

Bourdieu, a Lecture on the Method

Thibault LE TEXIER

The first two years of Bourdieu's teaching at the Collège de France were less a general introduction to his concepts than a long immersion in his method, at the intersection of reflexivity, symbolics and structural analysis.

Reviewed: Pierre Bourdieu, *Sociologie générale, vol. 1. Cours au Collège de France 1981-1983*, edited by P. Champagne, J. Duval, F. Poupeau, M.-C. Rivière (Paris: Seuil/Raisons d'agir, 2015), 752 p., 30 €.

Bourdieu was elected to the Collège de France in the spring of 1981. He chose to entitle his first five years of teaching 'Course in General Sociology' with the clear aim of 'presenting the fundamental outlines' of his work. This first volume groups together his first two years of teaching. Unlike the other courses published posthumously (the very general courses on the State and the more detailed, but just as captivating, courses on Manet¹), it mainly covers research he had just published (*La Distinction* [*Distinction*], *Le sens pratique* [*The Logic of Practice*], 'La sainte famille'² and *Ce que parler veut dire*) or that has been published since (*Homo Academicus* and *Les Règles de l'art* [The Rules of Art]).

Although these lectures do not present any previously unpublished ideas, they are not lacking in value. It is a pleasure to be in the company of Bourdieu's way of speaking, his modesty, his humour, his scientific intransigence, the range of his fields of research and the corrosive power of his concepts. In stark contrast to *agrégation* classes or contests of eloquence – which revel in a self-satisfaction that he hated – Bourdieu is happy to take things step by step, defusing any misinterpretations or criticisms before they arise, while at the same time questioning the presuppositions contained in every assertion he makes (this extreme caution gives a somewhat laborious rhythm – hesitant and repetitive – to the book as a whole and especially to the first four courses; for this reason, I would not suggest this volume to readers looking for an initiation into Bourdieu's thought).³

Sociology, a science of reflexivity and the symbolic

Bourdieu's courses addressed a large audience composed of novice and confirmed sociologists (whom he encouraged to extend his reflections further), entirely novice listeners (towards whom he showed great consideration) and also colleagues from the Collège (whom

¹ *Manet, une révolution symbolique : cours au Collège de France, 1998-2000*, ed. P. Casanova, P. Champagne, C. Charle, F. Poupeau and M.-C. Rivière (Paris: Seuil/Raisons d'agir, 2013).

² 'La sainte famille : L'épiscopat français dans le champ du pouvoir', with M. De Saint Martin, *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, Vol. 44, n°1, 1982, p. 2-53.

³ The work of reference for such an initiation remains *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology* with L. Wacquant, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992).

he hoped to convince of the usefulness of his tools in updating the ‘epistemological subconscious of specialists in the humanities’). He therefore began his course with the basics: what do sociologists do? How do they do it? What is their object of study? What traps must they avoid?

And in his view, the main problem encountered by any sociologist is how to classify [*classer*⁴] individuals who spend their time classifying themselves and others. How should we address the divisions that people and groups incessantly create to differentiate themselves from one another?

In order to avoid projecting their own representations on those of social actors, the first task sociologists must accomplish ‘consists in collecting these categories [that everyone uses spontaneously to classify] as naively as possible, to record them as such while always trying to find out who produces them, who uses them and what their field of validity is’. In this way, it is necessary to try and understand, for example, what criteria university professors use to define themselves and distinguish themselves from others.

In his view, society is the seat not so much for a class struggle as for a ‘classification struggle’ about how individuals are classified, in which categories, by whom, according to what criteria, etc. Very often, exercising power means legitimately making distinctions, drawing boundaries and creating a group by delimiting it. All power is therefore coupled with *symbolic power* and possessing the latter makes it possible to impose known and recognised categories, to delineate a group in which these classifications are effective, to *represent* that group (in all senses of the word), to speak with authority to that group and in its name, and, more generally, to impose a legitimate mode of representation of the social world. Here, Bourdieu returns to the contributions of sociolinguistics and the analytical philosophy of language, to acts of institution, constitution, nomination and consecration, as well as the notions of mandate and delegation – thoughts published, in particular, in *Ce que parler veut dire* and further developed in *Langage et pouvoir*⁵, which he summarises here in a pithy sentence: ‘*les mots sont toujours des mots d’ordre*’ [‘words are always slogans/orders’].

As these two years of teaching unfold, sociology takes on the features of a ‘science of symbolic powers’⁶, as Bourdieu defined it in his inaugural lecture. And it is not insignificant that he devoted the whole of his first year of courses to the symbolic dimension of the social.

Bourdieu as structuralist?

The second value of these courses is that they reveal Bourdieu’s debt to the structural method. He admits, for example, having elaborated the notion of *field* ‘by applying to the social sciences a mode of thinking that could basically be called structuralist’. A field is a space of positions that only have meaning in relation to one other; the specificity of one

⁴ Translator’s note: *classer* in French, translated throughout as ‘classify’, can also contain the meaning to ‘rank’ in French, classifying according to a hierarchical order.

⁵ Parts of both books have been translated in the volume *Language and Symbolic Power* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991).

⁶ Pierre Bourdieu, ‘Lecture on the lecture’ in *In Other Words: Essays Towards a Reflexive Sociology* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), p. 198

position lies in the fact that it differs from other possible positions (I am what the others are not).

As he describes it here, the social world is organised around antagonistic poles according to an interplay of opposites and contrasts. ‘The logic of the symbolic is almost automatically dual’ he explains, observing that ‘all spaces tend to be organised according to +/- oppositions’ (top/bottom, internal/external, distinguished/vulgar, masculine/feminine, public/private, left/right, etc.). The real is relational, and the relational is very often *oppositional* (a boss is not a foreman, a foreman is not a manual worker, and a manual worker of French origin is not an immigrant worker, etc.) Our thousand different ways of *classifying* each other are also different ways of *differentiating* ourselves from others, whether consciously or subconsciously, and we often expend a phenomenal amount of energy defended boundaries that distinguish us from the people from whom we wish to be distinguished. To Spinoza’s phrase ‘every determination is a negation’ Bourdieu adds: ‘this is especially true in the social world’.

While he states his filiation with structuralism, he reiterates his aversion to Marxist thinkers and the concept of *ideology*, which reduces representations to deceptive illusions. He also opposes interactionist sociology, which does not give enough importance to the symbolic dimension of the social and could lead to a Machiavellian conception of history (this small group was responsible for those actions, which resulted in these particular consequences, etc.). ‘The notion of field is constructed against the notion of interaction’, he states, without any detours (taking his position through opposition too).

In his view, sociology does not consist in observing visible *interactions*; it analyses social *relations* and *positions*, with their hidden, subconscious, unthought and unsaid aspects. Interactions are not necessarily essential in order for there to be a relation, just like objectivable representations are not necessarily essential in order for there to be meaning. According to him, ‘the objects that sociology has to describe are invisible things, relations that cannot be photographed’. The sociologist has to build out from the categories that individuals use to classify themselves/each other and then has to re-enrol these categories within the power relations and interplay of positions in fields that are generally little known. In short, in order to explain the logic of social spaces, the sociologist has to construct those very spaces.

In order to do this, Bourdieu suggests replacing the oppositions between practice/representation, realism/idealism and individual/society, with the triad field/habitus/capital. He devoted the main part of these two first years of teaching to his method, to symbolic power, to the notion of habitus and to outlining the concept of ‘field’. The courses that followed then studied the relations between habitus and field, analysed the relation between fields and capitals, and searched for invariants in the way these fields function. The second volume of these courses therefore promises to be even more fascinating, and, together with this first volume, will form a draft of the large synthetic overview of his field theory that, in the end, Bourdieu never published.⁷

⁷ In a note to *The Rules of Art*, he wrote ‘I have tried to separate out the general properties of fields [...] in the courses I gave at the College de France from 1983 to 1986 and which will be the subject of a later

Published in Books&Ideas, July 11th, 2016.
© **booksandideas.net**

publication' (*The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996, p. 376).