CHAPTER 1

The *Ancien Régime*: French Literary Culture

Didier Eribon: Is there a book you would have liked to write or that you regret you didn't write?

Claude Lévi-Strauss: I'm very sorry that I haven't written a literary work.

Conversations with Claude Lévi Strauss

Traditionally, the man or woman of letters (*philosophe* or *littérateur*) has been the model for all French intellectuals.[1] In most other national intellectual fields, for instance in Germany[2] or the United States, the model was the specialist or academic.[3] In opposition to Latin humanism, scientific culture developed with the Reformation mainly in Germany, England, and other European countries. In Germany a dual structure can be isolated in the intellectual field, consisting of two socially and geographically separated parts, the university and literary poles, and occasionally some parts of the artistic field. In France on the other hand, for centuries these two poles were united both geographically and socially in the politico-administrative center, Paris. From the 1960s on, a clearer triadic structure emerged in the French intellectual field, consisting of the university, media, and literary poles. As such, these poles have existed since the eighteenth century and the typically Gallic trait of impersonal and abstract thought has been dated back at least to the sixteenth century and Jesuit pedagogical techniques.[4] The French Revolution emphasized French culture's cosmopolitanism, which opposed the national particularism of Protestant countries. For the intellectuals in France at the end of the eighteenth century, the media became a sphere of political intervention, distinct from the arenas of professional politics. The essay became the medium. The role of the *savant* was traditionally dominated by the role of the *philosophe* or *littérateur*, the representative of Latin humanism and literary culture. This domination took multiple forms and could be noticed after

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the Second World War even in the education of linguists. According to an eyewitness, "Everything that appeared precise, meticulous, *scientific* was rejected."[5]

A profound structural transformation took place in the 1960s. Instead of two subcategories of intellectual capital, literary and academic, there began to exist three subcategories of intellectual capital: academic, literary, and journalistic.[6] The exchange rate for journalistic capital rose drastically in the 1960s, thus enabling, via its acquisition, the opening of new channels of social ascension and the updating of the French intellectual habitus: social and human scientific dilettantism, coupled with political and ethical radicalism, cast in the form of theoretical essays, became the order of the day. In the 1960s, some areas in the academic system, namely all the new sciences of the text, became areas of high social mobility as a result of their structural relations with the expanding media. This structural change enabled the symbolic revolutions under way to achieve their fullest scope—the importance of which is not sufficiently emphasized in studies of French cultural history.

Despite such deep changes, in the postwar period a specific kind of literary culture still determined the social conventions regulating symbolic goods. By definition, the man or woman of letters as a social role was a philosophical-literary type and his or her training—in literature, philosophy, and, beginning at the end of the nineteenth century, the human or social sciences—emphasized abstract reasoning and a concern with ends such as morality, for instance, not means. The valued style required the use of imposing proportions. Moral problems were not posed as national ones, as in other countries, but as problems affecting the whole of humanity. Some men or women of letters were also close to political power, under the aegis of which polite society had developed for centuries; their ambitions could not be separated from their political stances, something which became very clear in times of political turmoil and rapid social change, for instance, the 1890s and the 1960s. Literary criteria and the abstract individualism they conveyed were reproduced by informal and formal cultural learning, which favored dealing with ideas in a general way, in terms understandable to a large, learned audience. A classical education shaped certain tendencies: a concern for style, for surprising turns in the text, for play with concepts, and for so-called universal values—in short, for verbal and literary skills. Consider Georges Steiner's description of Lévi-Strauss's style:

> A page of Lévi-Strauss is unmistakable (the two opening sentences of *Tristes Tropiques* have passed into the mythology of French language). The prose of Lévi-Strauss is a very special instrument, and one that many are trying to imitate. It has an austere, dry detachment, at times reminiscent of La Bruyère and Gide. It uses a careful alternance of long sentences, usually organized in ascending rhythm, and of abrupt Latinate phrases. While seeming to observe

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> the conventions of neutral, learned presentation, it allows for brusque personal interventions and asides.[7]

The aim of this prose was to find in man what was the most abstract and general. This ambition was a distinctive trait of French literary culture and moral temperament.[8] Because of the valorization of this generalized critique of values, some academics, like the anthropologist Lévi-Strauss, could, by being experts on "primitive" human societies, easily fulfill the minimal requirements of the prized intellectual role. This role produced two opposing and hierarchical terms like writer and academic, sophisticated and pedantic, imaginative and dry, and so on.

The man or woman of letters was a generalist, dealing with general problems, who processed information by generalizing, by taking local or particular problems or themes as universal ones at an abstract, often moral level (the *moraliste*).[9] The canonized form of intervention was nontechnical language, accessible to the cultivated public, coupled with an extremist rhetoric and a universal message. For a long time, writing novels and essays was the only way to show one's talent. However, beginning in the 1950s, as the general schooling level rose and the composition of the reading public changed, even more technical terms entered the vocabulary, which led to the emergence of philosophers straddling two cultures: trained in philosophy, many were autodidacts in the human and social sciences. Like philosophers of previous generations, they switched from philosophy to other approaches, until the 1950s to literature, as in the case of Sartre.

The human and social scientists were forced to create their education for themselves. This situation of urgency can be seen clearly in the debates in the 1960s compared to those in the 1930s. Proof of this fundamental change can also be seen in the ascension of sociologists like Pierre Bourdieu and Alain Touraine into positions of intellectual prominence. In contrast to the interpretations of some observers, who have approached the problem of modernity mainly from the point of view of a sociology of science,[10] I will argue here that the complex relationships between radicality and Joseph Ben-David's third public, the laymen, is the crucial element for an understanding of intellectual and academic activity in the French context.

The updating of a dominant habitus depended on the structures of the field as a whole: it made sense in relation to the totality of practices in this entity. However, because of the habitus's flexibility and context-sensitivity, the habitus also left space for individual variations and improvisations. Because of the flexibility of the base, individuals could suddenly find common ground and knowledge based on a frame of reference unknown to those from another context. This unity was manifest in the discussions between Lévi-Strauss and the journalist Didier Eribon[11] concerning the anthropologist's youth.

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> *Claude Lévi-Strauss*: I believe, heaven forgive me, that at time I began composing an opera. I got no further than the prelude.
> *Didier Eribon*: That's pure Rousseau.
> *Claude Lévi-Strauss*: Except that Rousseau would do it and I couldn't.[12]

This dialogue, apart from demonstrating a shared social fund of knowledge, expresses common taste and cultural memory, which are reproduced informally via inherited cultural competence and formally via scholarly culture. To put the example in perspective, it could be said that Rousseau's or Lévi-Strauss's musical ambitions were as meaningless to a foreigner as baseball scores were to a Frenchman: they were part of local taste. To a member of the cultivated French public, Lévi-Strauss's comment was a clear sign of cultural competence.[13] It was considered legitimate to desire artistic or literary success.[14] This local taste was a system of constraints and incentives relative to cultural creation and consumption that differed from the conventions prevalent in contexts where the model to follow was a specialist. An observer of French intellectual life, David Pace, expressed it thus: "despite Lévi-Strauss's repeated identification with the ideal of the *savant* he remains in many ways a *philosophe*."[15] This contradiction was the main trait of French intellectual culture during the period studied here. In both roles, symbolic goods were placed in order of importance and their consumption modalities were relatively strictly controlled both implicitly and diffusely. The logic of the *philosophe* cannot be understood by examining it from the point of view of the logic of the *savant*, and vice versa.

The French intellectual habitus was made up of elements which were constantly reorganized and might not show direct relations to previous manifestations: the relationship was conceptually loose and vague ("family"), but still recognizable.[16] This historical continuity took the form of a dotted line. For instance there was a definite iconic relationship between the eighteenth-century men of letters like Voltaire and Diderot and the early twentieth-century intellectual as a member of the social group the intellectuals. This continuity could be detected by tracing the whole historical continuum, from the eighteenth century, to the Dreyfus affair and beyond, taking into account the social formation of mass-media mandarins.[17] Each time the habitus was realized, elements of past realizations and the requirements of the present—the values which must be fulfilled in order for the habitus to be legitimate and to work—were combined with the intellectuals' activities. There was thus a process of parallel connection of diverse structures which is called invention; updating was a continuing manifestation of social invention. The social pool of knowledge and taste changed in a structured manner as a result of modifications in the social structure, notably in the intellectual field, and in the intellectuals' dispositions. For example, starting from the mid-nineteenth century, romanticism and psychologism gave way to realism, personal letters to collective petitions, and

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cynicism and elitism to Republicanism or popular elitism. In the 1950s, general philosophical discourse gave way to more technical language drawn from the evolving human and social sciences. Thus, in this market for ideas, a structural imperative stood out: the necessity of creation of new positions according to certain conventions in relation to previous positions which were sedimented at different levels and constituted a tradition.

The complexity of local intellectual creations was often due to a constant, because internalized, problematic relationship with tradition and transmitted ideals, and to continued attempts to present new combinations which became, for the most versatile social groups of the moment, "as obligatory as the wearing of clothes."[18] For instance, a novel combination in the 1960s was to use terms from structural linguistics and also certain, at that time, esoteric terms from philosophy in order to analyze French classics like Rousseau in the case of Derrida and Lévi-Strauss, Racine or Michelet in Barthes's case. In the eyes of many philosophers, German phenomenology was a way to supersede Sartre. A thinker could also choose more avant-gardist authors like de Sade, Lautréamont, Mallarmé, and Freud, who had already been present in the Surrealist repertoire between the wars. This combining of new concepts with old objects[19] had a good chance of succeeding in this local market, because the resulting work referred simultaneously to the national cultural heritage and to novelty.[20]

Reorganization of the Social Conventions

The transformation of the structure of the social conventions as the habitus acquired more and more elements from the evolving human and social sciences, was simultaneous with modifications in the French academic system: the rapid growth in the number of both university students and teachers, and the institutionalization of many disciplines such as sociology and linguistics.[21] A separate degree in sociology was created in 1958. In the 1960s, the number of students in letters tripled from 7,000 in 1960 to 20,000 in 1969.[22] Both of these factors—the increase in the intellectual population and the founding of new chairs in higher education[23]—contributed to important changes in the structure of the market of symbolic goods and in the models of intellectual modernity.

In the academic system, the combined effect of these factors meant that some young academics could get tenured positions without having to wait for older professors to retire. New ideas and the influx of money necessary for the establishment of new posts were synchronized. Some sectors were more dynamic than others. There was both a material and symbolic decline in certain specific subareas tied to the classical humanities, for instance, Romance philology, the history of the French language, and lexicology. Some linguists, such as Greimas or Barthes, converted from lexicology to expanding fields like

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structural linguistics. Certain types of knowledge which had previously been considered more or less worthless, such as certain areas of mathematics, languages like Russian, or areas like East European linguistics, could become invaluable and enable previously unforeseen social ascension.[24] Some linguists became *bricoleurs*, which led both to relative chaos and innovation, for instance, in philosophical semantics. Many became—and this is no accident—fervent supporters of interdisciplinary studies. Intellectual novelty was thus simultaneous with wide-ranging institutional reorganization. The growth in the number of students in the human and social sciences, and the new disciplines that were detaching themselves from the guardianship of philosophy, also enhanced the need to invent radical ideas which could be incorporated into the expanding curriculum. The transformations underway also opened new doors of opportunity for publishers. As the novelty of the administrative profile of the university posts created in the 1960s demanded improvisation, an individual could (or had to) be at the same time dangerous and tenured. It was no accident that most of the inventors of successful neologisms (or rather, derivations and metaphors) like grammatology and archeology were philosophers. They were the ones who had so much initial symbolic credit that a risky move was what was expected from them.

It is difficult for an outsider to imagine the overwhelming predominance of philosophy, the dominant discipline in the traditional French humanities,[25] and of philosophers in French cultural discourse and in the social habitus of the French intellectual. According to local beliefs, degrees in philosophy were not taken (*prendre*) by the student like other degrees in mathematics, political science or law. They were given (*donner*), as if by providence, pointing to the quasi-ontological difference between those who had not succeeded in taking philosophy as their main subject and those to whom this privilege had been granted. If an individual had not taken philosophy as a major, it had to be because s/he had tried but failed. The writer Alain Robbe-Grillet expressed the valuation of philosophy, common to both philosophers, who were the included, and the others, who were seen as the excluded. "I received the grade 'good' in mathematics, but I was never 'given' the baccalaureate in philosophy. I failed twice in a row."[26]

The importance of the aspirations of the new, young consumers increased, as did of the role of the cultural press as an instance which gave form to the multiple events in an expanding field of cultural production. A larger-than-ever social demand for radical ideas developed: for publishers, it became symbolically and economically profitable to diffuse ideas which had circulated only in small avant-gardist circles during the interwar period.[27] Thus, for some intellectuals it became possible to popularize, or to contribute to the creation of a certain intellectual popular elitism—something which had not existed on such a

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scale before—and simultaneously to accumulate intellectual fame, a resource which could be reconverted into academic power.[28] Concomitantly, the rhythm of production of the goods accelerated. Publications and instruction in the human and social sciences increased.[29] Barthes's statement about his book, *Système de la mode* (1967), corroborates this general transformation of the circulation of symbolic goods: "In those years, intellectual history moved very fast, an unfinished manuscript quickly became anachronistic and I even hesitated to publish it."[30]

This general change also modified the social conventions relative to the forms intellectual intervention should take. Sartre, who had been trained as a philosopher and who was in a dominant position in the French intellectual field after World War II, had enlarged the repertoire of legitimate intellectual media interventions to include the theater and also journalism. In the 1930s, this repertoire already included protoscientific products, or theoretical essays, but the intellectual field was dominated by philosophic-literary discourse. This discourse had its own public, reviews, and publishing houses. The development of this new variant, the human and social scientist, was interrupted by the war; however, in the 1950s the relationship between the types represented by Sartre and Lévi-Strauss started to change gradually, concomitantly with the morphological modifications in the structure of the intellectual field mentioned above. The development of this new variant led gradually, at an unequal tempo, to changes in the structure of the discursive rules. Freudianism and anthropologism had already become fashionable in the 1930s. But in the 1950s and 1960s these currents, along with the fields of history (e.g., the *Annales* school), linguistics, and semiology would become the symbolically dominant perspectives.[31] By producing theoretical essays and becoming cultural celebrities, the intellectuals engaged in these areas gave backing to, and in fact, often indirectly supported the founding of new academic disciplines.

Even the scientific dimension can be found in earlier manifestations of the habitus: in Balzac's or Zola's nonacademic sociology, for instance.[32] There has thus been a constant interaction between the current scientific achievements and the concerns of the man or woman of letters. In semiotic terms, there has existed a sophisticated mechanism which transcoded scientific texts to the language of literature, and it can be argued that there has also existed a sophisticated, but much less publicized, mechanism for the incorporation of literary and philosophical techniques into scientific works. This combination of science and literature was especially clear in the semiliterary and semiscientific *Tristes Tropiques* (1955), Lévi-Strauss's travel diary, which became a literary best-seller and a standard anthropology textbook.

> *Claude Lévi-Strauss*: Did you know that the Académie Goncourt—the book came out just before prizes were awarded that year—published a notice saying

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> they regretted being unable to give the award to *Tristes Tropiques* because it wasn't a novel.[33]

An American anthropologist has described the book as a combination of "autobiography, traveler's tale, philosophical treatise, ethnographic report, colonial history, and prophetic myth."[34] But even this novel work had its antecedents, works like André Gide's *Voyage au Congo*. The hybrid character of Lévi-Strauss's book should not hide the fact that, in the French field of ethnography, Lévi-Strauss's use of the Anglo-Saxon term "anthropology" was simultaneous with a distancing from the museum and studies relative to technologies, the traditional context and object of ethnography, and an association with the large intellectual audience and with theoretical discourse.[35]

At a conceptual level, there was a dialectical relationship between the collective habitus and the individuals: the habitus influenced social actions and their criteria, and social actions shaped the habitus. In reality, there was a quasi-corporate relationship between the habitus and the individuals: the two were inseparable. It was very difficult for intellectuals to distance themselves from their own symbolic conventions, because the condition for the effectiveness of cultural capital as a social force is precisely that it was personalized as gifts and talent. Only in extreme cases, such as Althusser's, could this illusion be unmasked.[36] Because of the dialectical, quasi-corporate, and collective relationship between habitus and individuals, being a cultural hero was, in reality, as much the choice of others as it is one's own: it was a social construction, which was a culturally created and reproduced, loose, and largely implicit, pattern of both theoretical and practical knowledge.[37]

The blending of literary and scientific values was institutionalized in such academic settings as the École Pratique des Hautes Études, which had close relations with the traditionally large nonspecialist public that was a central feature of the French intellectual field.[38] This allowed interaction between marginal sections that were usually composed of young academics and writers. These marginal sections formed an area of innovation. The existence of this social space can be traced to the creation of the school and beyond.[39] Close relations between the poles and a unifying dominant intellectual habitus—the man or woman of letters—created a unique structural dynamic for the invention of unforeseen symbolic and institutional combinations. This unity and even affinity with distant disciplinary representatives was expressed by Robbe-Grillet. "Among the great intellectuals the first ones to be seriously interested in us were the philosophers. Hyppolite gave a class on *La Jalousie* at the École Normale Supérieure and Merleau-Ponty gave a few classes on Claude Simon at Collège de France."[40] The literary works that interested Robbe-Grillet and the authors that shared common values with him were either other writers or philosophers.

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These marginal sections of the university system were close to the increasingly influential cultural press, which expanded considerably, especially in the 1960s. Because of the rapid evolution of this sphere, which was an intermediate area between the producers and the consumers on the one hand and the academic and literary networks on the other hand, the traditional order in cultural careers could be reversed in the 1970s. From then on, even journalists, the gatekeepers to cultural celebrity, could become university professors.[41] This dynamic was also the condition for the establishment of new sciences and models beginning in the 1950s. If the value hierarchies were inverted, so were the temporal orders according to which diverse social resources could be accumulated. For the pretenders, the means to become part of the local intellectual nobility changed. Alternative channels of social ascension which took advantage of this intermediate sector were created.

Social proximity and density, due to geographical concentration and the common training of cultural creators, were another feature of this local market. The Écoles Normales Supérieures had traditionally been the common training ground for the local cultural elite.[42] A conventional education stressed classical languages like Greek and Latin, French literature, rhetoric, and philosophy: these subjects constituted the central portion of specific educational credentials. The effects of this formation took multiple forms. Theoretical, deductive, *a priori* reasoning was favored over practical, experimental, and empirical thought.[43] Philosophical training stressed analysis of texts and a search for systematicity in philosophical works (e.g., Spinoza's system). This very strong and uniform scholarly basis was the background against which all subsequent intellectual endeavors developed in this sociocultural environment could be evaluated. In contrast to this institutional and intellectual background, the specificity of the foreground, individual works, would become apparent. Often, once outside of the walls of the École Normale Supérieure, the young intellectual abandoned all scholarly models—the philosophical system, the mode of exposition, the style of writing. After a violent rejection there was, later, a return to a compromise position between scholarly and avant-garde models.

Numerous elements could be seen in the later works of a thinker which pointed to a *normalien*-habitus, to a specific, basic intellectual training: extreme presumption, pedantic concern with style, hatred of verbal improvisation, frequent Latin or Greek citations, a conceptual way of thinking, use of French classics, excessive abstraction, and so forth. As a counterreaction to this, an intellectual could, like many representatives of the human and social-scientific intelligentsia did in the 1960s, romanticize scientific method by developing quantitative history, deductive models, and statistics methods, for instance, and place excessive confidence in it.[44] Against this educational background scientization—a partial detachment from this background as a reaction to it—

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acquired its full meaning. The highly competitive environment in the schools (*lycées*, Écoles Normales Supérieures), based on examinations, created tensions not only between the individuals but also between ideas. Personal dislikes mingled with intellectual taste. It was not strange to hate Sartrian philosophy in the 1960s: everyone had to be either "for" and "against" concepts, which were the property of groups. The followers of Sartre—an intellectual totem—would use certain concepts and schemas, different from those of the followers of Lévi-Strauss, for instance. Robbe-Grillet's comment on some of his friends' attitudes toward Sartre exemplify this: "Moreover, I believe that Duras and Simon really hate Sartre."[45]

Let us explore more closely through a few examples the implicit, fragile, and changing habitus which has regulated cultural excellence in this market for ideas. Before Lévi-Strauss, it was impossible to imagine a known French intellectual doing fieldwork and interviewing indigenous people. For one thing, neither physical labor nor listening to peoples' accounts of events were part of cultured taste or shared cognitive disposition. An event, and all the instruments relative to its analysis, was something vulgar and thus not valuable enough. Events were at the bottom of the hierarchy of intellectual objects. In this respect, some affinity can be detected with the ideals of courtly or literary society where manners or form, not actions or studious work, decided an individual's reputation.[46] However, it was possible to talk about the university as an idea, as Edmund Husserl had done, and thus be radical symbolically. It was legitimate to talk about mental disorders in a distant manner—that is, combining psychoanalysis, history, the social sciences with general philosophical discourse, as Foucault would do. Lévi-Strauss, and the social-scientific intellectual type he represented, was thus something new. But his anthropology also contained something distinctively French in its overly optimistic scientism. It was legitimate, in this context, to analyze empirical issues only if they were linked, in methodological, epistemological, or other theoretical works, to universal issues by abstract dichotomies: normal and pathological, or primitive and modern, for instance. Objects of knowledge were constructed in this way.

This social fund of knowledge and the dominant *normalien*-habitus, tied to the national cultural heritage transmitted by family, also favored dramatic, theatrical, and poetic effects. Consider the introduction to Michel Foucault's *Folie et déraison* (1961). The author had a poetic gift: even scholars like Georges Canguilhem, a member of Foucault's doctoral jury, thought so. The opening sentence to his *Birth of the Clinic* was revealing: "This book is about space, about language, and about death; it is about the act of seeing, the gaze."[47] No wonder science became a sort of conceptualized literature, and vice versa. For the young readership of the 1950s and 1960s in search of models and idols, only this type of discourse had collective meaning. It fit the categories of

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perception. On the other hand, the criteria of excellence were not fulfilled if the work consisted of graphs and tables and made no clear connections to very abstract levels of analysis: this would not be socially or psychologically rewarding. Even reorganization of the elements of the conventions did not lead to this.

The definition of the prized intellectual followed literary criteria closely due to a long-standing and homogeneous literary culture, despite the impact of scientization. This influence can clearly be seen in the French social sciences, which have not, for a variety of reasons linked to the persistence of literary criteria, detached themselves from literary culture and its imperatives. The works of sociologists of culture—such as Bourdieu's—are still compared to Sartre's works on Flaubert or on literature, which constitute the category of reference in this area and which condition the expectations of the large public. The persistence of this standard is one of the main obstacles to a thorough professionalization of the human-science pole of the social sciences. But this should not be taken as an essentially restrictive position, as these conditions enable the sociology of culture and related disciplines to have a substantial and durable cultural impact.

A highly selective and competitive environment favored originality, but with certain restrictions. The quest for symbolic distinction, esteem, and admiration took place at an abstract and euphemistic level, and was guided by the informal constraints on language and interesting topics implicit in the conventions. Moreover, a certain type of behavior was expected by others: it was considered normal to be brilliant in a specified, local manner. The recoining of words borrowed from valorized disciplines like the natural sciences and linguistics, for example, was the most visible transcoding mechanism of scientific texts.[48]

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