

Publications

A New Beginning for French Sociology

by Martha Zuber

By all measures, 2004 is an important year in the history of French sociology. On February 24, 25, 26 and 27, the first conference of the newly formed *Association française de sociologie* (AFS), entitled “*Dynamiques de transformation de la société française contemporaine*,” was held on the outskirts of Paris. To the great surprise of the organizers, over 1000 participants paid the fees and trekked out to the Université de Villetaneuse campus in St. Denis.

This new association has replaced the largely moribund *Société française de sociologie* founded in the early sixties by Alain Touraine, Jean-Daniel Renaud, Michel Crozier and Henri Mendras to legitimize sociology as a discipline in French academic life. The old « *Société* » had struggled for years with declining membership (down to about fifty members), the absence of an institutional base, divisions among the various research cohorts, and a lack of consensus about professional work.

As Louis Chauvel, the treasurer of the new association, explained, the American Sociological Association will soon celebrate its 100th conference. The French Association of Economists recently held their 34th conference whereas this was the first conference of French sociologists! A first meeting in 2001, which attracted over 200 sociologists, was called to discuss the disarray of the discipline. Claude Dubar organized the initial brainstorming session and is one of the leading figures in the new association.

What blew the dust off the *Société française de sociologie*? Many contend that this gathering was in response to the crisis incurred by what is known as “*L’Affaire Teissier*.” In April 2001, Elisabeth Teissier, France’s best-known astrologist defended her doctoral dissertation entitled “Epistemological situation of astrology across the ambivalence fascination/rejection, in post-modern societies” in the hallowed halls of the Paris Sorbonne University. Her 900-page work was supposed to demonstrate that astrology is a science. The thesis was accepted and approved by a panel of prominent professors. In the view of many in the profession, following close readings by a committee of experts, Teissier’s work was an attempt to legitimize the teaching of astrology in the French university and was not adequate as a serious doctoral dissertation.

Out of Dubar’s initiative, an executive committee of twenty persons was established launching the new AFS. The officers are: Daniel Bertaux, president; Philippe Cibois, secretary; Dominique Desjeux, vice president; and Lois Chauvel, treasurer. In the following meetings it was decided to hold a bi-annual congress. Thus the task was to recruit chairs and discussants for a number of panels. The program committee accepted forty research panels on a wide range of topics. A special effort was made to broaden the range of participants (most French sociologists are affiliated with a university or a state sponsored research laboratory), namely to attract sociologists working outside the academic community as well as the inclusion of doctoral students on the afternoon panels.

The conference began with a welcoming talk and a reception by Patrick Braouezec, the mayor of Saint-Denis. Conference attendees were treated to the keynote presentation by Alain Touraine on “The

Sociologist Without Society.” The main themes of the morning sessions of the expert roundtables were: Which Social Model for France?; Is Society Reducible to the Individual?; Where is French Capitalism Going?; Schools, Inequality and Reproduction; The Future of Social Protection; and Links between Governance and Mass Opinion.

Some of the afternoon debates dealt with traditional mainstays such as the sociology of education and the sociology of religion. Others encompassed newer themes such as the influence of the body on the political landscape, gender inequality, and the roles of advocacy groups and other institutions in a wide range of fields. A special session was reserved for new curriculum developments due to the recent reform of the timetable of French universities known as LMD (License, Master and Doctorat) in order to be aligned with other European universities. For further information please write to: afs@iresco.fr.