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Reflexivity and the object of social science

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Rarefaction and contempt

There is something elevated, condescending, yet base, corrupt, hence dishonourable, in the operation of our most respected intellectual institutions. Nietzsche's rarefied and frank exclamation at the outset of *Anti-Christ* may serve as a marker of the arrogance which accompanies intellectual rectitude: "One must be superior to mankind in force, in *loftiness* of soul – in contempt."¹ This is not only one of Nietzsche's enraged and irrational diatribes against the baseness of activities all too human, mundane and inferior to the community of kindred spirits in which he places himself and his "rightful readers", but also a self-understanding of those elected to the higher grounds of the bodies of *rarefied comprehension*, spheres of the labyrinthine windings of legitimate discourse. Nietzsche's formulation is a most vivid expression of the ethos of the autonomous principle of hierarchisation, to which Bourdieu refers as the *specific principle of legitimacy* operative in the field of restricted production or the "sub-field of production-for-producers"². The intention of Nietzsche may be wholly different from that of e.g. Mallarmé and the symbolists, or Baudelaire, presented by Bourdieu as prototypes of the autonomous principle of art production, embodied in the slogan *l'art pour l'art*, but the spirit is the same – the formulation of an index of *rarefaction*, a safeguard against trespassers lacking sufficient eminence into sacred territory. It signifies a specific mark of distinction, beyond reach for the uninitiated.

The very machinery and machinations intrinsic to such partly isolated spheres betray a certain inaccessibility, constituting the structuring principle to which any aspiring entrant must submit. The processes of recognition are tak-

¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols/The Anti-Christ*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, Middlesex 1990 [1889/1895], p. 114.

² Pierre Bourdieu, "The Field of Cultural Production, or: The Economic World Reversed", pp. 29–73 in *The Field of Cultural Production*, Polity, Cambridge 1993, p. 46.

ing place within institutional frames making *any* individual agent, even those most aloof, more or less dispossessed and acquiescent to the rules of the game.

Those most involved, indeed *caught up*, in a certain activity tend to see the presuppositions, assumptions made as not only *necessary* but also *inevitable* and *natural*, being beyond question. The presuppositions are both *known* (the agents in a specific field of cultural production know what to be regarded as valuable, what to account as true or false, and what kind of argument is to be seen as valid), *recognised* (these values are commonly and generally accepted and approved) and *misrecognised* in that the real grounds, motives, causes for the principles involved are unknown. They are *arbitrary*, *contingent* and historically determined, but are regarded as natural, obvious, self-evident and transhistorical. Most actions are not performed in accordance with the calculated rationality of the goal oriented actor of rational choice theories, but are inspired by a *lex insita*, a law inscribed in the body, a *habitus*, *necessity made into virtue*, embodied objective constraints: "Real mastery of this logic is only possible for someone who is completely mastered by it, who possesses it, but so much that he is totally possessed by it, in other words depossessed."³

Inauguration

The installation of a new master on the throne to a prestigious office, whether sacral or secular, while securing continuity to the institution, offers a point of possible reform, a stage for potential breaching of the norms and rules safeguarding the establishment. The congregation is held in suspense as to what the new master would find appropriate for change. We find both a readiness to accept certain changes, but also a need for continuity and recognition, securing identification for the members of a partly new organisation. There is a hiatus in the processual flow, which justifies an alteration of direction, but a bridge to tradition, secured by the ornamentation of the ceremony, has to be offered. In many ways, these two aspects are closely linked, perhaps most obviously in the appointment of new leaders in the fields of cultural production, where a "return to the origins" is invoked in order to criticise the immediate predecessors and yet securing ancestry to a greater and truer, unadulterated cause. Such a call for a return, a restoration of an alleged lost foundation, is also powerful means in the hands of newcomers to get a foothold in the semiclosed world of consecration.

Turn on, tune in, drop out. Being turned on and having found the right attunement as well as tune, tone and tenor, a consecrated *maître* is thus also able to drop out from some more trivial demands which haunt the novice or the dominated in any field. The institution and the lofty status accredited to those posi-

³ Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, Polity, Cambridge 1990a [1980], p. 14.

tioned at the top of the hierarchy, makes the internalised command (of the correct phrasings, posture, in short *distinctive manners*) serve a highly functional purpose in its structured and structuring power over the whole situation, to the effect that the succeder naturally finds his way to transgress the boundaries which the institution is there to settle. Although there are limits, which are not to be exceeded, the exceptionality of the situation brings about a situational logic in which the frontier is repositioned and the economy of the field may be rearranged by force of the inaugural act. The most extreme example of such a crowning in which the institution functions as secondary to the very act of consecration is of course that of Napoleon, when he, in an absolute gesture of omnipotence, puts the crown on his own head and thereby gives flesh to his own statement of being the one *who makes circumstances*. In the case of two more recent maîtres, Foucault and Bourdieu, such a *complete* restructuring, in which the subject and object is shifted in the act of delegation, did not materialise. Still, both events were used as platforms from which the pretender proffered formulations aimed at the very institution – or rather the type of institutions which has this kind of significance accorded to its rites – in which the ritual was staged.

Objectivation and reflexivity

A rhetorical trick in which the speaker opens his speech by declaring that he is not much of speaker is rather common, but here, the reflexive prelude was not a humble gesture of modesty but one of supreme confidence and lofty, if not contemptuous, panoptic vision over not only the immediate scene, but of the field as a whole. The opening remark of Bourdieu is that “[o]ne should be able to deliver a lecture, even an inaugural lecture, without wondering by virtue of what right: the institution is there to set such questions aside, and with it the anguish associated with the arbitrariness of all new beginnings”⁴. Such a formulation may seem puzzling, but is really an introduction to his purpose, to offer a reflexive enquiry into the conditions of possibility of (legitimate) discourse. Who has the right, possibility, capability and means to speak? To whom do we normally accord meaning and attention? In what way is the lecturer, the author, circumscribed by the institutional setting?

Foucault opens by pleading for a relief from his predicament as instigator: “I would really like to have slipped imperceptibly into this lecture /.../ I would have preferred to be enveloped in words, borne way beyond all possible beginnings.”⁵ By this gesture, Foucault, performing his speech twelve years before

⁴ Pierre Bourdieu, “Lecture on the Lecture”, pp. 177–198 in *In Other Words. Essays Towards a Reflexive Sociology*, Polity, Cambridge 1990b [1982], p. 177.

⁵ Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* and *The Discourse on Language*, Pantheon Books, New York 1972, p. 215.

Bourdieu, sets the stage for subsequent involvements in discourse analysis by pointing to an extraindividual element of discourse, much in the manner of Hegel describing the forward march of the Absolute spirit.

While Bourdieu's concern is the lecture, Foucault's is discourse more generally. A lecture is more focussed – involving a sender and an addressee, an originator and a receiver, both of which could be singular or plural – and a message containing some information regarded by the involved parties as useful, truthful, trustworthy etc. *Discourse* is more amorphous, the question of subject (encoder), object (referent, signified) and recipient (decoder) is not definite. Consequently, it is not surprising that Foucault's interest is less in the orator as such or the institution in which the lecture is taking place, but in the universal attributes of discursivity. Foucault treats the speaker or the author paradigmatically as someone who is carried away by the imperative *inner logic* of the discourse itself: “*What does it matter who is speaking?*”, Foucault writes elsewhere, echoing Beckett and comments on this “indifference” – signalling an immanent ethical rule characterising its *modus operandi* rather than its *opus operatum*, the principle rather than its final, or rather transitional offspring:

...today's writing has freed itself from the dimension of expression. Referring only to itself, but without being restricted to the confines of its interiority, writing is identified with its own unfolded exteriority. This means that it is an interplay of signs arranged less according to its signified content than according to the very nature of the signifier.⁶

As a characterisation of this internal operative principle, this has less to do with what Barthes terms the *death of the author*, i.e. his waning as the authoritarian delimiter of meaning as a consequence of the birth of the reader than with the disappearing significance of the author even in the very process of textual conception. Foucault, playing within and against the Saussurean depiction of the sign as an interplay of the signifier and the signified, leaving the question of the referent and the or(igin)ator untouched and the relation between the two aspects or parts of the sign in limbo so as to have a principle at hand founding his, as well as other poststructuralists', *perpetuum mobile*, does not really face the crucial problems for the semantics and sociology of symbolic forms: Of what is this text speaking? Who is speaking? What are the conditions of possibility of this text? etc. These are the truly reflexive questions which Bourdieu ventures to address.

The question of the social conditions of possibility of any discursive act is not adequately addressed by Foucault or his adepts, as their focus is solely on the “field of strategic possibilities” given by the objective problem-situation. In order fully to grasp the significance of any symbolic artefact, the whole space of

⁶ Michel Foucault, “What Is an Author”, pp. 101–120 in *The Foucault Reader*, Paul Rabinow (Ed.), Penguin, Harmondsworth, Middlesex 1984, p. 102.

“external” social as well as “internal” symbolic possibles would have to be reconstructed. Every formation of a work of art or a scientific tractate is a political deed, an intrusion into the very order of the field of objective relations which made it possible in the first place. Every word, every statement, every text is normally both a constative and a performative, and permeated by signification reaching beyond its immediate formulation, thereby restructuring the field in which it is conceived. Therefore, Bourdieu carries his analysis further into the organisation of the field of cultural production in order better to see the genesis, meaning and consequences of a certain discourse.

Struggles of classification

Now, such a reflexive analysis is a much more difficult feat, certain to run into objections from those objectivated. Since the object of the sociologist is saturated with meaning, and among his tasks is the formulation of social taxonomies, he is liable to accusations of being a kind of “terrorist inquisitor”, engaged in “symbolic policing”. The social sphere is to a high degree a battlefield in which different schemes of classifications are debated, the very act of analysis is an intrusion into the field and the analyst himself is questioned, both because the social agents themselves believe they have a complete practical mastery as well as theoretical grasp over their situation, and that no one should have the right to impose an order from outside on these native activities and relations.

We come full circle upon the problematic to which sociology in its best sense always has to address: How is a science of the social sphere possible? How could anyone in the act of comprehension incorporate this very act of comprehension? Is it possible to take a step back from the symbolic struggles and the interests intrinsic to any act of ordering? Is it possible to conceptualize, in Bourdieu’s words, “the space of struggles over classification and the position of the sociologies within this space or in relation to it”⁷, without being caught up in these struggles? Bourdieu does indeed dismiss the idea of the sociologist as an “impartial arbiter” or a “divine spectator”, yet he presents him as someone who has severed all bonds and fidelities to the group out of which he has emerged and who has access to means of transcending the ideologies of the elite to which he now belongs.

Bourdieu suffers from a romanticisation of his own trajectory from the very depths of the populace into high society, making him the parable of the *marginal man*, incomparably competent to unveil the secrets of *both* worlds. Yet, he points to an important, even necessary prerequisite in the formation of a scientific sociology: the “denunciation” of both “populist” as well as “elitist” repre-

⁷ Bourdieu, op. cit. 1990b [1982], p. 181.

sentations. We have to construct our taxonomies and explanatory models independently and often against the lazy preconceptions of common sense. But we must also break with Bourdieu's romantic view of the pure detached social scientist. Although we could hold this refusal to directly take part in the classificatory struggles to be a requirement for a scientific sociology, we have to acknowledge that there is a growing number of scholars whose engagement is primarily political in the way that they take active part in these struggles. For them the Rortyan quest for a furthering the process of Enlightenment by freeing us from the tyranny of "truth" and "objective reality" fits into the scheme provided by standpoint epistemologies and more radical progenies calling for a "liberatory science" and for *strategic theories*, formulated not to obtain truth but to further political aims.⁸ In this quest, radical doubt about objectivity is viewed as a sign of political radicalism and Marx' eleventh thesis on Feuerbach is taken to its extreme so as to efface the first element; change becomes the overriding goal. Very much as pure science in Soviet Russia was regarded as a morbid symptom of class society, postmodern philosophers present the quest for truth and objectivity as morbid symptoms of a mainstream, oppressive logocentrism. Science is thereby reduced to means in a political agenda.

Emancipation and scientific illisio

Such a liberatory science is quite contrary to Bourdieu's call for a social science which strives to conceptualise, not take part of, the struggles:

To break with the ambition, which is that of mythologies, of grounding in reason the arbitrary divisions of the social world, and especially of the division of labour, and thus of providing a logical or cosmological solution to the problem of the classification of humans, sociology must, instead of allowing itself to get caught up in it, take as its object the struggle for the monopoly over the legitimate representation of the social world, that classification struggle which is a dimension of every kind of struggle between classes, be they classes of age, gender or social classes.⁹

Indeed, sociology does free us from the illusion of freedom, by making us aware of the historically contingent nature of social forms, but it does not thereby automatically provide us with the means of transgressing this contingency: We are always-already in a historical, cultural, social and political setting and we have to continually take pains to staying autonomous in relation to the other spheres in society. Furthermore we must endorse and defend the specific inter-

⁸ Cf Richard Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism*, University of Minnesota Press Minneapolis 1982; Alan Sokal & Jean Bricmont, *Intellectual Impostures. Postmodern Philosophers' Abuse of Science*, Profile, London 1998, p. 219.

⁹ Bourdieu, op. cit. 1990b [1982], p. 180.

ests of the scientific field – of obtaining a *true* account without diffidently adjusting it to the powers that be or to a rebellious movement.

The paradoxical enterprise which consists in using a position of authority to speak with authority about what speaking with authority consists of, to give a lecture – and a lesson – but a lecture on freedom from all kinds of lessons, would simply be inconsequential, even self-destructive, if the very ambition of producing a science of belief did not presuppose the belief in science.¹⁰

Thus, this scientific *illusio* has to be shared for social science to be possible and successful. The risk in today's heretical intrusions into social science in the name of radicalism clad in reflexive and historicist and relativist clothes is to dismantle the whole institutional setting for social science in general. Making the departments of social science into political bastions is to condemn them in the long run to a subordinate position within the field of power, as their accumulated prestige will crumble in the face of changes in the political makeup. In order to attain and defend autonomy sociology must stay above or perhaps outside the struggles between dominant or dominated. It will nevertheless have political consequences since it does indeed reveal structures of power and systems of subordination and oppression.

For Bourdieu, the study of the social history of science is a powerful, indeed perhaps *the only* means of “transcending history” – mobilising the instruments of objectivation in the service of guarding us against the slumber of commonsensical dogma, in which our unthought categories of perception and cognition precludes preposterous thoughts and delimits the horizon of reasonable thinking. Jameson's only “absolute” and “transhistorical imperative”: *Always historicize!*¹¹, may also be our means of transcending not only the poststructuralist deadlock, but also of bridging the gap between the different stances in social science: nomothetic vs idiographic, naturalism vs. hermeneutics etc, making us see how a science which becomes the submissive assistant to political causes eventually turns into a degenerating research programme.

We could perhaps recast Marx' thesis thus: *Sociologists have hitherto only tried to change the world in various ways; the point is to understand it, or perhaps more accurately: In order to be able to change the world we have to understand it.* And only an autonomous, rarefied, esoteric and perhaps also contemptuous science could profitably perform this task.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 198.

¹¹ Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious. Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*, Routledge, London 1981, p. 9.