

INTRODUCTION

In this book I describe the contention between two groups of intellectuals: on one hand the men of letters, i.e. the writers and critics, on the other the social scientists, above all the sociologists. From the middle of the nineteenth century onwards literature and sociology contested with one another the claim to offer the key orientation for modern civilization and to constitute the guide to living appropriate to industrial society. This contention played a significant role in the public life firstly of France and England, then also of Germany: its consequences are still visible today.

This competing discloses a dilemma which determined not only how sociology originated but also how it then went on to develop: it has oscillated between a scientific orientation which has led it to ape the natural sciences and a hermeneutic attitude which has shifted the discipline towards the realm of literature. The contention between a literary intelligentsia and an intelligentsia devoted to the social sciences was thus an aspect of a complex process in the course of which scientific modes of procedure became differentiated from literary modes; and this divorce was accentuated ideologically through the confrontation of cold rationality and the culture of the feelings – one of those antitheses which marked the conflict between the Enlightenment and the counter-Enlightenment.

The sciences of the eighteenth century were rich in creation-myths. From Linnaeus, who was only too glad to hear himself compared with Adam, and Montesquieu, who described the *Esprit des lois* as '*prolem sine matre creatam*', to Buffon, Winckelmann and Lavoisier, there runs through every discipline a long succession of men who asserted they had created entirely on their own account something novel that would stand the test of time. Breach with continuity and the founding of new continuities belong intimately together in this epoch of the evolution of science: most scientific investigators saw themselves as giants standing on the shoulders of dwarfs rather than the

reverse. Excessive ambition, in many cases a foolhardy exaggeration of the goals to be achieved, and a need for a continual commentary on one's own activities were not eccentricities but an everyday matter in the realm of science.

The day of the amateur was over and the contours of clearly circumscribed domains of research, each bent on self-sufficiency, were gradually growing visible, even if one can hardly speak yet of professionalism or specialization. The scientist had long since ceased to be a mere virtuoso whose objectives included the provision of amusement; yet the conviction still reigned that science was a calling and confession rather than a professional occupation. Many regarded the process of discovery as a purely individual, indeed a solitary act: the world around him was as a rule only a disturbance to the individual in his acquisition of knowledge. Societies devoted to science increased in number, but faith in a knowledge-promoting 'scientific community' was as yet feebly developed: within many disciplines cults founded on friendships, or even upon enmities, constituted the emotional equivalent of communities instrumental to the advancement of science.

At the end of the eighteenth century a sharp division between the modes of production of literary and of scientific works was not yet possible. The career of Buffon offers an example of how a differentiation between them occurred and then accelerated. In the eighteenth century Buffon's *Histoire Naturelle* was a best-seller: when the first volumes appeared in 1749 they were sold out within a few weeks; further printings followed in the same year, and in the end there were no fewer than 250 popular editions of the *Histoire Naturelle* in France.

Buffon was a *grand seigneur* of science and as such typical of the eighteenth century: an entrepreneur who knew well how to capitalize on his scientific abilities; a master of language, even if only of his own; at once a man of the world and a local hero who had no need to travel abroad – the age's lines of communication converged upon him as though as a matter of course.

It was as a stylist that Buffon gained his reputation: not everyone liked what he said but almost everyone was impressed by the way in which he said it. This too was how posterity remembered him: Flaubert noted in his *Dictionnaire des idées reçues* what the cultivated person was expected to say when Buffon was mentioned: '*Mettait des manchettes pour écrire.*'

To see in this nothing but a foible of an age long past would be a mistake, for Buffon's attitude was more than the whim of an eccen-

tric: the Count represented not a unique case but a type; he embodied a role which the society of his time did not merely recognize but valued and rewarded very highly.

When, after prolonged pressure from Louis XV, Buffon was in 1753 elected to the Académie Française, he spoke on the subject of style. The fact surprised no one: it was considered quite natural that a scientist should also regard himself as an author, as someone, that is, who paid heed not only to what he said but also to the way in which he said it, and who wished not only to instruct his public but also to entertain them as he did so. Buffon's address was accounted one of the finest ever delivered before the Académie – even Baudelaire was impressed by it.

Towards the end of the century, however, that which had formerly procured celebrity for Buffon had fatal consequences for him: he was the last scholar whose reputation was founded on his talent for presentation and the first to lose his reputation because he had devoted himself too much to authorship and too little to research. During Buffon's lifetime the concept of the novel underwent a decisive re-evaluation: if his writings had at first been read and commended precisely on account of their entertainment value they were now denounced as '*romans scientifiques*', suitable for women and laymen but of no interest to the professional scientist. The formula that put an end to Buffon's career and inhibited the reception of his works was: '*Stilo primus, doctrina ultimus*'; the development therewith inaugurated, and its seeming irreversibility, can be demonstrated by reversing this formula. '*Doctrina primus, stilo ultimus*' would never be offered as a reproach to a scientist today.

The course of Buffon's career and the changes in the way his *Histoire Naturelle* was received enable us to see how the sciences gradually became alienated from literature and traditional values that could be described as literary were excluded from the canon of accepted knowledge. This process did not proceed in a straight, undeviating line, but was characterized rather by the difference in the pace at which it took place in the different disciplines: it did not encompass every discipline, and those it did encompass it affected with a differing degree of intensity. National characteristics played an instructive role. The Germans never abandoned the suspicion that the French had never seriously intended to expel literature from the sciences: whereas, according to Taine, in the French academies the men of letters long continued to treat the natural scientists as their servants – though these servants were none the less Lavoisier, Lagrange and Laplace – the Brandenburg Sozietät der

Wissenschaften first of all classified every Frenchman, whether he was a dramatist or a physicist, as a man of letters.

How rich in tension the relationship between literature and the sciences none the less remained is made clear by the phenomenon of 'storage', by which is meant the fact, of significance for the history of science, that theoretical programmes at first rejected have frequently not simply disappeared or been forgotten but, having passed a winter in concealment, have returned and re-entered the stream of scientific discussion. These places of concealment may lie within the original discipline itself or in neighbouring disciplines, and one then speaks of intra- or inter-disciplinary storage; they may, however, also lie outside the frontiers of science altogether, and of this the subsequent history of Buffon's *Histoire Naturelle* offers a striking example.

Just a hundred years after the appearance of the *Histoire Naturelle*, Balzac in 1842 composed the preface to his *Comédie Humaine*: in it he appealed, among many others, to a poet who had also been a natural scientist, namely Goethe; he also appealed, and very emphatically, to a natural scientist who had in the end been rejected by his guild as being a man of letters, namely Buffon.

Balzac wanted to do for society what Buffon had done for zoology: he wanted to analyse the social species of which French society consisted and to write the true history of morals which the historians, fixated as they were on the glories of the battles and state occasions they described, usually forgot to write. The reader of Buffon can recognize elements of the *Histoire Naturelle* in Balzac's novels down to the smallest details; and when one considers the extent to which Balzac influenced Proust it becomes clear that, *via* the *Comédie Humaine*, Buffon also found his way to Combray and the Faubourg Saint-Germain.

But what we have to do with here is more than a story of survival. We cannot confine ourselves to tracing the migration of theories and traditions out of the natural sciences into literature, for during the first third of the nineteenth century the social sciences came into being and by demonstrating their disciplinary self-sufficiency sought to gain a place in the academies and universities.

Balzac was an inheritor but he was also a creator. His work is tied to the old natural history, but at the same time it is in competition with a new discipline: sociology. Balzac himself formulated this claim, for he at first intended to call his work, not the *Comédie Humaine*, but *Etudes Sociales*; and when he described himself as a '*docteur ès sciences sociales*' there lay in this designation a little self-irony

Introduction

5

and a great deal of self-awareness: for what sociologist of the mid-nineteenth century could compete with the analytical insight of this novelist and his '*science sociale*' – not to speak of competing with his art of description? Marx, who compared himself to the hero of the *Chef d'oeuvre inconnu*, and Engels posed this rhetorical question when they maintained that they had learned more from Balzac than they had from all the professional economists and historians put together – from '*Guizot e tutti quanti*', as they maliciously called them.

As a critic and colleague, Henry James described the mediating role Balzac assumes between natural history and sociology: from the simple accumulation and assembling of the facts of society – 'social botanizing',¹ as James calls it – Balzac passes over to the construction of a social system, and the *Comédie Humaine* finally comes to constitute an exact counterpart to that which Comte, the founder of the discipline, strove to achieve with his sociology. No one had a clearer perception of this than Hippolyte Taine, whom they called 'Balzac's son' and who ranged Balzac beside Shakespeare and Saint-Simon and described his work as 'the greatest storehouse of documents on human nature that we possess'.² It was through Balzac that Taine detected and developed a specific view of what the social sciences could and could not do: '*Nous aurons dépassé, d'ici à un demi-siècle, la période descriptive; en biologie, elle a duré jusqu'à Bichat et Cuvier; en sociologie, nous y sommes encore; tâchons de nous y tenir, avec application et intelligence, sans ambitions excessives, sans conclusions précipitées, sans théories hasardées et préconçues, pour entrer bientôt dans la période des classifications naturelles et définitives . . .*'³ Written in 1890, more than thirty years after Comte's death, this is an astonishing document: it recalls Buffon's dictum that natural history should be regarded as being above all '*description exacte*'; and when Taine says, in his *History of English Literature*, that our first task is to discover informative documents and then know how to interpret them, this advocacy of the modest task of description rather than a premature systematization is as much in line with the attitude of the sociological monographs of the nineteenth century as it is with that adopted by the natural history of the eighteenth. So it was that in 1902 – the year in which

¹ Where no source is given for a quotation its source is the same as the preceding reference. Henry James, 'Honoré de Balzac' [1875], in *Literary Criticism (French Writers, Other European Writers, The Prefaces to the New York Edition)* (New York: The Library of America, 1984), p. 37.

² Hippolyte Taine, *Balzac: A Critical Study*, translated, with an appreciation of Taine, by Lorenzo O'Rourke (New York: Haskell House, 1973), p. 240.

³ H. Taine to A. Delaire, 19 April 1890; quoted from Carlo Mongardini, *Storia e sociologia nell' opera di H. Taine* (Milano: Giuffrè, 1965), p. 251.

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Wolf Lepenies

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Emile Durkheim arrived in Paris – Paul Bourget could speak of the ‘*enseignement sociologique*’⁴ of the *Comédie Humaine* as being a crowning feature of Balzac’s work.

As soon as sociology had advanced its claim to be a self-sufficient discipline it saw itself confronted not only by the ill will of the established disciplines but also by competition on the part of literature; one reason for this last was that, in the climate of belief in science that characterized the nineteenth century, some branches of literature claimed a status equal to many scientific disciplines so far as the advancement of knowledge was concerned.

His great ambitions notwithstanding, Balzac’s attitude towards science had something playful about it. With Flaubert all is serious. The ‘*impassibilité*’ he demands of the writer is the transference to literature of a maxim of scientific research: literature must become more scientific if it wants to survive. As Baudelaire demanded in 1852: ‘*Le temps n’est pas loin où l’on comprendra que toute littérature qui se refuse à marcher fraternellement entre la science et la philosophie est une littérature homicide et suicide.*’⁵ When Flaubert, who boasted of his solitary situation in isolation from society – ‘*Bédouin, tant qu’il vous plaira; Citoyen, jamais*’⁶ – wrote to George Sand in 1871 that if France were to awaken it must abandon inspiration in favour of science, give up every kind of metaphysics and begin to practise criticism, i.e. investigate things themselves, he therewith formulated a programme which would – even in its choice of words – have delighted an Emile Durkheim. At once a critic of the sciences and a believer in science, Flaubert was self-confident in both what he revered and what he despised: a Claude Bernard seemed to him more sacrosanct than Pius IX, but he could not take seriously the pretensions of an Auguste Comte and called for a modern Aristophanes to excite general mockery of this theory-manufacturer’s fantasies. Flaubert undoubtedly regarded his work as a finer kind of social science – he felt superior to the sociologists because he believed that as an author he could elude the constraints of society: ‘*Qui êtes-vous donc, ô société, pour me forcer à quoi que ce soit?*’⁷

⁴ Paul Bourget, *La Politique de Balzac* (1902); Bourget, *Sociologie et Littérature*, Etudes et Portraits, No. 3 (Paris: Plon, 1906), p. 46.

⁵ Charles Baudelaire, ‘L’Ecole païenne’ [1852], in *Oeuvres complètes*, texte établi, présenté et annoté par Claude Pichois (Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1976), Vol. 2, p. 49.

⁶ Gustave Flaubert to Louise Colet, 23 January 1854; Flaubert, *Correspondance II* (July 1851–December 1858), édition établie, présentée et annotée par Jean Bruneau (Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1980), p. 515.

⁷ Flaubert to Mademoiselle Leroyer de Chantepie, 18 May 1857; Flaubert, *Correspondance II*, p. 719.

Introduction

7

Flaubert's claim to be able to see through society and at the same time elude its ties and duties contains a great deal of presumption. In Zola this attitude is, where possible, enhanced. His theory of the experimental novel – which had, to be sure, little connection with his practice as a writer – became the foundation of the claim to scientificity advanced by a certain type of literature which understood itself as a finer kind of sociology: when Zola spoke of the '*sociologie pratique*'⁸ that characterized his novels he implied that in the last resort it was he who practised true sociology.

Sociology was thus faced with growing and dangerous rivals, and the social sciences were well aware of this competition, which threatened their disciplinary identity at its core: for, unlike the historical disciplines – whose idiographic orientation furnishes them, especially in Germany, with a methodological counterweight to the nomothetic claims of the exact sciences – the social sciences, above all in France and England, fortified their struggle for an academic reputation by imitating the natural sciences. The proximity of and competition from literature served to intensify this strategy.

Thus there was soon set in train an inner-disciplinary process of purification: disciplines such as sociology, which at first lacked recognition within the system of knowledge and had to acquire it, sought to do so by distancing themselves from the early literary forms of their own discipline, whose purpose was rather to describe and classify than to analyse and reduce to a system. From this process there arose a competition between a literary intelligentsia composed of authors and critics and a social-scientific intelligentsia. The problem of sociology is that, although it may imitate the natural sciences, it can never become a true natural science of society: but if it abandons its scientific orientation it draws perilously close to literature.

Sociology's precarious situation as a kind of 'third culture' between the natural sciences on the one hand and literature and the humanities on the other was exacerbated by the fact that the intellectual traditions of the Enlightenment and the counter-Enlightenment struggled with one another over its destiny.

From the founding of the French and English academies in the seventeenth century onwards, the natural sciences had achieved the high prestige they enjoyed and the possibility of acquiring state subvention not least through the absence of passion or self-interest that

⁸ Emile Zola, 'Le Roman expérimental' [1880], in *Oeuvres critiques I: Notices et notes de Henri Mitterand* (Paris: Cercle du livre précieux, 1968), p. 1188.

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supposedly characterized them. Initially the social sciences followed this pattern; it was no accident that Condorcet, who embodied as no one else did the Enlightenment's faith in science, should have been the decisive champion of a social mathematics. Once the correct employment of the faculty of reason had been mastered there were no grounds for thinking that morality, politics and political science would not pursue a course of development as sound and purposeful as those disciplines making hectic progress in the investigation of nature. It was not least because they were academic latecomers that the social sciences exhibited in the nineteenth century a degree of optimism as to the possibilities of knowledge which was exceeded by no other discipline: that nature had set no limits to what we might hope for, and that human reason would eventually lead mankind to Elysium, are among its original dogmas.

Already by the end of the eighteenth century, however – and not least as a consequence of a general sobering up engendered by the abuses fostered by the French Revolution – the practice of the social sciences in imitating the natural sciences was coming to seem more and more problematical: the insight grew that the aim of the 'moral sciences' was to reduce to the formulae of science domains of life which were in principle other than natural objects. The natural sciences had achieved their successes through experimentation – all too soon it was to become apparent that in the realm of society experiment could not simply be substituted for experience. It also became increasingly questionable whether the sciences of man ought to be pursued in a dispassionate and disinterested manner, whether the heart ought to be sacrificed to the head and religion to reason. It was the champions of the Enlightenment themselves who first formulated, not a distrust of reason in principle, but a recognition of the harmful effect of its over-estimation, as, for example, did Lessing in the lines:

Die grübelnde Vernunft dringt sich in alles ein,
Und will, wo sie nicht herrscht, doch nicht entbehret sein . . .
Gebietertisch schreibt sie vor, was unsern Sinnen taue,
Macht sich zum Ohr des Ohrs, und wird des Auges Auge.

(Brooding reason forces its way into everything,/ and where it does not rule it nonetheless demands to be indispensable . . ./It imperiously decrees the worth of our senses,/ makes of itself the ear of our ear and becomes the eye of our eye.)⁹

However widely they might differ in other respects, the cham-

⁹ Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *An den Herrn Marburg über die Regeln der Wissenschaften zum Vergnügen*, Lessing, *Werke*, Band 1 (München: Hanser, 1970), p. 163.

pions of the counter-Enlightenment were united in their critique of the over-estimation of reason, and in their determination to protect society from abstract political and social experiments of which the criminal experiment of the French Revolution was the prime example. None of these thinkers who espoused the counter-Enlightenment stood closer to sociology than did Count Louis de Bonald, whom Robert Spaemann was right to regard as one of the founding fathers of the discipline, which he called a '*discipline du fait*'¹⁰ that anticipated positivism. De Bonald, who was accounted a scholastic and was anything but a *bel esprit*, at the beginning of the nineteenth century set down in a number of brief and exceedingly clear-sighted sketches the dilemma facing the social sciences as they oscillated back and forth between an orientation towards science and an inclination for literature.

De Bonald saw in the widening divorce between science and literature a sign of modernity and thus a symptom of decadence. Even in an age as recent as that of Louis XIV no distinction had been made between *sciences* and *lettres*, and the dictionary of the Académie Française was consistent when under the rubric *science* it referred the reader to *littérature* and defined *lettres* in the plural as '*toute sorte de science et de doctrine*'.¹¹ De Bonald mourned for an age in which the sciences were related to literature as content is to form: to him Massillon was a representative of a theological, Montesquieu of a political, Bossuet of a historical and La Bruyère of a moral *littérature* – they spoke on behalf of disciplines the outcome of whose researches could in no way be separated from the form in which it was presented. Buffon's *Histoire Naturelle* demonstrated the extent to which even the natural sciences could be at one with literature.

The divorce between literature and the sciences was the responsibility not least of a new class produced by the Enlightenment: if there had in the early phase been scholars who lacked feeling for form, '*savants sans littérature*',¹² among modern intellectuals an over-estimation of form concealed a lack of content: they were '*littérateurs sans véritable science*'. Under the dominating influence of these men of letters, who were devoid of all knowledge, the natural sciences, with mathematics at their head, had come to represent the leading disciplines of the modern age; the '*sciences exactes*' were now accounted the '*hautes sciences*'. This change in prestige among the scientific disciplines was producing harmful effects not least in the world of edu-

¹⁰ Paul Bourget, 'Le Réalisme de Bonald' [1904], in *Sociologie et Littérature*, p. 43.

¹¹ Louis de Bonald, 'Des Sciences, des lettres et des arts' [1807], in *Oeuvres, Mélanges littéraires, politiques et philosophiques* (Paris: Librairie d'Adrien Le Clerc, 1852), p. 294. ¹² *Ibid.*, p. 296.

cation. Literary decadence and scientific decadence were only two sides of the same coin: as the tragedy of the Ancien Régime became the bourgeois drama, so the title of honour '*hautes sciences*' passed from the '*sciences morales*' to the '*sciences physiques*'.

It was precisely their exactitude, however, that precluded the natural sciences from being placed at the head of the scientific disciplines: it was precisely because, as Pascal and Leibniz had shown, they could also be pursued by machines that these sciences were of the second rank as compared with theology or ethics, jurisprudence, politics or history, which required the use of language and would therefore always remain human.

In de Bonald's eyes the superiority of the moral sciences to the natural sciences was manifest: the anthropocentrism of the latter if nothing else, their unavoidable reliance on the concepts of 'character', 'family', 'intention', 'affect', demonstrated their inability to survive without borrowing from the sciences of man. The ideology of progress propagated by the natural sciences was a chimera: fundamentally they followed the identical principles they had followed since primeval times and as a rule their learned men proffered nothing but elucidations of popular practices which worked just as well without them. From reading the *Journal de Physique* de Bonald gained the impression that the age of great discoveries was past in the natural sciences; they were now dominated by '*le petit esprit*'¹³ and were engaged less in discovering than in improving on what was already known and further refining what was already perfect. Whatever airs the mathematicians might give themselves, mankind would still build houses and spin wool even if there were no such thing as geometry.

It was not the self-overestimation of the natural sciences that constituted for de Bonald the decisive problem: of greater consequence was the possibility that the state would appropriate this self-overestimation and derive from it the fundamental principles of its educational policy. That in the mechanical sciences, where machines were gradually replacing man, there should appear more and more men who resembled machines was a regrettable fact but one whose consequences could be lived with; what was incomparably more detrimental was that modern society's ideas of truth and utility, exactitude and solidity, were associated almost exclusively with the natural sciences. It was not only the social sciences that suffered harm: the core of society itself was affected by it.

The natural sciences required for their legitimation the belief in

¹³ de Bonald, 'Des Progrès ou de la décadence des lettres' [1810], in *Oeuvres*, p. 446.