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Trails for critical developments of Bourdieu's sociology

Bruno Frère

brunofrere@hotmail.com

University of Liège

Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales

I. Introduction: for or against Pierre Bourdieu

Pierre Bourdieu died in Paris on the 23rd of January 2002. He left some 40 book-length essays and over 200 articles. Unpublished texts are being brought out *en masse*, and much more is to come. Even before his death, sociology textbooks presented his genetic structuralism (which he sometimes also called structuralist constructivism in opposition to Bloor's or Latour's relativist constructivism¹) as "one of the most significant [sociologies] to appear in France after the war."² Despite the fact that textbooks and sociology courses cannot avoid mentioning Bourdieu, and that the public at large is in general favourably inclined towards him, the scientific community is increasingly divided. On one hand, his faithful French-speaking followers maintain that his theory is a genuine "symbolic revolution, a new way to perceive the social world."³ On the other hand, we have those he used to call his most "fervent enemies." J. Verdès-Leroux, one of his earliest followers, contends today that Pierre Bourdieu's sociology is merely an "ideological discourse" and a "scientific mythology" which develops a "vindictive vision of the social world."⁴ Jeffrey C. Alexander writes that P. Bourdieu's texts are "so poor and deterministic that they are unable to offer either the theoretical, or the empirical resources required to understand modern societies, let alone to evaluate them."⁵

¹ P. Bourdieu, *Science de la science et réflexivité*, Paris, Raisons d'agir, 2001, p. 41.

² P. Corcuff, *Les nouvelles sociologies*, Paris, Nathan, 1995, pp. 41-42.

³ L. Pinto, *P. Bourdieu et la théorie du monde social*, Paris, Albin-Michel, 1998, p. 224.

⁴ J. Verdès-Leroux, *Le savant et le politique, essai sur le terrorisme de Pierre Bourdieu*, Paris, Grasset, 1998, p. 237-238.

⁵ J-C. Alexander, *La réduction. Critique de Bourdieu*, translated by N. Zaccai-Reyners, Paris, Cerf, 2000, pp. 120 and 25.

Along with some commentators, I believe that “absolute detestation or outright rejection are pointless. Yet But sterile shows of support or praise are not much healthier than sterile questioning. In my opinion, true scientific respect towards a work (and its author) is expressed in rigorous discussion and evaluation and not in the endless repetition of concepts, established arguments, etc.”⁶ This project may seem ambitious, for discussing Bourdieu’s theses entails a discussion of all those influences which allowed him to develop them. “One finds in them multiple interpretative schemes drawn from the international heritage of research in social and human sciences. [...] An outright condemnation and rejection of his entire work amounts to the unintentional rejection of intellectual schemes or habits he drew from a large number of works by authors such J. Austin, G. Bachelard, E. Benveniste, N. Chomsky, E. Durkheim, N. Elias, S. Freud, J. Piaget, E. Husserl, E. Kant, G. W. Leibniz, C. Levi-Strauss, M. Mauss, K. Marx, M. Merleau-Ponty, J-P Sartre, M. Weber, L. Wittgenstein, etc.”⁷

It is unfortunate, that once established, Bourdieu’s system became a rigid reading grid of the world, which was meant to apply to an increasingly wider range of fields (religion, education, politics, journalism, economy, art, the intellectual world, etc) without taking into account the fact that a correct understanding of some situations requires the application of other paradigms. As they hardly considered the evolution of sociology beyond their review *Les Actes de la Recherche en Sciences Sociales*, Bourdieu and his followers may have fallen into the trap of “a routinisation of the production, of the repeated and repetitive application of established processes,” a trap they used to denounce themselves.⁸ They use repeatedly their key concepts while it may have been necessary to refine and qualify them further. In his commentary, Alexander states that Bourdieu’s model is designed to be repeated and reproduced on demand: “practices are transformed into habitus, and both practices and habitus are superseded by unconscious strategisations which fit the domination structures.”⁹ And this holds true at any time and in every social group. We should therefore qualify and criticise some aspects of Bourdieu’s theories. For “a self-closure with an automatic application to various fields of investigation, without challenging the foundations or allowing debate, means

⁶ B. Lahire, “Pour un sociologie à l’état vif,” in *Le travail sociologique de Pierre Bourdieu*, Paris, La découverte, 2001, pp. 5-20 (p. 17-18).

⁷ Ibid., pp. 10 and 11.

⁸ P. Bourdieu, *Les règles de l’art, genèse et structure du champ littéraire*, Paris, Seuil, 1992, p. 352.

⁹ J-C. Alexander, *La réduction. Critique de Pierre Bourdieu, Op. Cit.*, p. 97.

only one thing: fossilization.”¹⁰ I think that “if one has to start thinking from Pierre Bourdieu, one also has to think away from him.”¹¹

This is the thesis we can develop from this intention: Bourdieu’s sociology could transcend its limitations by taking into account the wide fields explored by those authors he quotes to build his own theories yet which he hauntingly disregards. His thinking ought to be diversified and new research areas should be opened. The authors whose works he drew upon can be presented on a spectrum: from Freud (he accepts his concept of the “unconscious,” but goes beyond it) to Wittgenstein (whom he quotes as an absolute authority and never calls into question). Between these, we can place the authors we mentioned above (Weber, Durkheim, Levi-Strauss, Bachelard, Marx, Merleau-Ponty, etc.). They are all close to some extent to one of these poles. Some of these authors (such as Husserl) are quoted and criticized. In this case, they are treated in a way which is similar to the way Bourdieu treated Freud. Others (such as Austin or Bachelard) are used without being challenged, which is the way Bourdieu approached Wittgenstein. Unfortunately, we lack the necessary time to detail these intermediary positions. I will therefore limit the scope of this presentation to the treatment of Freud’s and Wittgenstein’s works, and I will try to show that a different usage of these authors’ achievements might lead to a diversification of Bourdieu’s sociology.

II. From Freud to a psychological sociology

Bourdieu’s objective is to reveal the unconscious mechanisms through which social and collective elements exist in each individual. He defines habitus as an individual’s set of dispositions, tendencies, orientations, and actions which originate from his social group. They permeate his behaviour and everyday life without him being aware of it. It is indeed an unconscious without its mentalist and psychological yoke. Bourdieu interprets it through the habitus. The unconscious no longer points exclusively to a representation which exists in the mind but is unknown (and which may [...] be detected in the psyche and made consciously known *a posteriori* by the psychoanalyst). It is the set of society’s influences over our bodily behaviour which operates without our knowledge.¹² The habitus displaces the unconscious of the psyche to the socialised activity of the body. Bourdieu was relentless in his attempts to get

¹⁰ P. Mounier, *Pierre Bourdieu, une introduction*, Paris, La Découverte, 2001, p. 214.

¹¹ O. Favereau, “L’économie du sociologue ou: penser (l’orthodoxie) à partir de P. Bourdieu,” in *Le travail sociologique de P. Bourdieu*, Op. Cit., p. 307, 255-314).

¹² P. Bourdieu, *Méditations pascaliennes*, p. 199, S. Freud, “Notes sur l’inconscient en psychanalyse,” in *Métapsychologie*, Op. Cit., pp. 173-185, et *Méditations pascaliennes*, p. 169.

rid of psychoanalysis and psychology in order to focus on the unconscious social conditions of human actions: the habitus, that is the set of matrices holding in each individual's body the product of past experiences.¹³ What we are not aware of, or rather what makes up our unconscious, is in fact our incorporated social past, embodied in us in the form of dispositions.

But what are these dispositions, these matrices? Some agree on the fact that Bourdieu does not provide any empirical descriptions of these elements. It is therefore difficult not to see them as black boxes (it is the term used by Boudon and Grignon). Lahire shows that Bourdieu ignored that in the 70s and 80s Freudian psychology defined such terms as disposition, mental reproduction of social structures, etc. Not taking these into account prevented him from answering the following questions: How is it possible for various socialising experiences to inhabit the same body? How do they intervene later in an individual's life? etc. Bourdieu never details what he means by "the dispositions of an individual." "We do not have a single example of a social construction of incorporation or transmission of these dispositions. We have no indication as to the way they can be built or the way they operate."¹⁴

The following questions arise: Would dispositions fade away progressively or would they disappear through a lack of actualisation? Is it possible to destroy them through an effort of counter-socialisation when they become consciously known? Nothing in Bourdieu's sociology helps us answer these questions. This is the reason why we need to go beyond the ritual invocation of the incorporated past. *The psychology of the unconscious, inspired by Freud* should show how we incorporate a whole series of habits and how we experience their actualisation. We will probably discover a diversity of ways in which the habitus is incarnated and actualised: Habits may be interiorised and updated through constraint or obligation; it can happen through passion, desire or envy, or even unconscious routine.¹⁵ Psychology could also study the question why some of our dispositions operate and are updated in some social contexts and not in others. Bourdieu does not allow us to understand how an individual lives in a plurality of social worlds nor his own internal plurality: which dispositions does he/she invest in the various universes he has to explore? Bourdieu thinks that the dispositions of an individual's habitus are designed only to adapt to the sphere they come from. According to Lahire, the more social contexts an individual experiences, the more heterogeneous and un-

¹³ B. Lahire, "De la théorie de l'habitus à une sociologie psychologique," in *Le travail sociologique de P. Bourdieu, Op. Cit.*, p. 124 (pp. 121-152).

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 129.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 133.

unified his set of dispositions, habits and learnings will be. It will vary depending on the social context he is evolving in. This is the reason why some dispositions may disappear. Lahire is currently developing a psychological sociology in order to grasp the plurality of the individual. It allows the comparison of practices in various social universes. He believes that it is necessary to unfold the social reality within the individual, which is never as smooth and uniform as Bourdieu might lead us to believe. A lot may be expected from projects such as the one elaborated by J-P Bronckart and M-N Schurmans (a psychologist and a sociologist) in which they propose to associate every level of the habitus' manifestations with the matching psychological conceptual construction: elementary language and psyche, inter-psyche, mental models and psychological archaeology. They recommend Freud and Piaget as resources in this endeavour.¹⁶

III. Common language and intellectual language

I would now like to study an author who stands at the other end of Bourdieu's influences, namely Wittgenstein. In total opposition to his treatment of Freud's work, he never contradicts the German thinker and quotes him only in order to praise him. I would like to show that he leaves a whole part of Wittgenstein's work untouched. I believe however that if these ignored elements were taken into account, they might serve as an interesting tool for pragmatic sociology.

Bourdieu already uses Wittgenstein in developing his critical vocabulary. He criticises "prenotions" and the prejudices deriving from the spontaneous sociology of the uninitiated. He argues that "ordinary language which goes unnoticed contains in its vocabulary and syntax common words which the sociologist cannot but use. When the prenotions (prejudices) take on the appearance of scholarly developments, they sneak into the "intellectual" discourse without losing their credibility."¹⁷ According to Bourdieu, Wittgenstein's analyses lead us to doubt the idea "that facts have to match with the images and prejudices that thrive in our language."¹⁸ He believes that these images are necessarily illusory because they originate in a mythological and a non scientific analysis of the social world performed by lay people.

¹⁶ J-P. Bronckart et M-N Schurmans, "P. Bourdieu et J. Piaget: habitus, schèmes et construction du psychologique", dans *Le travail sociologique de P. Bourdieu, Op. Cit.*, p. 173 (pp. 153-173).

¹⁷ P. Bourdieu, J-C. Chamboredon, J-C. Passeron, *Le métier de sociologue*, Paris, Mouton, 1973, p. 37.

¹⁸ L. Wittgenstein, *Le Cahier bleu et le cahier brun*, translation by G. Durand, Paris, Gallimard, 1965 (1st ed.. 1958, Oxford University Press), p. 89.

I think that Bourdieu does violence to Wittgenstein's thinking regarding the identification of the sources of illusions conveyed in our language: In Wittgenstein's mind, mythology does not originate in the social agents' common language, but rather in the intellectual language itself (which is the same as the philosophical language). It is held that intellectual language is "a terrain safe to tread on. In reality it is a treacherous swamp." It is only when "we return to the point of view of the common meaning, [that] this impression of uncertainty dissipates."¹⁹ In Stanley Cavell's words, we find in Wittgenstein "a fervent quest for the ordinary and the familiar."²⁰ It protects us from the fascination of abstract representations which put a distance between us and reality. This does not mean that there are no false representations in common language: Wittgenstein writes that common language "continuously integrates scholarly concepts even when they are vague or inexact."²¹ It is as if philosophy was the element which threatens to introduce the error into common language. Why is that? It is so because philosophy is the opposite of what it should be: "a critical thinking which banishes explanations, constructions of hypotheses and only shows the phenomena of the language without trying to explain." If philosophy remained faithful to its role, it would express "what everyone agrees upon, what we all know but do not see because of its excessive familiarity." "The problem does not lie with the common meaning," but in the overly intellectual language which freezes the meaning of things.²² It is arguably "philosophy's task to analyse ordinary concepts and to give us a more transparent perspective on them. But it should not try to replace or transform our common practical concepts with rationally reconstructed artificial concepts which satisfy the demands of theoretical discourse."²³

To sum up, Wittgenstein fears that common language is contaminated with intellectual (philosophical) contradictions. As far as Bourdieu is concerned, he defines the task of critical and sociological science as that of the intellectual who refuses to accept "the undisputable evidence of the common meaning."²⁴ It is always necessary to go under or behind the false evidence conveyed in the discourse of the uninitiated in order to establish the true meaning of social facts. However J. Bouveresse defines Wittgenstein's thinking as the "exact opposite of a philosophy of the deep." The element which he thinks is characteristic of "the philosophical

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

²⁰ C. Chauviré, *La philosophie dans la boîte noire*, Paris, Kimé, 2000, p. 42.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 103.

²² L. Wittgenstein, *Cours de Cambridge, 1932-1935*, French translation by E. Rigal, Mauvezin, T.E.R., 1993.

²³ R. Schusterman, "Bourdieu et la philosophie anglo-américaine", translation by C. Fournier, in *Critique*, n° 579/580, août-septembre 1995, pp. 595-609 (p. 605).

²⁴ P. Bourdieu, J-C. Chamboredon, J-C. Passeron, *Le métier de sociologue*, *Op. Cit.*, p. 78.

method is precisely the fact that there is nothing hidden to be discovered, that generally everything can be accessed at the surface.”²⁵ Bourdieu, by contrast, wants to get under this deceiving surface of the common language, which should always be the object of sociological suspicion.²⁶ The common meaning should not be trusted. Sociology has to succeed where philosophy failed by guarding itself against prenotions, ‘schematic and summary representations’ deriving from ordinary language.²⁷

Wittgenstein’s second argument departs from this requirement. He writes in *Philosophical Investigations* that it is difficult to see that we should stay in contact with the objects of everyday thinking and that we should not go astray while trying vainly to explain the latest niceties of the world. He is not interested in the idea that “we should think against our prejudices.”²⁸ Reflection should describe real everyday usage of the language rather than undermine it. Wittgenstein asked intellectuals whether this language was too materialistic or too crude. It may be so for Bourdieu, who sees it as generally rife with prejudices and illusions. This brings about the following question: Would Bourdieu be opposed to Wittgenstein’s hope to see the birth of “a philosophy of the common meaning”? I believe it to be the case. Had he taken into account this aspect of Wittgenstein’s work, he might have opened a dialogue with pragmatic sociologists such as Latour, Callon, Boltanski. Only with them is it possible to continue the development of Wittgenstein’s project: to study primitive instances of common languages with the assumption that “supposing that these languages are incomplete is an erroneous argument.”²⁹ These sociologies receive *a priori* the discourse of the actors as the result of a coherent interpretative effort. They take into account “ordinary speaking subjects.” These subjects co-state the discourse which constantly intervenes in the construction of meaning. They are able to construct and deconstruct their practices. We are far from the discourse rife with illusions which Bourdieu talks about. For L. Boltanski and L. Thévenot, “people, just like scientists, continuously suspect, ask questions and test the world in their everyday life.”³⁰ In some situations “the actors expose and unfold their actions

²⁵ J. Bouveresse, *Philosophie, mythologie et pseudo-science*, Paris, L’Éclat, 1991, p. 20.

²⁶ It should be noted that my reading diverges from R. Schusterman who argues that Bourdieu shares with Wittgenstein the same “appreciation of the ordinary” (R. Schusterman, “Bourdieu et la philosophie anglo-américaine,” *Art. Cit.*, p. 605.).

²⁷ P. Bourdieu, J-C. Chamboredon, J-C. Passeron, *Le métier de sociologue*, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 28 and 36.

²⁸ L. Wittgenstein, *Les investigations philosophiques*, précédé du *Tractatus philosophicus*, translation by P. Klosowski, Paris, Gallimard, 1961, pp. 163 and 164.

²⁹ L. Wittgenstein, *Les cours de Cambridge*, 1932-1935, *Op. Cit.*, p. 126.

³⁰ L. Boltanski et L. Thévenot, *De la justification, les économies de la grandeur*, Paris, Gallimard, 1991, p. 54.

verbally”. Using language, they attempt to generalise and put facts together. They use language in a manner which is similar to the scientific usage of language.”³¹

A sociology which would be able to fully use Wittgenstein’s work could become one of these performative sociologies “which associate with actors to produce with them the theory of their practices with the assumption that they have the required competencies to do so.”³²

VI. Conclusion

I hope that I have managed to show that a different approach to those writers who inspired Bourdieu (whether he later criticized them or not) can help us put some distance from his interpretation of their work and allow us to use or construct new tools for our analysis.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 436.

³² M. Callon, “Ni intellectuel engagé, ni intellectuel dégagé: la double stratégie de l’attachement et du détachement”, dans *Sociologie du travail*, n° 41, 1999, pp. 65-78.