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CHAPTER 3



The Sociological Discourse on Inequality and Social Class in France

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1. Introduction

Over the past three decades social inequality has grown in France, as in many other countries. Paradoxically, however, during that same period the dominant discourse concerning French society, both in the social sciences and politics, has largely tended to conceal this growing social polarization and to eliminate any reference to class. Indeed, since the beginning of the 1980s, sociologists and politicians have vied with one another to invent clever words and expressions to describe the structure of French society. However, these substitute discourses were soon gainsaid by the growing social disparities prevalent within French society, and which existed in spite of the rhetoric which obstinately denied the reality of class within French society. Indeed, in France, the notion of ‘class’ had, at best, changed and become more complex, but remained as present as ever.

This chapter will, first, explain the background to this increasing social polarization of French society. This polarization is of course not unique to France, and can be found in varying degrees in most capitalist countries in Western Europe. The widening wage gap has had clear consequences for all significant aspects of people’s lives, and a number of indicators converge which allow us to expose this tendency, and demonstrate the existence of a system of inequality characterized by segmentation, hierarchization and conflict. After this initial presentation, some thoughts will be put forward on the words and categories that are used in certain sociological theoretical frameworks. This alternative sociological discourse was pervasive between 1980 and 2000 and continues to be used today, even though it has long since been largely refuted by the facts. This chapter will focus in particular on the discrepancy between the rhetoric of these theories, which deny the existence of ‘social class’ within France — and the undeniable reality of a growing polarization within French society.

2. From inequality to social class

The relative deterioration of the situation of wage earners in general, and of certain categories in particular, namely public sector employees, people in short-term employment, and the unemployed, differs in intensity and in timing according to

the country and the sector of activity concerned. This is because the big reduction that has occurred in salaries has been accompanied by a decrease in spending in sectors such as health and education. This is why it is possible to talk about the relative pauperization of wage earners, which is felt by the latter both as individuals and as a group. Moreover, as the stratum of wage earners tends to widen and, as the budget allocated to the maintenance and renewal of this workforce increases, a second contradictory tendency arises, by which the extortion of surplus value is practised on an ever dwindling group of citizens.

Consumption as a whole, and specifically the consumption of goods and certain services, including access to property and housing, are greatly affected by such considerations and, to these direct effects we can add the contrast in the ways in which capital income and labour income have evolved; namely, the decline of some of the left-wing political parties, and the growing gap between the social origins of the leaders of the Socialist party and those of ordinary citizens. In short, it is clear that the same social groups consistently and systematically come out at the top or the bottom of the social ladder. And, indeed, it is this very fact that allows us to demonstrate the existence of a genuine system of ‘classist’ inequalities (see Bihr & Pfefferkorn 2008).

The concepts of ‘social class’ and of ‘class struggle’ were a part of every new social scientist’s conceptual toolkit between the 1950s and 1970s and, although some lively debates took place regarding the precise ways in which class could be represented theoretically, in countries such as France, Italy or Great Britain there was general agreement, at least, about the importance and the reality of the concept of class itself. The paradox whereby, during the 1980s and 1990s, an increase in social inequality actually coincided with a decline in class-based discourse, both in sociology and in the broader social sciences, is therefore particularly odd. The widespread success of the rhetoric that publicly announced the end of class, replacing it with a discourse centred around the concepts of individualization and *moyennisation* (which this chapter will refer to as ‘median-ization’), and which appeared exactly at the time when the social divide was becoming more and more apparent, will probably be a source of wonder for future historians of sociology (see also Pfefferkorn 2007: 33–199). A systematic analysis of the inequality between social categories can be easily constructed in France on the basis of the list of socio-professional categories compiled by the French National Institute of Statistics INSEE (*Institut national de la statistique et des études économiques*) and this, in turn, allows us to challenge such rhetoric and to confirm the relevance of the concept of ‘social class’ to modern sociological analysis. Incidentally, Marie-Anne Paveau observes that this is also true for sociolinguistics (see Paveau 2008a, 2008b).

Analysing inequality in this way (see Bihr & Pfefferkorn 1999, 2004, 2008), allows us to demonstrate that contemporary society, and more specifically French society, continues to be segmented, hierarchized and conflict ridden. Many studies and regular quantitative enquiries have produced elaborate statistics which reveal the detail of this social structure. By examining in turn the three areas of segmentation, hierarchization and conflict, this chapter will argue in favour of keeping the notion of ‘social class’ as a useful parameter for the analysis of French society.

2.1 *A segmented society*

Contrary to the widely diffused hypotheses which posit a gradual ‘uniformization’ of contemporary society, the study of social inequality shows beyond question that not all members of a society are alike, nor do they possess the same social attributes. More precisely, it is easy to demonstrate the existence of ‘groups of individuals’, who share the same lifestyle and identical, similar or equivalent ways of thinking which differentiate them from other groups. A good example of this would be the analysis of consumer habits which, it is claimed, are clearly affected by the growing uniformity of commercialized consumerism: all sociological research on this subject shows that members of different socio-professional categories have different consumer habits and consume different goods and services. An example of this can be found in the United Kingdom, where charity shops appeared at the same time as the trade in luxury goods developed — which indicates, albeit simplistically, the social polarization of consumer practices.

These practices have clearly arisen from an inequality in living standards: in other words, inequality in purchasing power or in available income, which, as seen above, has greatly increased since the 1980s. However, they also relate to differences in consumer norms since, throughout all socio-professional categories, we find consumers with identical living standards and identical purchasing power but who do not make the same choices and do not share aspirational priorities. In other words, their consumer practices are directed and organized according to different value systems (see Bihr & Pfefferkorn 1999: Chapter 6). Indeed, social behaviour can vary greatly even within a single social group, social subcategory or social segment and it is precisely this variation which enables us better to understand the differences in the ways people relate to education, work, their own social environment and those social circles which they perceive as completely ‘unfamiliar’. Such variation in social behaviour has led some authors to suggest that individualization is increasing. The same can be said for housing, health, schooling or the social differences in the way people spend their leisure time. In the case of France, basing our analysis of social reality on the divisions apparent between the various socio-professional categories highlights many internal differences, all of which confirm that French society is indeed a segmented one.

2.2 *A hierarchized society*

The study of social inequality reveals not only the existence of different groups but also, and more importantly, it demonstrates clearly that different groups have unequal access to resources of all kinds. The concept of ‘resources’ must here be understood in a broad sense and includes both differences in material resources (such as income, property, living conditions and life expectancy, and so forth) and in social and political resources. Great differences exist, for instance, in terms of social networking opportunities and in the wealth of social networks, depending on whether an individual belongs to an association (of any type), a trade union or a professional organization, a religious community, a political movement, a network of people of the same origins, and so forth. This is also true of the ways in which

individuals make themselves heard or defend their rights, and the institutional positions which may grant them certain privileges. Finally, we must also consider what may be termed symbolic resources, such as school certificates and university degrees, which are more generally related to the accumulation of knowledge and to cultural references — in other words, to the ability to construct a coherent image of the world, of others and of oneself, and to the ability to put forward this image or to impose it on others.

It will therefore be apparent that what we have, in France, is a highly hierarchized society. Every domain of social activity is marked by a deep inequality (some long-standing, some more recent) between social categories.¹ These inequalities generate a system of reciprocal self-reinforcement, which consequently gives rise to an accumulation of advantages or disadvantages (note that advantages or disadvantages in one field inevitably bring advantages or disadvantages in other areas). The general upshot of this process is that the top and bottom of the social hierarchy are strongly polarized. This situation typically carries over from one generation to the next. The fact that we all have equal access to the highest, best paid and most prestigious positions is undoubtedly pure myth: social mobility is not at all as widespread as it is — frequently — claimed to be, and is mainly limited to ‘short trajectories’ in an upward or downward direction, or to mere lateral movements (see Chauvel 2002b). The point here is not so much that inequality between social categories continues to exist, nor that it is universally present (namely, it covers people’s entire social practices) but, rather, that this inequality is systemic and that it gives rise to phenomena such as the repeated accumulation of advantages for certain categories and disadvantages for others (see Bihr & Pfefferkorn 2008).

2.3 *A conflict-ridden society*

The differences and internal hierarchies described above also bring with them a number of conflicts that arise from the tensions that can exist between the different groups they have created and which, in turn, can cause disputes, oppositions and rivalries. These groups compete with one other in maintaining or improving their relative position in the previously described hierarchy. We are thus faced with societies of conflict. These are collective conflicts, which are not only centred around the appropriation of social wealth (such as trade union movements aiming to increase the direct or indirect purchasing power of employees’ wages) or the attribution of institutional positions (which can form the object of electoral battles), but also around the social order’s norms of legitimacy (which are at stake in the ideological struggles between the different perceptions of the world that are played out in the media and on the political, cultural and even the academic scene). Indeed, the aim here is to define what is just or unjust, what is acceptable or unacceptable, and what is desirable or undesirable, with regards to the distribution of social resources across all members of society.

¹ Clearly, we should not ignore the existence of inequalities which exist among other categories (in other words, between men and women, between different ‘racial’ or ethnic groups, or between the younger and the older generations). However, due to considerations of space, the present chapter focuses uniquely on social inequality in the usual (restricted) sense of the term.

Between the end of the Second World War and the mid 1970s, a context marked both by relatively strong and sustained economic growth and by the rivalry between East and West, workers — more specifically the more ‘modest’ income earners (blue-collar workers and employees) — organized themselves to fight, both politically and through trade unions. As a result, they managed to obtain a general improvement of their living and working conditions, and of public services, which were improved and had their reach extended, resulting in an overall reduction in social inequality. Then, from the late 1970s onwards, during a period of rising unemployment which witnessed the arrival of different types of short-term employment, the ability of workers to organize themselves and fight in the same way was weakened. Their situation generally declined: public services were dismantled and inequality rose again, notably because of the neo-liberal policies put in place by successive governments which were under direct pressure from the industrial and financial sectors (see Bihr 1991). Inequality and the hierarchy it generates are therefore not automatic outcomes of an abstract economic process, nor do they result from competition between individuals to access rare goods. They are, rather, created through public and private policies implemented as a result of the power struggle between different social groups. Significantly, we are therefore not witnessing a mere struggle for a better social position but, rather, something which used to be termed the ‘class struggle’. However, during the first decade of the twenty-first century France has not taken the lead insofar as social unrest is concerned (Pigenet & Tartakowsky 2012). Rather, based on the number of strike days per 1000 employees, France ranks tenth, behind Spain, Italy, Austria and northern European countries. This was also true thirty years ago, when French social conflict reached a record high. Indeed, France’s uniqueness lies more in the large-scale, widespread movements that we witness sporadically throughout French history (such as the Popular Front in 1936 and May 1968) than in the frequency of its strikes.

Interestingly, the modern class struggle is led by those at the top of the social hierarchy and waged against those at the bottom: men and women who benefit from the social security system and workers facing an increasingly challenging labour market — are all caught up in a game of competition and rivalry between wage earners. A representation of French society grounded in an analysis of the system of inequality thus clearly reveals a society that is simultaneously segmented, hierarchized and conflict-ridden. Such divisions and inequalities do not pit individuals against each other but, rather, bring into opposition groups of individuals who share the same positions in society. These positions should be considered both on a concrete and a more idealistic level: they refer to people’s (unequal) capacity to obtain property, power and knowledge, which leads to the accumulation of advantages on one side of the spectrum, and disadvantages on the other — a process which causes different groups to enter into conflict with each other and to organize themselves (in varying degrees) to that end. In our view, all the preceding arguments warrant and justify the use of the concepts of ‘social class’, ‘class relations’ and ‘class struggle’ in order to explain and understand the phenomena of segmentation, hierarchization and conflict which continue to exist in modern French society, and which persist

more generally throughout all contemporary societies. French society is clearly still a class-ridden society with rifts that have tended to deepen over the past decades. Of course, this does not diminish the importance of other social relations such as those between men and women, between generations or between ‘races’ (cf. Pfefferkorn 2007, 2012), and the question remains as to how these different social relations should be represented and linked together (see also Dunezat & Pfefferkorn 2011).

3. Alternative discourses in sociology: individualization, ‘median-ization’ and exclusion

We will now consider the words and expressions which came into widespread use during the 1980s and 1990s to describe the structure of society, with all its contradictions and transformations. This section will present the alternative discourses which were created in sociology, and which also constitute a rhetoric of avoidance, since the main idea is to circumvent the use of class-based language and to eliminate the concepts of ‘social class’, ‘class struggle’ and ‘class relations’.

From the early 1980s onwards a number of ‘new’ theoretical frameworks started to replace the ‘old’ rhetoric on class. The rise of these alternative discourses was boosted by the fact that social class theory (which had reigned supreme during the 1960s and 1970s) had some clear weaknesses — most notably, it was too often marked by labourism and Stalinism. Moreover, the loss of power on the part of the political Left brought into question the idea that the working class could be at the root of far-reaching social change. Sociologists therefore lost interest in this class. Indeed, despite some excellent studies, notably Verret (1995a, b) and Schwartz (2002), French researchers have not shown much interest in the working class nor, more generally, in its links with the socially inferior and the oppressed. Between 1990 and 2000, painstaking efforts were made to refocus sociological analyses on questions of social class, although it should be stressed that the concrete (micro) sociological study of these social layers is still in its infancy.

The first of these so-called ‘alternative discourses’ to appear during the 1980s were those of individualization and ‘median-ization’, followed — with the rise of inequality in the 1990s — by the rhetoric of exclusion. On a conceptual level, the notion of *rapport social* is replaced by the more pacificatory notion of *lien social*. During the 1980s and 1990s, therefore, there appeared in French society a tendency to hide social conflict — since the common ground between these ‘modern’ methodological representations of individualization, ‘median-ization’ and exclusion is not only that they deny the existence of class but also that they avoid the matter of conflict.

The *Dictionnaire critique de la sociologie* (Boudon & Bourricaud 1982) gives a symbolic confirmation of the sudden decline of class-based approaches. It replaces the entry for ‘social class’ with ‘social stratification’, and this despite the fact that French sociology saw relatively few strata-based approaches in the years following the Second World War. Still more emblematic of this decline is Mendras’s (1988) *La Seconde Revolution française: 1965–1984* which, following the trend of its time, explicitly denies the existence of class: ‘On voit clairement que les grandes structures sociales

du XIXe siècle s'écroulent: quatre classes massives et antagonistes s'émiettent en une multitude de groupes qui gravitent autour d'une constellation centrale' (1988: 24). He continues: 'En disparaissant, bourgeois, paysans et prolétaires font disparaître en même temps un système de classes au sens fort du terme, c'est-à-dire d'une part des univers de civilisation qui englobaient toute la vie, toute la personnalité et toutes les ambitions de ses membres et, d'autre part, des macro-groupes en lutte pour le pouvoir et la domination de la société globale' (1988: 44).

Paradoxically, Mendras's thesis became a theory precisely at the time when social inequality was once again on the rise, namely at the end of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s. Just like Giscard d'Estaing's *immense groupe central* (1976: 56), Mendras's *constellation centrale* (1988: 24) is supposed to include most of society, leaving at the margins only the minor fringes of the excluded and the privileged. However, this view can be traced back to Guizot who elaborated it in the first decades of the nineteenth century. Some aspects of this thesis of 'median-ization' are developed further by Ulrich Beck in Germany and by Pierre Rosanvallon in France (Beck 1998, Fitoussi & Rosanvallon 1996), who discuss the 'individualization' of social inequality in the context of the disappearance of social class. They do not, however, take into account the systematic destruction of the collective forms of solidarity and of social benefits, which partly contributed to bringing about this 'individualization'. Indeed, the assault on the right to work, the rise in unemployment, resulting in a tougher competition between workers, the adherence of social democracy to the principles of market forces, and the fact that the leadership of different trade unions were forced to show deference to the State and to big businesses in order to preserve their status as social negotiators, led many workers, who felt increasingly isolated, to adopt this individualism as a form of obligatory common consent (see Garo 2009: 84–121). Although the above authors do take the rise in social inequality into account, they consider this phenomenon to be largely disconnected from the issue of social classes which, they predict, are destined to disappear.

The socio-economic developments of the last two decades of the twentieth century completely contradict and invalidate Mendras's main thesis which described the 'median-ization' of an 'appeased' (*apaisée*) society, no longer encumbered by *grandes discordes nationales* (Mendras 1988). Although the end of the 1970s, the 1980s and the first half of the 1990s all witnessed a reduced amount of social conflict, we should not ignore the great conflicts which were taking place between different sectors of society during that very period. In the words of one well-informed observer, 'Le mythe de la classe moyenne a été un expédient et un cache-misère qui se brise aujourd'hui' (Tenzer 1994). In short, Mendras's thesis of median-ization became obsolete as soon as it appeared in print and was replaced almost immediately by another type of rhetoric which has proved to be much longer-lasting, namely that of exclusion.

The theme of exclusion dominated in France between the late 1980s and late 1990s (cf. Tissot 2007). The success of the rhetoric of exclusion may be explained by the participation of certain representatives of the state in a number of intellectual debates, the tendency to simplify the issues, and a general deterioration of critical

thought. Paugam sets out contemporary thinking on the concept of exclusion by focusing on the *rupture du lien social* and raises exclusion to the rank of a *paradigm sociétal* (1996: 7). It is not yet clear, however, how complete a picture of the main economic and social transformations of contemporary society this work actually presents. The whole notion of ‘exclusion’ could merely be seen as a reformulation of ‘median-ization’, since, according to Touraine (2001: 14–15) the *exclus* supposedly constitute a minority which, when combined with the even smaller numbers of *privilegiés* can be seen as one *immense classe moyenne*. Touraine sees France’s social structure as being comprised of a) the excluded (at the very bottom — some 15% of people), b) the privileged (at the very top — some 3.5% of people) and c) the urban middle classes (in the middle, some 80% of people). On the face of it, this analysis seems surprising, especially given the fact that the additional socio-professional categories of blue-collar workers and employees at the bottom of the pay scale actually make up some 60% of the active population. The success enjoyed by the notion of exclusion during the 1990s may also be explained by the fact that it helped to dilute, and even hide, the paradigm of conflict, and more precisely that of class struggle, by rendering invisible (and thus incomprehensible) the economic and social transformations which were happening at the time, namely the increase in exploitation and domination, the rise of social inequality, and the gradual weakening of the resistance with which these transformations were met. For a more detailed critical discussion, see Bihr & Pfefferkorn (2001: 123–28).

It seems that sociologists continued using class-based discourse not so much because of the outcomes of statistical or ethnographic surveys but, rather, because of the change in the meta-sociological rhetoric that occurred as a result of the objective transformation of the social structure and of the entire socio-political context, and because of changes happening on an ideological level. The success enjoyed by these alternative discourses between 1980 and 1990 within academia, the media and politics in countries such as France, the United Kingdom and Germany is due neither to the quality of the arguments put forward nor to their giving a truthful reflection of what was happening in the real world. This period is marked by a political turn to the Centre-Left and, as discussed above, is characterized by an increase in social difference (see, for example Bihr & Pfefferkorn 1999, and Duménil & Lévy 2001). Given these conditions, it becomes almost impossible to interpret contemporary social structure as being characterized by the ‘median-ization’, ‘individualization’ and ‘invisibilization’ of social inequality, nor indeed by the ‘death’ of social class. In France, it has become increasingly difficult to deny, hide or minimize class conflicts as merely a paradigmatic organizing force, given the strikes and social movements of November 1995 and subsequently. In other words, social classes have begun their come-back.

The dismantling of welfare policies that occurred in France during the 1980s and 1990s, coupled with the expansion of the country’s financial markets and the increased prominence of its charitable networks, brought about a change in the way academics viewed social structure. Amongst the liberal masses, in whose market individuals function like atoms and are mere buyers and sellers, or possible negotiators and pleaders of a cause, there are no social classes. However, the marked

increase in social inequality since the 1980s and the reappearance of social conflicts has led a growing number of sociologists to reconsider class-based analyses and to discard the old theme of social individualization. Those scholars who had never stopped working with the concepts of social class, class relations and class struggle once again found an audience and the new fashion for studies on class confirms that every trend follows a cycle and that this terminological cycle corresponds to other cycles which are related to power struggles in society: in other words, the struggle which used to be called 'the cyclical class struggle' (Pfefferkorn 2007: 33–202, Dockes & Rosier 1983).

This type of discourse was prevalent in both the media and in the rhetoric of political parties. Considerations of space prevent us from presenting precise examples of this type of political discourse, such as that developed by the Socialist Party's think tanks prior to the presidential campaigns of 2002 and 2012, or the formulae used by Nicolas Sarkozy during the 2007 presidential election campaign, all of which deny the existence of social class. The fact that large parts of the social sciences and the political left abandoned class-based discourse during the 1980s and 1990s allowed Sarkozy to deftly manipulate two different and contradictory registers by, on the one hand, taking over the traditional right-wing mystique of unification and, on the other, developing a new discourse which, despite its lack of sophistication, allowed him to divide the working class. Sarkozy used a clever rhetoric which tapped into fear, frustration and jealousy, but while he was playing with words, the class struggle nevertheless continued to happen. And, moreover, arguably through his initiative.

The first piece of legislation to be passed during Sarkozy's five years in office (2007) illustrates this point clearly. It exploded the myth of a unifying President Sarkozy by enabling new types of wealth to be transferred from the different strata of employees, workers and intermediate wage earners to the most wealthy sectors of society and, more particularly, to the richest proprietors. And this even though, during the last quarter of the twentieth century, the share of wage earners' incomes in the distribution of the country's wealth had already declined significantly in comparison with that generated by profit-making. Other measures, such as lowering inheritance tax, establishing a fiscal protection scheme (which benefited the wealthiest), and the discontinuing the taxation of overtime (with employers therefore contributing less in terms of social security payments), all reinforced social inequality even further. The tax breaks allotted to the country's 300,000 to 400,000 wealthiest households further deepened the deficit, while their weight was carried by the whole of society. Edwy Plenel summarizes Sarkozy's class war perfectly thus: 'L'arrogance initiale et jamais démentie, de la soirée du Fouquet's couplée au yacht de Bolloré jusqu'aux spectaculaires affaires Bettencourt et Tapie: celle du "président des riches", selon l'heureuse formule des sociologues Pinçon-Charlot. Mieux, des très riches. D'un chef de l'Etat devenu chef de bande, fondé de pouvoir d'un clan oligarchique' (Plenel 2011).

At the same time, the right to strike was weakened, real wages stagnated or fell, the retirement benefits of wage earners were curbed and expenditure on private health medical care hit every household. To end with a specific example, the state's

disengagement from public education during the Sarkozy era led to a multi-tiered education system, as the *carte scolaire* (the distribution of places in primary and secondary school based on catchment area) was abolished, as tens of thousands of jobs in education were scrapped, and universities, made autonomous and subjected to market forces, were handed over to petty officials.

These ‘new’ policies were matched by developments within the field of social sciences. As numerous sociologists were replacing their conceptual tools, a radical shift could be observed in the vocabulary used by politicians to refer to society. We have already seen how Giscard d’Estaing used the term of *classe centrale* or *groupe central*. In the same vein, since the 1980s, the word *worker*, a traditional term in political debate, seemed to become obsolete, even within the Left:

On se souvient de cette apostrophe prémonitoire de Pierre Mauroy, dans son fief socialiste du Nord, quinze jours avant la fin de la campagne de premier tour [2002], rappelant à Lionel Jospin qu’il pouvait employer le mot de ‘travailleur’ dans sa campagne. Cet ‘oubli’ du candidat, qui est aussi celui de son ‘atelier de campagne’ était significatif: le ‘cœur de cible’ du PS, comme disent les spécialistes du marketing, était bel et bien les classes moyennes, celles pour lesquelles avaient été faites les principales réformes de la seconde partie de la législature Jospin, notamment la baisse d’impôts inspirée par Laurent Fabius. (Beaud & Pialoux 2002: 34)

Years later, the socialist candidate Ségolène Royal tried to revive the term *worker*, but in fact she only used it four times during the whole of her 2008 campaign (Calvet & Véronis 2008). And yet, this ‘turnaround’ in vocabulary came too late, as Sarkozy was already more successfully using the same word with a different meaning: in his rhetoric, *worker* had a stake in voting for the Conservatives as their productive efforts would be rewarded: *travailler plus pour gagner plus*.

This short chapter has been unable to offer an in-depth analysis of how political language has been changing since the neoliberal breakdown. However, if the great virtue of sociology is to question preconceived ideas, then it has to be highly critical of the words chosen by journalists, politicians and even scholars. This is the lesson from Victor Klemperer, George Orwell and Herbert Marcuse’s masterpieces: critiques which advocate what we might term ‘linguistic vigilance’ (Moulène 2011). The use or obliteration of expressions such as ‘social class’ or ‘social struggle’ is extremely relevant to the discipline and our attitudes towards these words should be at the centre of our research.

4. Conclusion

This chapter has illustrated the vigorous debate that has occurred in France with regard to the description of the country’s social structure. This terminological battle, whether led by academics, the media or politicians, represents just one of many incarnations of the class struggle, which is apparent in France both in concrete terms and also at an ideological level. The increasing social polarization of French society that has taken place since the beginning of the 1980s allows sociologists to keep (or to rediscover) the ‘dirty words’ that certain groups would like to eliminate

from everyday speech, namely social class, class relations and class struggle. Sociolinguists working on the French languages are therefore entirely right to keep the notion of 'social class' at the heart of their analyses. It is an important paradigm when considering linguistic variation.