

Bourdieu by Bourdieu

by Jacques Hamel

Pierre Bourdieu declared that sociology has the power to reflect on itself, and in particular to reflect on its own scientificity. Four rare or previously unpublished texts serve to illustrate this doctrine, the implications of which are still open to debate.

Reviewed: Pierre Bourdieu, *Retour sur la réflexivité*, texts collected and presented by Jérôme Bourdieu and Johan Heilbron, Éditions de l'Ehess, 2022. 136 pp., €8.

Twenty years have already passed since Pierre Bourdieu's death. To mark the occasion, a number of books have been published to remind us of the continuing relevance of his reflections on sociology, the discipline in which he became something of a figurehead. On the initiative of Jérôme Bourdieu and Johan Heilbron, *Retour sur la réflexivité* was published in 2022, presenting in one short work four of Bourdieu's texts on reflexivity that are little known or even entirely new to readers. The collection opens with an unpublished text from 1967, "Épistémologie et sociologie de la sociologie" ("Epistemology and sociology of sociology"), based on an oral contribution to a debate at the Sorbonne entitled "Les sciences humaines pour quoi? Formalisation et modèles" ("What are human sciences for? Formalization and models"). It is followed by an article originally published in German, which made it difficult for French-speaking readers to grasp Bourdieu's distinction between "narcissistic reflexivity and scientific reflexivity". Next, readers will discover another unpublished manuscript: "Projet d'histoire sociale des sciences sociales" ("Project for a social history of the social sciences"), which is in fact based on Bourdieu's largely improvised oral presentation given as an introduction to the second year of his seminar entitled *Histoire sociale des*

sciences sociales. The final text in the collection is "La cause de la science. Comment l'histoire sociale des sciences sociales peut servir le progrès de ces sciences?" ("The cause of science. How the social history of the social sciences can contribute to their progress"), first delivered orally, then edited for publication as an introduction to the two issues of the journal *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales* devoted to *L'histoire sociale des sciences sociales* ("The social history of the social sciences").

Sociology of science and sociology of sociology

The collection is particularly well presented by its editors. Its common thread is the need for reflexivity, which "has become an inescapable principle in the human and social sciences and is one of Pierre Bourdieu's major contributions" (p. 9) to sociology. In a nutshell, *Retour sur la réflexivité* is essentially about the epistemological vigilance to which sociologists must adhere, over and above "the instruments of logic defended by certain philosophers of science or 'methodology'" (p. 13) that are often used to demonstrate objectivity.

To Bourdieu's mind, it should be recognized that, compared to the natural sciences, "sociology contains within itself the power to reflect on itself, and in particular to reflect on its own scientificity" (p. 34). Sociological theory enables scholars, above all sociologists,

"to escape the social conditions of which they, like everyone else, are the product [...] on [the] condition that they arm themselves with knowledge of the social determinations that may influence them and, in particular, with the scientific analysis of all the constraints and limitations linked to a given position and trajectory in a field, in an effort to neutralize the effects of these determinations." (p. 57).

Reflexivity is therefore essential in both science and sociology, and, for Bourdieu, "involves a process of objectivation" (p. 67), driven in this case by the sociological theory he sought to develop (see Gingras, 2004). Put succinctly, Bourdieu's theory seeks to determine an individual's social position, for example, in relation to the capital they possess—i.e., the resources and powers they are endowed with—and the mobilization of this capital according to *habitus*, which are the dispositions they employ in the form of "mental and bodily schemes of perception, thought and action" (Bourdieu, 1992, p. 24), arising from the constraints underlying the relationships into which they have entered over the course of their life. In this

theoretical register, the combination of capital and habitus determines the position occupied in the field, which is perceived in various ways (economic, political, cultural, scientific, academic, etc.) as a "space of objective relations". The theory, conceptualized as a kind of social geometry (see Crozier, 2002 and Gauthier, 2012), is thus developed objectively under the formula capital ∫ habitus → position/field, which is capable of determining the position occupied by situating it in relation to other positions identifiable by points, between which lies the web of objective relations that Bourdieu associates with the field. With regard to analysis—in this case of the scientific field—the distribution of points makes it possible to ascertain that certain individuals—here, theorists or researchers—are in a dominant position, while others occupy a dominated position, with the former thus holding a power of domination over the latter, a power by virtue of which the dominant can impose a biased understanding of objectivity because they lack the social position required to demonstrate their legitimacy.

The objectification of the objectifying subject through sociological self-analysis

In this way, reflexivity centered on the objectification of the scholar, i.e., the "objectifying subject", requires exercising "epistemological vigilance"; Bourdieu conceives this as "self-analysis" which, "applied to itself, the knowing subject, and more precisely to the social universe in which this subject is inserted" (p. 67), thus exposes the social determinations that give rise, for example, to scholastic biases (p. 55), whether conscious or unconscious, which may compromise the objectivity of the scientific explanatory endeavor that sociology wishes to embrace.

However, self-analysis on an individual scale can quickly turn into a rather self-indulgent exercise. The "objectivizing subject" can, intentionally or otherwise, orchestrate reflexivity by demonstrating, with theory at the core—i.e., in the light of the analysis of the species of capital with which they are endowed and according to their dispositions in the form of the habitus employed—that they are in an ideal position to give the sociological knowledge they produce the prestige of objectivity. Bourdieu's brief analysis of himself shortly before his death, published in *Science de la science et réflexivité* (2001) and *Esquisse pour une auto-analyse* (2004), goes some way toward illustrating this possibility.

Nevertheless, Bourdieu is sensitive to this challenge, not to say problem, particularly for sociologists, and aptly observes that "the conditions for a collective socio-analysis must be established, since each researcher can only illusorily make the sociology of his/her own sociology [...] in order to go beyond a 'self-socio-analysis', which risks being just another way of putting oneself in a state of social impeccability" (p. 41), in order to demonstrate objectivity when conducting sociological research. He describes socio-analysis as taking place under the guardianship of the *collective intellect*, bringing together researchers who are resolutely committed to having their counterparts identify prejudices, biases and categorizations, among other things, that are likely to distort the "objectification of the social world" by failing to conform to the position that is ideally required from a sociological point of view. Yet, in this case, is objectification problematic only because the social position in question does not conform, or does it also stem from a lack of rigor in the use of the "instruments of logic"?

Opposition to "epistemocentrism": limitations and failings of socio-analysis

As we can see, for Bourdieu, the return to the self that is implicit in reflexivity is conceived in purely sociological terms. His observations on the subject stand in stark contrast to ethnomethodology or the "egological point of view" advocated by Alvin Gouldner (1970), according to which it is "sufficient to make explicit the 'lived experience' of the knowing subject" (p. 46)—in this case, that of sociologists when they produce sociological explanations. Beyond this, it is also necessary to "objectify the social conditions of possibility of this lived experience and, more precisely, the act of objectification" (p. 46).

Although this theoretical and political view that social determinations play an influential role in the development of science—of all sciences, including, of course, sociological theory—is undoubtedly relevant, it is difficult to understand Bourdieu's opposition to epistemology in the rather caricatured guise of "epistemocentrism", repeated numerous times in the 125-page book. The blind spot of scientific activity is in fact a kind of "scholarly ethnocentrism" that consists in "ignoring everything that makes the specific difference between theory and practice, and in projecting into the description and analysis of practices the representation that the analyst can have of

them because s/he is external to the object, and observes it from afar and from above" (p. 54). As we have seen, Bourdieu considers this "epistemocentrism" to be related solely to the emphasis placed on methodology and instruments of logic by certain philosophers of science.

However, the subject is not without its nuances. Epistemology, represented in particular by Gilles-Gaston Granger, considers science to be knowledge "by concept [and method] intended to produce a distinct representation of the object we seek to know" (Granger, 1986, p. 120). In other words, science corresponds to an activity, if not a task, that is certainly relative to social determinations, but can by no means be reduced to them, since the representation produced with this intention mobilizes means, both theoretical and methodological, whose elucidation makes it possible to demonstrate their objectivity on the spot, regardless of the researchers' social position. With this task duly set out and made public, it becomes possible, under these conditions, to confirm its rigor and, at the same time, to give the explanation thus expressed its objective value. The representation that the sociological analyst may have of the practice is certainly "external to the object", not because we "observe it from afar and from above", but because we envisage it for another reason and with another *aim*: to produce it in a way that is distinct from actual practice, in order to explain it by means of concepts and methods whose implementation needs to be clarified, in order to guarantee its accuracy and its "potential" to account for what we seek to know and explain. If we are willing to subscribe to this characterization of science, it is difficult here to reduce reflection on the underlying work to "epistemological blather" (p. 86) when defining reflexivity.

In this respect, Bourdieu seems paradoxically to be a victim of his conception of reflexivity, which helps scholars to gain awareness of "the social conditions of which they are the product" by arming themselves with "knowledge of the social determinations that may influence them". If we adopt it and limit ourselves to it, we can indeed think—in the terms of his theory—that sociology is certainly in a good position to expose the "social conditions of the act of objectification in relation to philosophy (see p. 86 ff.) and to the philosophy of science, but it is surely wrong to regard epistemology as mere blather likely to compromise or, worse still, nullify the reflexivity needed to give science (including sociology) its objectivity and the rigor expected of explanations put forward in its name. Sociology may be well placed to explore reflexivity from the point of view of the social determinations that influence scholars as they develop their analyses, but it is nevertheless essential to reflect on the work by which their theories take shape in the light of epistemology, beyond

Bourdieu's sociological observations on reflexivity, since occupying the right social position is not enough for scholars to explain objectively. They can surely be in a "state of social impeccability" without at the same time conforming to the theoretical and methodological rigor that also gives substance to the epistemological vigilance derived from reflexivity.

Further reading:

- Pierre Bourdieu, *Microcosmes. Théorie des champs*, Paris, Raisons d'agir, 2021.
- Pierre Bourdieu, *Esquisse pour une auto-analyse*, Paris, Raisons d'agir, 2004.
- Pierre Bourdieu, *Science de la science et réflexivité*, Paris, Raisons d'agir, 2001.
- Pierre Bourdieu (with Loïc Wacquant), *Réponses*, Paris, Seuil, 1992.
- Jacques Crozier, « Géométrie dans l'espace social », *Revue internationale de philosophie*, vol. 56, n° 220, 2002, pp. 195-225.
- Claude Gautier, *La force du social. Enquête philosophique sur la sociologie des pratiques de Pierre Bourdieu*, Paris, Éditions du Cerf, 2012.
- Yves Gingras, « Réflexivité et sociologie de la connaissance scientifique », in Louis Pinto, Gisèle Sapiro and Patrick Champagne (ed.), *Pierre Bourdieu, sociologue*, Paris, Fayard, 2004, pp. 337-347.
- Alvin Gouldner, *The Coming Crisis of Western Sociology*, New York, Basic Books, 1970.
- Gilles-Gaston Granger, « Pour une épistémologie du travail scientifique », in Jean Hamburger (ed.), *La philosophie des sciences aujourd'hui*, Paris, Gauthier-Villars, 1986, pp. 111-129.

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