CHAPTER EIGHT

THE RISE OF THE ‘MIDDLE CLASSES’ OR THE MOYENNISATION OF SOCIETY IN CONTEMPORARY FRANCE: A DIFFICULT DEBATE*

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“The detailed history of the eclipse of social classes in sociology remains to be written. And it would be all the more enlightening because [that disappearance] seems to have been particular to France. It would call for research on the origins of the representations of the working world and the symbolic struggles which have taken place in the political and academic arenas alike. This history, which might well constitute a chapter in the social history of intellectuals during the 1980–2000 period, could be entitled “The social origins of an unconscious denial”.¹

This essay is intended to analyse how late 20th-century French sociology dealt with social classes in general and, more specifically, with the ‘middle classes’, which is a very common concept today but one which remains quite vague. Indeed, there is a great deal of confusion in the use of the term because the very definition of the ‘middle classes’ is variable.

For some, the determinant factor is income (North American tradition), with the ‘middle classes’ situated around the median wage. The drawback of such an approach based on wage levels, however, is that it automatically focuses too low on the scale (the median wage in France was 1,500 euros a month in 2006), and at the same time, fails to distinguish between generations. Another approach, which is closer to a European sociological tradition, focuses on socio-economic conditions or job structure.

* We have chosen to use the original French term moyennisation throughout this essay because there is no equivalent in English to express its specific, twofold nature:
  • the expansion of the service sector (‘moyennisation’)
  • the homogenisation of lifestyles, or at least the illusion of such a homogenisation (‘average-isation’)

¹ cf Beaud, S., ‘La gauche et les classes sociales : de l’éclipse au renouveau’, Mouvements no. 50 (June-August 2007), 66–78.
In France, official statistics use a classification system known as PCS (professions-catégories socio-professionnelles), which may be compared to the English SEC (socio-economic groups). It differentiates self-employed occupations from salaried ones and divides the latter into four hierarchical categories: senior managers and professionals, technicians and associate professionals, white-collar workers, blue-collar workers.

In the course of the 20th century, the socio-occupational structure in France, as in the other Western countries, underwent profound changes. The number of self-employed persons (and especially farmers) declined radically, while that of wage-earners showed a steady increase before levelling off at about 90 percent at the turn of the 21st century. The wage-earners’ profiles were transformed as well: industrial jobs decreased sharply in favour of those related to services, and jobs requiring qualifications increased at the expense of lower-skilled ones.

The main trends of the past 40 years may be summarised as follows:

- The proportion of senior managers and professionals tripled, going from 5 to 15 percent of the labour force;
- That of technicians and associate professionals more than doubled, going from 10 to 22 percent;
- That of white-collar workers also doubled, going from 15 to 29 percent (but has now levelled off);
- That of blue-collar workers went from 35 to less than 25 percent of the labour force during the same period.

1. French Sociology and the ‘Middle Classes’

In the 1960s and 1970s, the French sociological tradition was dominated by a bipolar reading of the social space, which meant that all the new employment situations occupying the intermediate levels of the social space raised problems for the discipline. At the time, there were two ways of seeing them:

- These new ‘in-between’ levels represented an expanded ‘new working class’ which even included managers. This was the position, for example, of Serge Mallet (1969) and Alain Touraine (1969).
- Alternately, the new levels were designated by the term ‘new petty bourgeoisie’ (Poulantzas 1964; Baudelot, Establet and Malemort 1974; Bourdieu 1979). These authors carried out major research on