

FAKSIMIL & AVSKRIFT

Arkiverad under datum 1985-05-01

Donald Broady, "L'école de Bourdieu and life stories",
Biography and Society/Biographie et société, Newsletter, nr 4,
May 1985, pp. 16–17.

Stalsburg

VPR

BIOGRAPHY AND SOCIETY / BIOGRAPHIE ET SOCIETE

Research Committee 38
International Sociological Association
Comité de Recherche 38
Association Internationale de Sociologie

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L'école de Bourdieu and life histories

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Pierre Bourdieu, ethnologist and sociologist and now holder of the chair in sociology at the Collège de France, has always made frequent use of biographical material and biographical methods in his studies. So have several of his disciples. See, for example, Luc Boltanski's extensive monograph on the higher officials in France, Les cadres. La formation d'un group social (Éd. de Minuit 1982), and Francine Muel-Dreyfus' Le métier d'éducateur. Les instituteurs de 1900, les éducateurs spécialisés de 1968 (Éd. de Minuit 1983); the latter is a study on the constitution of the social meaning of both elementary school teachers work in the beginning of the century and a modern type of social work in the late sixties.

In addition, l'École de Bourdieu takes an "autobiographical" stand. Ever since his first ethnological research in the late fifties and early sixties, Bourdieu has been preoccupied with questions concerning the relations between the observer and those observed, the researcher on one hand and those whose practices he examines, on the other. According to one of Bourdieu's most fundamental dicta, a social researcher ought to make himself clear about this relation, which not the least means making himself clear about his own biography, his dispositions, how he is positioned inside the scientific field, and the trajectory that brought him there, i. e., that brought those dispositions to that position.

In other words, the sociology of scientific knowledge is not merely a subdiscipline among others, but should be a foundation for all rigorous work in the field of social science; and the social scientist should engage in a perpetual effort to execute a "social psycho-analysis" of himself and his group, i. e., to trace how his own habitus was formed and his entry into the scientific community made possible, etc.

In his most recent book, Homo academicus (Éd. de Minuit 1984), Bourdieu's undertaking is to map out a sociological reconstruction of his own terrain, the competition field of the French university. A "field" in Bourdieu's sense exists where people are struggling over something that they share, something specific that is at stake - in this case academic recognition. Bourdieu has made similar analyses before, of, for example, the fields of economic and religious power in France, inhabited by respectively the leading managing directors and the bishops (Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales, N° 20-21, 1978, pp. 3-82, and N° 44-45, 1983, pp. 2-53). This time his own colleagues, the university professors and researchers, are scrutinized: their different trajectories and holdings of different kinds of symbolic capital, their struggles and alliances, stakes and strategies.