace the locus of struggles and, possibly, inverse the prevalent symbolic order (see Reader 1987). When ideas such as the Derridean “deconstruction” acquire this symbolic status, their social force will not depend on their veracity but rather on their capacity to inspire and mobilize individuals and groups to engage in certain intellectual postures and practices (Burke 1966, Searle 1969). Personified in their creators that become totemic emblems and eponymous heroes, power-ideas function as banners that rally the intellectual troops on the battlefield of symbolic production and consumption. On this battlefield, what is at stake is the success of ideas, and through them the content and limits of social and political imagination.

In this sociological analysis, power-ideas constitute intellectual metapreferences, ideas of a higher order that determine the value of ideas of a lower order (derivative ideas). In theory, these intellectual metapreferences can be challenged only with ideas of a similar order. They function as symbolic guarantors that work from a distance, as presuppositions of symbolic social action and as objects of belief more than reason. Embedded in modes of symbolic action and habits that are not just intellectual but also practical and even bodily, they are extremely difficult to overthrow. Power-ideas require from their inventors manners that contribute to the construction of a theoretical juggernaut. In fact, the accumulation of intellectual fame necessitates “internal” changes in the individuals concerned, growing self-assurance, ideas of universal scope and domineering manners (see for an illustration Kristeva’s description of Derrida, Kristeva 1992: 109). For these reasons, abandoning a power-idea involves more than just changing intellectual clothes. It requires from individuals a total conversion from one power-idea to another, from one set of social networks to another, from one set of intellectual habits to another, from a self-perception to another, a life-style conversion that resembles religious conversion (see Berger and Luckmann 1966). The intrinsic truth of an idea is a social phenomenon as it is lived as original and true by an individual socialized at framing issues in a certain way. The role of social networks can hardly be overemphasized in a context like the French intellectual field where ideas “belong” to individuals and, through them, to their followers and derive, to a large extent, their social prestige and intellectual power from this collective membership (for sociological analysis see Clark 1973, Collins 1998). In this context, collisions of concepts are always collisions of affections. Concepts are also Shibboleths: only certain individuals know how to use them correctly (see Chapters 9 and 10). Under the authority of intellectual gurus, patrons, demons, mandarins or samurais, “inventors” and thus

“owners” of concepts, social networks are built around symbolic and physical supports, styles of thought, power-ideas, university seminars, exposés, dinners, parties, books, journals and articles. The locus of this study will be the Parisian intellectual scene. Although its impact was global, radicalism at this time was highly Parisian, that is embedded in this particular sociological milieu (see Lemert 1981, Kauppi 1996 and Higonnet 2002 for analysis).

The tendency of old and new sociologies of ideas is to downplay the specificities of ideas and ideals and their objective and subjective effects (for critique see Munz 2000). Ideas as social, intersubjective and interindividual phenomena have to be analyzed in dynamic relational or dialogic spaces involving communities of ideas, individuals and groups. The dynamic character enables us to explore the shifting status of ideas. For instance, prior to the publication of several important works in 1967, Derrida’s theory of deconstruction had not acquired the status it would acquire after 1967 when it became an obligatory reference point to all avant-garde intellectuals and a key product of “French theory.” However, the making of theories does not only involve sophisticated symbolic goods, but also the making of persons that “swallow” the theories to embody them. Abstract, ahistorical, formal and linear approaches such as the “new sociology of ideas” have difficulty grasping the ideational and often retroactively created character of intellectual and scientific innovation. Relational spaces are objective, external to individuals, and internal to them. Intellectuals as individuals of ideas live off ideas that give meaning and structure to their existence. Dostoyevskyan idea persons are dominated by ideas that create complicities and affinities between individuals from different backgrounds and occupying different social positions. The effect of ideas will vary depending on background and habitat. For instance, the middle-class background of socially central intellectuals like Philippe Sollers enabled them to fully play the intellectual game whereas intellectuals from more modest backgrounds like Jean Thibaudeau did not have inherited resources at their disposal and were thus relegated to the margins of influential social networks. Social leaders like Sollers were dependent on ideas in a different way than intellectual leaders like Kristeva. Sollers needed the ideas of intellectuals like Kristeva to make a mark with his review *Tel Quel*, whereas Kristeva as an upcoming intellectual leader who lived through her ideas needed Sollers to publish her work. While Sollers exerted his influence through his central social position, Kristeva exerted hers more through her ascending ideas than through her social position. Intellectual self-identity is then variably dependent on ideas, depending on factors that have to do with background and habitat. The internal transformation is clear in Kristeva’s intellectual career, from an unknown student in the mid-1960s to a domineering intellectual star a few years later. I will however not have enough space to analyze the personal relationships between Kristeva and Sollers nor will I examine the “intellectual lives” of Julia Kristeva (see Moi 1987 for an overview).

In the twentieth century, European avant-gardes such as Italian futurism and Russian formalism as well as Surrealism had developed around reviews and journals that provided the social infrastructure for “coalitions in the mind” (Collins

1998). These sites and their collaborative circles (Farrell 2001) took over the task of literary and intellectual innovation from princely courts and literary salons. In my interpretation of Farrell's concept I will concentrate on the dialogical nature of ideas. Because intellectual culture is always personified (contrary to folklore), scholarly accounts of French cultural radicalism systematically minimize the significance of the broader environment and the historical traditions that condition innovation (see also Ross 2002). Culture is conceptualized as the *chasse gardée* or private hunting ground of a few supermen who mould reality following their genius (see for instance Forest 1992a, 1995). Individuals are not seen as group and clique members, struggling to choose between different lines of action, both free and constrained in their actions. Obviously there are gender dynamics involved. I will point to some aspects here and there but will not be able to analyze them more systematically.

Two different approaches, one historical and the other sociological, have recently deepened our knowledge of the life of ideas. The so-called Cambridge school and Reinhart Koselleck's conceptual history (1998) seek to contextualize ideas and study their "lives" in specific environments. These approaches, while not sociological, have contributed a great deal to a sociology of ideas through their careful reading of texts (see also Pocock 2003). Quentin Skinner (1978) has sought to find a middle ground between texts and contexts, arguing for a dialogical relationship between the two. Analyzing meaning in context, he has demonstrated how ideas get their meaning in relation to other ideas in intellectual contexts. Taking into account "intellectual facts" and ideas as serial speech acts addressed to specific audiences enables Skinner to gain new insights into the development of political thought. The relative autonomy of ideas was also the object of Reinhart Koselleck's *Begriffsgeschichte*, history of concepts, through analysis of the semantics of political discourse, an analysis Koselleck combined to social history (see also for sophisticated analysis Palonen 2008). The relative autonomy and relational character of ideas are valuable principles central to the approach developed in this book.

Reinhart Koselleck's theory focuses on fundamental concepts, how they are invented and how they develop. Some power-ideas, such as that of structure, can be considered as forming a fundamental concept in France after the Second World War. The specific historicity of French intellectual life involves distinctions into historical periods such as those dominated by existentialism or structuralism (and poststructuralism). But they are still objects of debate. One of the central features of symbolic struggles is not the sense of history typical to European culture as Koselleck sees it but rather the opposite, the denial of history. Intellectual and politicalisms pretend to reveal essential features of human existence. In this sense, they lack a sense of history. The culture of French radicalism studied in this book is no different.

A second, sociological approach is developed in Neil Gross' Bourdieusian study of the American philosopher Richard Rorty (Gross 2008). Charles Camic and Gross construct, on the basis of other studies such as Lamont's (1987), a

“new sociology of ideas” (Camic and Gross 2003) that they contrast with an “old sociology of ideas” represented by authors such as Karl Mannheim and Robert Merton. In his hagiographical usage of Pierre Bourdieu and Randall Collins, the main representatives of the “new sociology of ideas,” Gross introduces the concept of “intellectual self-concept” as a theory of the self, following Jeffrey Alexander’s critique of Bourdieu (Alexander 2001). This concept enables Gross to argue that his approach is theoretically distinct to that of Bourdieu and Collins. The concept has the merit of deepening analysis of intellectual agency through a fusion of psychoanalytical, psychological and sociological ideas. However, several biases can be detected in Gross’ otherwise sophisticated work on Rorty. First, in his operation of theoretical sublimation, he is led to minimize the role of the concept of “habitus” in Bourdieu’s and his associates’ numerous empirical studies. Second, Gross seems to consider the sociology of ideas as being of relevance mostly to sociology and not to a broader audience. The chapters that deal with the “new sociology of ideas” are curiously separated from the body of the text in which Gross analyzes in a rather descriptive fashion Rorty’s illustrious career. Third, the vibrant “new” European tradition of the sociology of ideas that has been largely inspired by Bourdieu and others, works by scholars such as Christophe Charle are missing from the analysis. This is a pity, as it would have enabled a more nuanced reading of Bourdieu and a necessary position taking *vis-à-vis* other studies in the sociology of ideas inspired by Bourdieu’s work. And fourth, the social logic of ideas, its internal value hierarchies and oppositions, as analyzed for instance by the Cambridge school, is not systematically scrutinized. Instead, following in this the example of Lamont, we find a sociologically conservative organizational analysis of ideas that explores in a formal, ahistorical and linear fashion the development of universities and broader political and economic contexts in the US (see also Frickel and Gross 2005). In this theorization, the differences between intellectual and scientific movement are neglected. At least in the European context intellectual movements are broad and often fuelled by political ambition (see for instance Kauppi 1996). Formal organizational fit does not explain intellectual success, which is the explicit aim of Gross’ study of Richard Rorty.

In contrast to a Kuhnian analysis of paradigms, in the present study ideas are collective symbolic instruments used to arouse and direct objective and subjective energies. These energies involve definitions of one’s intellectual identity and of one’s in-group(s). The social force of ideas will depend on the followers’ or believers’ inner conviction (Certeau 1987), on the collusion of their psychic energy with for instance professional career plans and political ideologies, and on the synchronization of conviction and psychic energy with broader political, social and economical developments. The central argument of this study is that ideas become power-ideas only if they succeed in acquiring a symbolically dominant position by uniting individual and collective psychic investment in powerful social networks with significant institutional and political backing in the intellectual field. As I will show, for some individuals and ideas these unique

conditions were met in the French context for a certain amount of time. From roughly the mid-1960s to the beginning of the 1970s, radical intellectuals such as Roland Barthes, Pierre Bourdieu, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Julia Kristeva and Philippe Sollers developed a host of new ideas, concepts and theories some of which have subsequently been labeled as French theory (Corral and Patai 2005, Cusset 2005). How can their success be explained? First, some of their ideas became power-ideas encapsulated in concepts such as “deconstruction” (Jacques Derrida) and “intertextuality” (Julia Kristeva). But concepts never rule alone. Second, power-ideas constitute with other concepts semiotic colonies that “live together” and acquire an inner coherence: a concept such as *différance* cannot be used without implicitly referring to other concepts like logocentrism. The theory of deconstruction is semiotically and socially tied to concepts such as *différance* and logocentrism. Likewise the theory of intertextuality is embedded in a broader semiotic space comprised of concepts such as “symbolic *chora*” and “geno/phenotype.” Third, this colony is linked with other colonies in hierarchical relationships to form a style of thought and collective mind in which some ideas will be more powerful than others. For some time, these colonies formed around concepts such as deconstruction and intertextuality correlated positively with some other colonies and more specifically with the political interests of the Communist party and radical student movements. Their success had little to do with their veracity or some inner quality that made them “better” than some other colonies. For many intellectuals of the 1960s studied here, the “science” of the text combined to a political position close to the French Communist Party, various leftist cliques and/or the anti-establishment student movements constituted the “un-surpassable” horizon of symbolic action and intellectual identity.

The structure of the work reflects its central focus, transformations in symbolic production in a period characterized by rapid social and economic transformation. This acceleration of history took the form of decolonization, technological change, an expansion of industrial output and of the university, urbanization, and so on (see Hobsbawm 1994). This kind of acceleration increases the likelihood of disruptions in symbolic production and uncertainty in terms of political and intellectual positions (Kauppi 1996, Anderson 2005, Gobille 2005b). The first part of this work illustrates one side of a double symbolic movement of symbolic convergence and divergence. These movements were not totally successive or totally simultaneous. Symbolic convergence meant the gradual building up of a common worldview or *Weltanschauung* that some have labeled as “structuralist” and “poststructuralist” and later forming “French theory.” Less structured and more diverse and contradictory than Kuhn’s scientific paradigm, a certain Wittgensteinian family resemblance united the very different ideas and theories that were developed starting from the end of the 1950s. The building of this new “in-group” was constructed, often non-consciously, in opposition to various “out-groups,” the Sartreans being intellectually the most influential (see for instance Lacan 1966a). Editors launched new journals. Young intellectuals organized events, mainly in Paris. Personalities that desired to and could act as charismatic

leaders were propelled to the front of the French intellectual scene. A relative chaos followed, in which everything old was devalued and everything new was elevated. In a more invisible, but nevertheless crucial manner, a symbolic caution for any kind of experimentation and rebellion, the French Communist party, was set into place. This symbolic caution glued together experimentation and rebellion, giving these a leftist note. Working from a distance, this symbolic caution provided a crucial moral support to new ideas that were, by definition, illegitimate in the eyes of the intellectual establishment. Apart from economic support and intellectual visibility through its publications, this alternative source of legitimacy could also provide its protégés other symbolic services, mostly the concepts, ideas and theories linked with Marxism, of which the French Communist Party was the official representative in France.

Theoretical radicalization took the form of an arms race of increasing bidding, of an escalation in the frequency of breaking the rules of the established game (“philosophy of transgression”) that quickly outpaced the logic of political radicalism. A pathology of radicalism started to develop in intellectual life that could be distinguished from the normalcy of rational debate. They had different ends: escape through feedback into indeterminacy and the critique of the French bourgeois order.

While the first part of the work analyzes the fusion of these partly contradictory logics in various productions, the second part of this work focuses on the very different forms symbolic divergence took in the theories produced in the 1960s. The symbolic caution provided by the French Communist Party gradually, and very unevenly, disappears. This increase of the (relative) internal heterogeneity of this collective mind and style of thought turned into an integration of some of the rebels into the university and literary establishments and of a political dilution of their radical message into a variety of marginal leftist narratives. The rebels quickly became what they had denounced, representatives of the establishment and the bourgeois order. For some, rebellion turned into orthodoxy, for others into oblivion. For many, intellectual and emotional dependency to the French Communist Party led to a long and painful process of detachment.