

## BOOK REVIEW

# Bourdieu on Sociology mirror's effect

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Pierre Bourdieu, *Retour sur la réflexivité*, Paris, Éditions de l'EHESS, 2022.

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## FROM EPISTEMOLOGICAL VIGILANCE TO SCIENTIFIC REFLEXIVITY

More than twenty years after his death, Pierre Bourdieu, the most cited sociologist (Korom 2019), continues to be admired and criticised in his homeland. In a stream of recent French publications devoted to Bourdieu, one in particular caught my attention and seems to be interesting to a English-speaker audience. *Return to Reflexivity* aims to come back to a central problem of Bourdieu's work: the practice of scientific reflexivity. In the introduction, the editors, Johan Heilbron and Jérôme Bourdieu, recount the elaboration of this concept as a way of doing social science. Bourdieu's scientific project is guided by reflexivity. Long before using the word, the idea emerged in his first fieldwork during the war in Algeria (Perez 2023). Then, the concept appeared in the transatlantic context of the scientific exchange with Loïc Wacquant (Fringuant 2025). Finally, the idea culminated in his last course at College de France, *Science of Science and Reflexivity* (Bourdieu 2004). Throughout his life, the sociologist sought to establish a new conception of scientific reflexivity based on sociological knowledge. In doing so, he promoted the need for a squared sociology (or sociology of sociology) in order to pursue the progress of scientific reason. By its mirroring effect, this project of sociology applied to social scientists invites us to intellectual humility and reveals the ethical dimension of Bourdieu's oeuvre.

## FROM PHILOSOPHICAL EPISTEMOLOGY TO SOCIOLOGY OF SOCIOLOGY

The book is a compilation of four texts, among which the first three were originally speeches. The first, from 1967, written in the same period as *The Craft of Sociology* (Bourdieu et al., 1991) is titled 'Epistemology and Sociology of Sociology'. This text is Bourdieu's proposal for a debate organised at Sorbonne University on using model analysis in human sciences. He came to this event with a performative intention, or more precisely 'with a lot of ulterior motives' (p. 34), in the same vein as his later *Leçon sur la leçon* (Bourdieu 1982). His intention was to provoke the audience to think critically about the topic of the debate. He then transforms the question of models from a theoretical problem to one that is sociological. This is the subversive and critical aspect of his thesis: refusing to solve theoretical problems with philosophical discourses on science and replacing them with the question of the sociologist's social insertion into his work. He writes that the problem of the theory of knowledge applied to sociology 'is not so much a question of answering the question of its scientificity, but, more concretely, of helping itself to move in the direction of its scientificity' (p.

38).<sup>1</sup> When locating this discourse in the French intellectual field of the time, one can see the connection with Bachelard's idea of a psychoanalysis of the scientific mind, aimed at returning scientific reason to science itself (Bachelard 2002). Moreover, for Bourdieu, as for Bachelard, 'every discourse on method is a contextual discourse' (p. 42). Here his opponents are both the methodologists without data and the sociologists without epistemology.

Bourdieu then attempts to outline a research program in the sociology of scientific practice, more specifically in the sociology of sociology. This project will show how the epistemic unconscious, or our specific ways of thinking, are linked to their social conditions of possibility. He writes: 'Sociology encloses within itself the power to reflect on itself and in particular to reflect on its own scientificity' (p. 34). It is this mirror effect of sociology applied to the scientific activity that becomes his leitmotif in the practice of social science. Rather than formulate theoretical answers to the problem of the use of statistical models in sociology, Bourdieu prefers to question the mathematical skills of those researchers who pose such a theoretical problem. Taking the reflexive analysis of sociological production a step further, he states: 'It would also be easy to show that a certain type of social organisation of intellectual work generates a certain type of epistemology' (p. 38).

Similarly, Bourdieu applies this sociological lens to one of the classical problems in the theory of scientific knowledge: determinism. He writes:

Sociology could go further, until analysing for example the affinity which can exist between an epistemological position and a social position: these points of view on the problem of the determinism in the human sciences are not undoubtedly distributed randomly but according to the social insertion of the researchers, according to their social origin, etc. (p. 39).

The final aim is to establish a collective scientific program which would serve the progress of social science itself: 'the sociology of sociology or, more precisely, the sociology of the social conditions of the production of sociological sciences is one of the fundamental conditions to the progress of sociological knowledge' (p.38).

## **SCIENTIFIC REFLEXIVITY AGAINST NARCISSISTIC ONES**

The second text, published solely in Germany in 1993 and entitled 'Scientific Reflexivity and Narcissistic Reflexivity', is dedicated to his student and friend Loïc Wacquant. In his position statement, Bourdieu defends his own conception of reflexivity in relation to those of his competitors in the international academic field. His argument can be summarised as follows: first, to reject the outsized reflexivity of neo-Marxists such as Georg Lukács or Karl Mannheim. For Bourdieu they both culminated in what he called a 'paralogism of the short-circuit' (p. 52), by ignoring the autonomy of the field of cultural production (Bourdieu 1993). In his view, this type of analysis tends to reduce intellectual production to the social characteristics of its producers. But Bourdieu also seeks to distance himself from another form of intellectual reflexivity, the textual narcissism of 'postmodern' anthropology and sociology. Rather than the mirror effect of social science, these theorists often prefer the emphatic depiction of their unique reflection. Bourdieu's conception of reflexivity is completely different:

The form of reflexivity that seems to me to be the most scientifically fruitful is quite paradoxical, in that it is profoundly anti-narcissistic. This is undoubtedly one of the reasons why it is so little

<sup>1</sup> All translations are the review author's.

practiced and why its products arouse so much resistance. The properties that this sociology of sociology discovers, all opposed to an intimate and complacent return on the private person of the sociologist, have nothing singular nor extraordinary; they are common, for a part, to whole categories of researchers (therefore banal and not very "exciting" for the naive curiosity). This sociology questions the charismatic representation that intellectuals often have of themselves, and also their propensity to think of themselves as free of all social determinations. It makes us discover the social in the heart of the individual, the impersonal hidden under the intimate (p. 51).

Here the French sociologist comes close to Norbert Elias's criticism of *homo clausus*, this individualistic conception of humans being derived from Western philosophy. Bourdieu's scientific project to establish sociology applied to the sociological field proposes to reject the last great narcissistic wound inflicted to humanity (Bourdieu 1992: 132; Kilminster 2007: 154-155), born with the sociological revolution (Kilminster 1998; Joly 2017). The idea is simple: we are never alone; people are always interconnected. Contrary to the modern myth of the scientist as a solitary genius, the sociology of scientific activity reinserts the products and the producers within their socio-historical conditions of possibility into a field, a specific social space with its own rules. For Bourdieu, this realistic view of science could, at best, counteract intellectual arrogance, all the while enabling the development of a collective scientific practice in which everyone knows their strengths as well as weaknesses according to their education and technical abilities. In this perspective, the sociologist once notes: 'My dream would be a scientific field in which - and this is particularly necessary in the social sciences - everyone is a socio-analyst of others, but not in a polemical logic' (Bourdieu 2015: 357).

Bourdieu goes on to distinguish three levels in the reflexive analysis of scholarly production. The first is to emphasise generic social properties (age, gender, language, class, education) of the agent. Then, the reinsertion of his production and his social and intellectual positions within the struggles that structure the state of the field (p. 53) at a given moment. Finally, to methodically erase all the biases inherent to the scholastic position. This bias consists in the idea that in order to study the social world, we must necessarily adopt an abstract and distanced glance. But this view ignores the practical and concrete relationship that those we study have with the social world (p. 54). Here appears the difference between doing something, and saying something about what someone is doing. Sociological analysis must necessarily consider these two issues. Without a theory of practice, the sociologist runs the risk of not being able to go beyond the description of the social action derived from common sense. On the contrary, the scholastic fallacy consists in putting 'a scholastic head into non-scholastic bodies' (p. 79). The best example of this scholastic bias in social science is rational choice theory, which assumes that all agents act rationally.

## THE SOCIOLOGY OF SOCIAL SCIENCES AS A RESEARCH PROGRAM

The third text, 'Project for a Social History of Social Sciences', is the introduction to the seminar Bourdieu held at the School for the Advanced Studies in the Social Sciences in 1997. Bourdieu appears here as a team leader, or a 'rugby coach' (p. 69). In this text, it is the pedagogy of sociology that becomes reflexive. In a kind of double discourse saying both what he would like to do, and why it is necessary, but also why there are so many obstacles standing in his way, Bourdieu tries to make the practical necessity of reflexivity clear to students. Close to Goffman's analysis of the Lecture (Goffman 1981:166-196), the French sociologist outlines reflections on what a seminar is from the point of view of research communication. He also points out the social constraints on any form of collective organisation. Pedagogically, his point is that 'the teaching of research is done by

researching' (p. 64). The teacher's ambition then, is not to train disciples, as well-disciplined Bourdieusian's *lectores*, but rather to discipline them to indiscipline, and thus to form *auctores*. The latter are in short: 'people capable of appropriating methods, theories, readings, in order to make something of them' (p. 64).

But how to teach research? How to teach this specific practice? These questions are still relevant today. Bourdieu is certainly not unaware of the intricacy of after mentioned questions, and even goes so far as to speak of religious 'conversion' (p. 65). He does not stop showcasing examples to reiterate his point. Thus, the young researcher is compared to a 'top athlete' (p.18). He/She/They must not cease to train tirelessly, to organise themselves methodically, and to criticise themselves, in order to perfect the art of doing research. All this work takes place in a dialogical relationship, which is sometimes tense, but always regulated by one's peers and competitors (agents of the same field). This intervention also takes on an ethical dimension. The professor cautions students against the risk of a cynical use (p. 90) of knowledge when it comes to the history of social sciences or the sociology of intellectuals. This cynical use is made most evident when observing polemical debates within the intellectual fields. Sometimes biographical details or economic interests are revealed in order to discredit certain works rather than develop a sociological analysis of the scientific field. Bourdieu invites his students to move away from this form of 'perversion' (p. 89), this illegal use of social science where the purpose is to nail an opponent or legitimise an ally rather than analyse the social phenomenon under study.

## **TOWARD A SCIENTIFIC REAL POLITIK?**

The last text was first published in 1995 and served as an introduction to two issues of *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*.<sup>2</sup> These issues were devoted to 'The social history of social sciences'. Unlike the other speeches, this text, conceived as a piece of writing, could be difficult for anyone who has not mastered Bourdieusian rhetoric. This text is a plea for the history of social sciences. In Bourdieu's view, this project contributes to the progress of reason through reflexivity it gives us about our scientific practices.

Social science has the privilege of being able to take its own functioning as an object and being able to bring to consciousness the constraints that weigh on scientific practice: it can thus make use of consciousness, and of the knowledge that it has of its functions and functioning, to try to remove certain obstacles to the progress of consciousness and knowledge. Far from ruining its own foundations by condemning to relativism, as it has often been said, such a reflexive science can on the contrary provide the principles of a scientific Realpolitik aiming at assuring the progress of the scientific reason (p. 98).

Promoting the unification of a global scientific field, this fourth text takes on performative, programmatic (Camic 2011: 276) and utopian dimensions. In Bourdieu's view, the awareness of the social constraints on scientific life leads to the hope of being able to overcome them collectively. The sociologist reiterated the need for a comparative history of disciplines and national traditions in the social sciences, a scholarly program that later flourished among his students (Fassin and Steinmetz 2023). Bourdieu then calls for the organisation of 'socially instituted forms of communication that favour the production of the universal' (p. 124). This text also contains one of the most beautiful formulations of the connection between the scientific field and individual reflexivity: 'A point of view that perceives itself as such, that is, as a view taken from a point, a position in a field, is able to

<sup>2</sup> The journal of Bourdieu and his collaborators.

overcome its particularity; in particular, by entering into a confrontation of differences in vision based on an awareness of the social determinants of these differences' (p. 122-123).

## **BOURDIEU BEYOND BACHELARD**

At the end of the reading, Bourdieu seems faithful to the Bachelardian epistemology in which he was trained by Georges Canguilhem, and which strongly inspired the *Craft of Sociology*. The main legacy of this epistemology is to propose a reflection on scientific practice against all idealistic epistemologies. This kind of epistemology became later, in Bourdieu's vocabulary, a 'science of science'. It is a regional theory of knowledge built out of the scientific activity itself rather than a unified theory of knowledge based on a set of abstract propositions founded on the idea of an immutable reason and an isolated and transcendent knowing subject. But Bourdieu, as a philosopher converted to sociology at a time when the social sciences expanded in France (Heilbron 2015), went beyond Bachelard. Bachelard was close to a sociology of science when he talked about the 'social relations of science' (Bachelard 1972: 54) and the intersubjectivity of knowledge within the 'scientific city' (Bachelard 1951: 16). But Bourdieu went further and offered a coherent sociological model with his conception of the scientific field (Bourdieu 1975). Likewise, in analysing our epistemic unconscious, Bourdieu transformed 'the psychoanalysis of the objective knowledge' (Bachelard 2002) into the sociology of the sociology.

Among scholars who are intimately familiar with Bourdieu's work, these four short texts will not radically change their views. But others may discover a new dimension of it, related to a central problem of social science: the fact that sociologists are both subject and object of their scientific inquiry. According to Bourdieu, this social situation must be controlled by an ethical practice of scientific reflexivity, which means always applying the tools of sociology to sociologists themselves.

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