The work of Pierre Bourdieu owes much of its distinctive qualities to its reflexive character, to the incisive and recurrent analysis of what it means to practise social science, to be an academic, or to speak out as an intellectual. The sociology of the intellectual world for Bourdieu is not so much a particular research specialty as an indispensable precondition for social scientific research. Reflexivity in this sense is a working method, recognizable in all of his various undertakings, whether they concern his research and teaching, the publishing of *Liber* and *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, or his current activities in finding ways to redefine and revive the critical role of intellectuals. 1

If, in contrast to this reflexive stance, there is anything lacking in Bourdieu’s writings, it is indeed the plain and spontaneous adherence to the established intellectual models. Bourdieu never quite identified himself with what was readily available, neither with the professorial fate of the academic specialist, nor with the Sartrean figure of the ‘total intellectual’. For a young French philosopher, originating from a province at about maximum distance from the capital, who had made it to the École normale supérieure, it was rather unusual, to say the least, to start ethnographic and sociological fieldwork in Algeria. Bourdieu’s subsequent work, marked by an unfailing refusal of the predominant dichotomies (theory/research, objectivism/subjectivism, holism/individualism), testifies to the same unease with the primary divisions of the academic universe. His inability and unwillingness to be satisfied with the existing options is aptly illustrated by the dictum he quotes from Karl Krauss, the Viennese critic and writer: ‘Were I forced to choose between two evils, I would choose neither one’ (Bourdieu, 1997: 129).

This inclination, visible in his way of constructing sentences and developing arguments, is at the root of acclaimed innovations in various research fields, and has, more generally, led him to conceive of social science as a reflexive endeavour. Bourdieu’s use of neither-nor reasoning is no rhetorical device, commonly employed to nestle oneself comfortably in the middle of two (often fictitious) extremes, but a way of gaining distance from the dominant views, allowing a reflection upon what is at stake for whom, and why some things are conceivable from one point of view, whereas others are not.

This reflexive urge, which simultaneously questions a specific object and those who question the object in question, is present from his earliest work onwards.
In the introduction to *Travail et travailleurs en Algérie* (1963), for example, Bourdieu discusses the relationship between statistics and sociology. The very first sentence of that text, which is about the academic division of labour as an obstacle for a realistic assessment of the question, is marked by such a reflexive turn: ‘Specialists of each science tend to forge an ideology about the other sciences and the relationship these maintain with their own science’ (Bourdieu et al., 1963: 9). Bourdieu then continues about the difficulties that arise in the collaboration between statisticians and sociologists, due to the ‘clear-cut duality of scientific and literary education’.

The sensitivity to the social dynamic of intellectual production and its cognitive consequences was elaborated in *The Craft of Sociology* (1991[1968]) as the need for ‘epistemological vigilance’. The idea of epistemological vigilance subsequently evolved into the more broadly conceived notion of reflexivity. So, more or less from the beginning, Bourdieu’s work is marked by a critical analysis of the relationship researchers have with their object of research.

**A Negative Philosophy**

*Méditations pascaliennes* is, above all, a new building stone to this edifice of a reflexive social science. In this new book Bourdieu first of all returns to a number of topics which have been central to his work for a long time. That procedure in itself is part and parcel of his intellectual habits, and represents a form of reflexivity with regard to his own work. Over the years Bourdieu’s thought has advanced both by tackling new problems and by steadily returning to previous work, rethinking familiar objects and considering them from a different angle than before. Even a rapid comparison of his first work on education with more recent books like *Homo Academicus* (1988[1984]) and *The State Nobility* (1996[1989]) is sufficient to see the fruitfulness of this procedure. The same point can be made by comparing his early papers on cultural consumption and the artistic field with major books such as *Distinction* (1984[1979]) and *The Rules of Art* (1995[1992]).

In *Méditations pascaliennes* Bourdieu returns to some of the most general questions of the human sciences, questions he had addressed especially in *The Logic of Practice* (1990[1980]). Building on his theory of practice, Bourdieu reformulates some of his thoughts, adds new considerations, draws on other material, extends the scope of his arguments, or shifts the emphasis from one aspect to another. Yet this whole movement, familiar to the readers of his work, is executed from a more general point of view than he has adopted so far. At the centre is an anthropological reflection: what can, on the basis of social science research, be said about the human condition? And which illusions systematically obscure the main questions at stake?

Since anthropological interrogations are commonly left to philosophers, much of the debate Bourdieu engages in involves the discipline he was originally trained in. For Bourdieu there are, on the one hand, those philosophers who have
critically examined the presuppositions and modes of reasoning of their discipline; here ordinary language philosophy and pragmatism are his main allies (Austin, Wittgenstein, Dewey, Peirce). On the other hand, there are the interlocutors who are at the centre of contemporary debates (Habermas, Foucault, Rawls), whose work is discussed critically. And in the background there is the figure of Pascal, to whom Bourdieu returns in every chapter and whose presence somehow gives a serene touch to the whole argument. To a certain extent the book also culminates in a philosophical statement, a 'negative philosophy', which calls into question some of the most fundamental presuppositions of theoretical discourse.

Bourdieu typically enters the discussion by raising the question of what it is that allows people to engage in intellectual speculation at all. Which presuppositions are involved in such undertakings and how do they relate to the social conditions that make them possible? The first type of presuppositions involved are those linked to the social position, the trajectory and the gender of the thinking subject. A second type of presuppositions is intrinsic to the doxa of a specific field (artistic, literary, scientific, etc.) and is based on the fundamental belief, the illusio, specific to that field. The third and most profound type of presuppositions are those derived from the doxa of the scholastic condition, the skhole. The scholastic condition rests on its freedom from the necessities of the world of practice. This liberty is the fundamental precondition for any theoretical reflection but engenders specific errors and misrepresentations.

Many of the philosophical illusions, meticulously examined by ordinary language philosophers, are in effect rooted in the skhole, in the scholastic view and the scholastic disposition on which it is based. Bourdieu does not analyze this privileged condition of retreat from a political or a moral point of view. His perspective is an epistemological one: how does the scholastic condition affect the very thinking process it enables?

This sociological epistemology allows Bourdieu to examine a whole range of fundamental distortions of theories of knowledge, morality and aesthetics. In all these cases, the worldview and the habits of thinking of a particular social condition are generalized and supposed to be valid for other social conditions as well. A theoretical view of the world is thus projected on the world of practice. What if professional readers, lectores, profess that the world is a 'text', or, at least, has to be interpreted as a text? Is not this an ethnocentric ontology par excellence? Bourdieu discusses many examples in the fields of knowledge, morality and aesthetics, which are more subtle, arguing that in fact some of the most fundamental theoretical arguments are founded on the same type of intellectual illusion.

The alternative Bourdieu elaborates is subsequently based on those elements which are central to the comprehension of practical logic, and which are most difficult to assess from the point of view of pure theory: habitual action, the dynamics of practical reason, the historical basis of the production of knowledge, bodily dimensions of human action, physical and symbolic violence. *Méditations pascaliennes* is therefore both an authentic 'Bourdieu' and a radical
challenge to contemporary theorizing. Bourdieu forcefully demonstrates that since there is no philosopher's stone, no transcendental criterion or philosophical foundation, reflexivity is the primary condition for intellectual progress. This concept of reflexivity has a few distinctive features. First, it does not imply a return to the personal experiences of the researcher or the author in the sense of Alvin Goulder or some of the current anthropologists. Reflexivity in Bourdieu's sense is not an attempt to subjectify but to objectify the knowing subject, in other words to employ the tools of social science for grasping the conditions of intellectual practice (see also Bourdieu 1993b). Second, reflexivity does not imply a relativist stance either. It is not in any way defined in opposition to scientific knowledge, but, on the contrary, as an essential tool for the advancement of scientific understanding (see Bourdieu, 1995). Third, reflexivity allows practitioners of the social sciences to face issues which are the least obvious and the most difficult to acknowledge, and that not so much for technical but for social reasons, for reasons linked specifically to the scholastic view to which the inhabitants of the academic world tend to adhere without being conscious of it.

Socio- and Psycho-analysis of Objective Knowledge

The closest parallel to this sociological concept of reflexivity is probably what Gaston Bachelard called the psycho-analysis of objective knowledge. In *La formation de l'esprit scientifique* (1938), Bachelard examined the development of the physical sciences from the point of view of the epistemological obstacles that were overcome from the end of the eighteenth century onwards. Since the evolution of science is not a regular and continuous process, but a series of minor and major ruptures, scientific knowledge can only be the result of rectifying and replacing errors. Bachelard thus discusses a whole series of images, arguments and expectations that one still finds in scholarly books in the eighteenth century, but which have all lost their epistemological value with the triumph of mathematical physics. Commonsense reasoning, first impressions, vivid images, utilitarian arguments, the search for hypothetical substances, all were progressively deprived of their validity in scientific reasoning. What changed accordingly, in Bachelard's analysis, is the psychology of scientific work. Nineteenth-century scientists could no longer indulge in the pleasures of metaphor and seductive imagery, they had to comply with a well-defined conceptual and abstract language, requiring an intellectual and affective catharsis. Although Bachelard occasionally hints at the *libido scienti* as an autonomous mechanism, his primary interest was in the affective basis of epistemological obstacles. Epistemology in Bachelard's sense was therefore an instrument for scientists in their research work.

Bachelard's proposals for a psychoanalysis of scientific knowledge have not had much serious impact, either in France or elsewhere. But there is at least one author, Georges Devereux, who has made a major contribution to this rarely explored domain. Although he curiously does not refer to Bachelard's pioneering work, Devereux published an original and unjustly forgotten book, *From Anxiety*
to Method in the Behavioural Sciences (1967), which is entirely in the spirit of Bachelard’s psychoanalysis of objective knowledge and Bourdieu’s reflexivity.3

Over a period of several decades, Devereux collected hundreds of cases of emotional disturbances among professional observers and analysts. Being an anthropologist and a psychoanalyst himself, he had noted some of his own anxieties and inhibitions, and detected similar instances in the fieldwork and observations of others. Having no model at his disposal to interpret his material, Devereux fantasized about a purely theoretical book on the epistemology of the behavioural sciences. As it was eventually published, the book was no general treatise, but a lucid analysis of his numerous cases, centred on the mechanisms of counter-transference. By focusing on the reactions of the observers on their own observations, Devereux highlighted the cognitive effects they produced.

Since practitioners of the human sciences are emotionally involved with the object they study, the subjectivity inherent in their work should be a starting point for a realistic rather than a fictitious objectivity. For Devereux it was, in particular, the anxiety aroused by the material of study that distorts their perception, frequently producing reactions of denial and defence. If such reactions are themselves ignored or denied, they can only cause further distortions. The standard methodologies thus tend to function as a defence mechanism, as a way to legitimately ignore the affective involvement of the observer, thereby transforming disturbances into sources of uncontrolled and uncontrollable error. Among Devereux’s many examples, is the case of a young anthropologist who had chosen to study anthropology in a violent conflict with his father. When he was studying kinship relations during his first extensive fieldwork, he got confused, had difficulty in observing and taking notes, and eventually had to abandon the research altogether, without understanding why. The example is perhaps a bit crude, but its tragic simplicity is a proper illustration of Devereux’s point.

Devereux’s analysis corresponds in a fundamental way with Bourdieu’s conception of reflexivity. Like Bourdieu, Devereux proposes to objectify the objectifying subject, in order to control the cognitive effects of his or her various involvements. The following quote from Devereux, for example, could have been almost written by Bourdieu:

... instead of soothing our scientific consciences with the fiction of the participant observer’s neutral position, we should analyze the actual situation into which we are maneuvered, so as to attain that real objectivity which only the analysis of the role assigned to us makes possible. (Devereux, 1967: 248–9)

Compared with Devereux, Bourdieu is not primarily interested in the individual but in the collective subjectivity of the knowing subject, and in its historical and social conditions, his critical point being that what we tend to regard as our individual and even most intimate experiences often result from unacknowledged social mechanisms. In a section of his new book, entitled ‘impersonal confessions’, Bourdieu applies this idea to his own experiences as a young philosopher in the 1950s. Outlining the structure of the intellectual field, he indicates the
principal choices of the philosophers of his generation, and how these depended on social background and trajectory. Such a sociological objectivation is necessary for understanding both collective and individual experiences. As he argues in a chapter on Baudelaire, a sociological model of this kind is a necessary precondition for understanding the singularity of figures like Flaubert and Baudelaire.

Despite this difference in emphasis between Bourdieu’s reflexive sociology and Devereux’s psychoanalytical interactionism, the very idea of a psychoanalysis of objective knowledge complements rather than contradicts Bourdieu’s concept of reflexivity. Both insist on the need for a reflexive perspective, on the necessity to uncover basic mechanisms of denial, defence and projection, and both wish to make such an analysis fruitful for epistemological purposes.4

Constructive Scepticism

If Bourdieu’s concept of reflexivity shares a fundamental affinity with Devereux’s psychoanalytic perspective, there is yet another parallel to be drawn. Bourdieu’s reflexivity is also linked to a specific use of scepticism. Bourdieu gives various reasons for presenting his reflections under the sign of Pascal. Beyond a number of common themes, there is a similar outlook and attitude, especially in their way of dealing with the intellectual oppositions of the day. Bourdieu thus recalls that when asked about his relations with Marx, he has the habit of replying that he is actually more of a Pascalian. The reference to Pascal suggests some historical questions which Bourdieu himself does not take up explicitly, but are interesting to comment upon briefly.

A critical revision of the current division of labour by reintroducing questions which are relegated to the rank of a philosophical specialty, implies a revision of the standard history of the social sciences as well. While the predominant conception is one of disciplinary history, the history of the social sciences should, in fact, be conceived in a much broader manner. Not only disciplinary structures and their genesis, but the entire early history of the social sciences are in need of serious reconsideration. It has been a regular part of the strategy of the intellectual historians of the Cambridge school (Skinner, Dunn, Pocock) to stress the importance of the early modern period in the formation of modern notions of the social world. This work began in the history of political theory, it has since broadened, and there is some recent work on the history of the social sciences along familiar lines. The casual treatment of the early modern period in the standard histories of the social sciences is, in fact, merely based on an uncritical belief in disciplinary social science. If these disciplinary divisions are in many respects unfounded, the early modern period and the Enlightenment are again open to renewed enquiry, and they may possibly even become relevant again to contemporary social science. Bourdieu’s return to Pascal thus reinforces some of the recent scholarship about the human sciences in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (see Fox et al., 1995; Olson, 1993; Heilbron et al., 1998).

A related historical issue is that of modernity and its post-modern critics. Here
Bourdieu does not engage in an elaborate debate either. He does not have much taste for general and rather vague notions, and, yet his book may be read as a critique of some of the post-modernist views. Contrary to the assumptions of Lyotard and others, Pascal reminds us that the disbelief in ‘grand narratives’ is neither new nor post-modern. An intellectual tradition of radical doubt is as old as the Greeks, and problems of scepticism and relativism can hardly be considered to be recent innovations. Nietzsche’s work, often invoked as the most radical challenge to the myths of modernity, is itself the apotheosis of a long history of sceptical thought (see Goudsblom, 1980).

A crucial moment in the history of sceptical thought was the so-called Phyrronian crisis. After having fallen into oblivion for nearly a thousand years, the ancient sceptics were rediscovered in the sixteenth century. Latin translations appeared, among others of Sextus Empiricus’s treatise, and with Montaigne scepticism became one of the major undercurrents in European intellectual life. In his History of Scepticism (1976) Richard Popkin demonstrated convincingly that early modern philosophy and science cannot be understood properly without taking into account the sceptical crisis of the end of the sixteenth and the beginning of the seventeenth centuries. Many of the ideas which we have come to call modern were formulated not only against the religious orthodoxy but also as a response to the sceptical crisis. The main figures to whom this applies were convinced that the arguments of the sceptics were irrefutable, but that their relativistic consequences were unacceptable. Out of this tension emerged a tradition of mitigated or constructive scepticism, as Popkin calls it, including the natural law theories of Grotius and Pufendorf, Hobbes’s political theory, probability theory, the epistemology of Descartes, as well as the new conceptions of science proposed by Mersenne and Gassendi. By reconsidering this tradition of thought, to which Pascal also belongs, it is quite apparent that (early) modern views cannot be identified with the intrinsically dogmatic and hopelessly naïve ‘grand narratives’ of Lyotard. The aim of Pascal was obviously not to achieve absolute certainty or to construct unquestionable foundations.

Contrary to Toulmin’s overly general view, the seventeenth century was not merely the period in which Montaigne was forgotten and the old dogmas of the church were replaced by new dogmas about scientific truth and historical progress (Toulmin, 1990). Both Lyotard and Toulmin identify modernity far too easily with a kind of intellectual fundamentalism, founded on the dogmatic notions of science and progress. This view is too one-sided and misrepresents the intellectual history of early modern Europe. What it obscures in particular is the crucial significance of scepticism for the shaping of modern conceptions of philosophy, science and the social world. By returning to Pascal, Bourdieu in yet another way recalls that the post-modern view of modernity is untenable and simplistic.

In fact, Bourdieu’s programme for a reflexive social science can itself be seen as a new branch of this tradition of constructive scepticism. Méditations pascaliennes, in any case, outlines a similar orientation, thereby representing a vivid alternative to the false certainties of dogmatism and the frivolous noncommit-edness of relativism.
Notes

1 On the crucial significance of reflexivity see especially Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc Wacquant (1992) which contains a general discussion as well as the extremely interesting text of Part 2 which outlines Bourdieu's pedagogical views. Bourdieu's political and more public activities are probably less known in the English-speaking world. See the recent translations (Bourdieu, 1997/forthcoming; 1998; Bourdieu et al., 1993/1999).

2 Some of his earlier articles are collected by Randal Johnson in Bourdieu (1993a). For an excellent overview of the research that has been inspired by Bourdieu's sociology of culture see Jurt (1995).

3 Georges Devereux (1908–85) is known as the founder of ethnopsyhiatrie. Born in a Jewish family in Romania, he fled to France in the 1920s and studied physics, oriental languages and ethnography. He did ethnographic fieldwork in the 1930s, obtained his PhD in Berkeley in 1936, and held various university positions in the US before returning to France in 1966 after an invitation from Fernand Braudel and Claude Lévi-Strauss. Founder of the journal *Ethnopsychiatria* (1978–), Devereux published numerous ethnopsychiatric studies and also wrote on ancient Greek poetry and tragedies.

4 In a recent study, Hans-Peter Waldoff proposes a sociological reflection in a similar direction (Waldhoff, 1995: 372–406 especially). Waldhoff, among others, adds a historical dimension to the issue of reflexivity by distinguishing between a disciplining and a reflexive phase in the civilizing process.

5 For recent contributions to this debate see several volumes edited or co-edited by Richard Popkin (1996, 1998; van der Zande and Popkin, 1998).

References


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