

Dispositions, Social Structures and Economic Practises

Towards a new economic sociology

Several recent publications testify to a kind of revival of economic sociology, in France, following an international movement born in the 1980s and originating, to a great extent, in the United States, as shown by the publication in 1994 of the « Handbook of Economic Sociology » by Neil Smelser and Richard Swedberg (Smelser, Swedberg (eds.), 1994). Some journals such as *Actes de la Recherche en Sciences Sociales* (Acts of research in social sciences), *Génèses* (Genesis), *Regards Sociologiques* (Sociological Outlook), *La Revue Française de Sociologie* (The French journal of Sociology), *Cahiers Internationaux de Sociologie* (The international journal of sociology), *La Revue du MAUSS* (the journal of MAUSS, “Mouvement antiutilitariste en sciences sociales”), have also, in the last few years, dedicated a number of issues to economics, examined from a sociological or ethnological point of view. Various books dealing with the history of economic sociology have accompanied a renewed interest in Durkheimian sociologists who contributed extensively in laying the foundations in this field during the first half of the 20th century – principally Simiand, Halbwachs and Mauss – even though their following has remained limited, at least within this discipline (See in particular Gislain, Steiner, 1995). Several French sociologists are turning more and more towards economic sociology, as is indicated by the recent research carried out by Pierre Bourdieu in the economic field or, with substantially different theoretical approaches, the research of Michel Callon - recent co-ordinator of a collective book on the social construction of the market (Callon (ed.), 1998) – as well as that of Bruno Latour or Luc Boltanski (see Heilbron, 1999, Steiner, 1999). The success, among the « quantitativist » sociologists, in the United States and in France, of the methods of network analysis contribute to the revival of interest in a better sociological understanding of the real conditions of the emergence of economic action, and of the socially constructed functioning of the organisations and markets.

This revival bears witness to the persistent difficulties facing the neo-classical theory in justifying its fundamental presuppositions, such as the primacy of rational calculation in the individual action and the self-regulating role of the market in the functioning of economies.

The significant interest, in France, given to the «heterodox » schools of thought, such as the theory of regulation and the economy of conventions, can be analysed as an indication of a persistent internal critique targeting some of the over simplistic and unreliable postulates of the dominating theory. Some specialists in microeconomics and mathematical economics no longer attempt to hide their deep dissatisfaction with a discipline which, nevertheless, is perceived as being self confident and domineering. (Guerrien, 1996; see in particular page326). Similarly to what happened at the end of the 19th century (Gislain, Steiner, 1995), the sociological reconstruction of economic sciences is undertaken at a time of crisis of the prevalent theory of economics.

Another reason - parallel to the one mentioned above - for this revival of economic sociology probably lies in the aggravation of the social damage caused by the changes in the world's economic system, following its neo-liberal change of direction under the pressure of the big international organisations and transnational firms: The calling into question of the social norms which were set up, with difficulty, for a large part of the population, between the end of the 19th century and the 1970s, resulted in the worsening of living conditions for much of the population and in the emergence of an intellectual as well as social critique of the many undesirable effects of a market economy which knew almost no limits. The return of economic sociology to the world of scientific issues thus expresses a kind of civic awareness of the responsibility of sociologists, as producers of knowledge questioning the over-confident truths.of the economic theory whose temporal dominance is greater than ever.

The social conditions of calculation and economic action

At the centre of this recent revival, the research carried out by Pierre Bourdieu on the economic field holds an original place. Indeed, economy, has had a significant importance for him for a long time and has most probably been one of his oldest and deepest theoretical preoccupations, even though he might have privileged other subjects in the past (the education system, the dominating classes, the fields of cultural production...). During his first years of research in Algeria, Bourdieu (1977) pondered the relation between transformations of the economic system and social dispositions particularly as concerns time, which he regarded as a blind spot of neo-classical economy. The integration of the Algerian economy into the world's capitalist system occurred so quickly and brutally, that the economic *habitus* of the indigenous population became unfit for the new *cosmos* of the market economy, where agents became incapable of « rational » behaviour and of the anticipations required in the ordinary state of its functioning. A product of history, the rational *habitus* associated with the capitalist

system is not a natural phenomenon, but an essential element of the functioning of the economic order. So are all the institutions, considered as obvious frameworks of the economic action, which are the products of the long history of capitalism (firms, accounting, banks, the stock exchange, etc).

In a similar way, Pierre Bourdieu's reflection on what he called the « causality of the probable » (Bourdieu, 1974) fed on a direct confrontation with the *homo-oeconomicus* model. This model represented an attractive framework for the interpretation of inequalities between the social classes as regards the education system but completely ignored the social conditions of “rational choices” and the real logic of practices. Bourdieu shifted the object of the theory of action, and turned from rational calculation and prediction to the genesis and the social conditions of calculation and prediction. The latter seem to be immersed in a fabric of collective beliefs depending, first of all, on the agents' social position and path incorporated in their *habitus*.

These are the dispositions - acquired and to a great extent unconscious – which make it possible to make all types of « decisions » of an economic nature. The relation between these acquired dispositions and a certain state of the social world (defined by a number of indications of what is to « be done » and what « should not be done », of what is « good » and « bad », « true » or « false », etc) is at the heart of economic practise; the latter appears, from then on, to be the result of an almost physical *adjustment* rather than of a simple calculation, even though, *ex-post*, one might mistake the « model of reality » with the « reality of the model », and find, in the statistical regularities, the apparent consequences of purely rational choices.

Thus, the sociological theory of the economic action appears not as an alternative to the economic theory, but as a broader and deeper approach made possible by the rational critical de-construction of some presuppositions: The « individual » is separated from his body as the receptacle of an experience which is indissociably individual and collective, The « choice » is isolated from the social context in which it is produced and, above all, from anything about the choice which is the product of acquired dispositions, and therefore does not truly depend on a choice ; lastly, « rationality » is separated from the social genesis of economic systems where it is defined, and more precisely, from the relation between the economic systems and the dispositions of the agents determining their functioning.

This programme of research which was formulated mainly in the 1960s helped a great amount of empirical works in the following decades. They include, above all, Abdelmalek Sayad's research which followed the studies made in Algeria, in which he mentions the social conditions of the flows of migration which turn the « migrants » into agents who, moved from one national space to another, are defined by the complex relation between their position (dominated) in the immigration space and the dispositions associated to their social origin in the emigration space. (Sayad, 1991). But this programme can also be associated with the research which, through an « analysis of taste », has made it possible to define the systems of preference associated with the different social groups and paths (Bourdieu, 1979). The *Distinction* can thus be understood as the systematic product of the empirical exploration of the systems of preference associated with the occupation of some positions in the social space: by thinking of the social reality as being essentially relational, Pierre Bourdieu, describes tastes, not as facts which « one does not discuss » (expression used by the neo-classical economist Gary Becker) but as determining elements of the consumption and cultural practises which only make sense in the complex relation they have with each other. To try and isolate a « working class » or a « popular » taste does not make more sense than rambling on about the « bourgeois taste », as the system of taste keeps on being redefined by the logic of exposure and distinction.¹

Another field of research has made it possible to verify the validity of a systematic analysis of economic dispositions: the sociology of labour which, in the 1970s, was revived by issues inspired by books written about Algeria, but dealing with new subjects (as far as this kind of questioning is concerned at least) such as the behaviour of « young workers » in the context of the rise of unemployment and the crisis of the traditional labour movement. At the end of the 1970s, Michel Pialoux offered, in an article which has become a milestone (Pialoux, 1979), an original interpretation of the development of temporary work among the working-class youth. The development of short term work and the rise of unemployment do not lead to the « social explosion » announced by the political and media prophets; and this is due, above all, to the fact that the new systems of integration in the world of labour are adapted to a certain kind of social dispositions: the children of working class families - many of whom were immigrants with little or no education - are nowadays better educated and prefer to multiply experiences at the frontiers of the world of labour rather than « ending up » in the working class again and

¹Thus one can see that *marketing* feeds on some of the results and instruments of analysis developed in the framework of such a programme of « analysis of taste »: driven at once by the desire to adjust the offer to the existing systems of preference and by the necessity to create future tastes, the professionals of marketing redefine the social categories into more or less reliable schemata .

working in factories , as their parents did. Their attitude could be interpreted as a refusal to reproduce, for themselves, the working class' living conditions; this refusal is made possible thanks to the new possibilities offered by the systems of education and employment. The last¹ two decades, since the publication of various books inspired by this analysis, have confirmed the strength - both « integrating » (from the point of view of the capitalist economic system) and « dis-integrating » (socially) - of unemployment and short-term work for the people arriving on the labour market. Associated to dominant values such as mobility, change, individual experience, promotion opportunities, etc, the new jobs offered and the new conditions of access to the working conditions make it possible to maintain in a weak position an army of industrial reservists of a new type -often women (Maruani, 1996)- which is generally fragmented, powerless and facing disgraceful conditions and individual suffering. These new types of « integration journeys » also correspond to new, more subtle forms of domination, whose impact can be worse on a collective level because they create disillusion, individual despair and an inability to act collectively (see the two issues of *Actes de la Recherche en Sciences Sociales* dedicated to the « new forms of domination at work », numbers 116 and 117). The crisis of the « traditional » labour movement, which is studied in the collective book *La Misère du monde* (« Déclins », p 317-595, in Bourdieu (dir.), 1993), testifies to its inability to alter the forms of organisation and action when faced with the new realities, leading them to fall back on the most stable fractions of the labour world.

Social structures and fields

At the beginning of the 1970s, Pierre Bourdieu proposed a critique of the « interactionist » model of action, through his re-reading of the religious sociology of Max Weber (Bourdieu, 1971). Even though the study of the functioning of the religious fields requires an analysis of the relations between preachers and prophets, between prophets and theologians, etc - as Weber indicated - one must not consider these relations as simple interactions but as structural relations, determined by the occupations of different positions in one social space (and therefore by the different possession of several kinds of capital). This criticism is also at the heart of his idea of economic sociology. His critique is addressed, for instance, to the « new sociologists of sciences » who question, because of the weight of local interactions and historical contexts, the Mertonian model which they consider too general and idealistic, without offering any real alternative (Bourdieu, 1994). The sociologists who question the concept of *homo oeconomicus* using the argument of the integration of individuals in the

social structures, do so generally by starting from an idea of action which is strictly interactionist, and which ignores the existence of structures underlying interactions, defined by the distribution (specific to each field) of different types of capital. It is this concept which influences, for example, the analyses in terms of « networks », which have almost become the « mainstream » of the American and therefore of the world's economic sociology (see W.W.Powell and L.S Smith-Doerr, « Networks and Economic Life » in N.J. Smelser, R.Swedberg (eds.), 1994). Yet, Bourdieu does not question the role of the « networks » (or, better, of the social capital) in the functioning of the economic field. According to him, economic practises are, above all, dependant on the position and the strategies of the agents in the specific social, structured, constraining microcosms: that is to say what he calls the « fields ». The economic *illusio*, the advantage gained from playing the economic game, is the product of the particular investment made in this field, which is both, a field of struggle and a field of forces (Bourdieu, 1994). The social capital that economic agents possess and use is itself determined by the their position in a particular field, the economic field (Bourdieu, 1997).

The economic field can be described as a field of forces, where the goal of the participants is to impose their rules of the game on the others, and not just to be better at this game whose rules would already be defined. The domination of a company in the economic field consists, not only in controlling an important part of the market, or in higher benefits, but also in the ability to impose on others its own definition of the game and in taking advantage, economically as well as symbolically, of a position of domination, linked to the possession of various forms of capital. The specifically symbolic dimension (and not only « monetary » or « financial ») of domination in an economic field, whatever it is, expresses itself through the work which aims to perpetuate the differences between the dominant company and the others, who, whatever they do, have to acknowledge that the company in question is the point of reference and that they are forced to position themselves, actively or passively, in relation to that company (Bourdieu, 1997, p.57). If the field is the place where the real constraints conditioning economic decision making are exerted -as illustrated by some housing markets (Bourdieu, 1990, 2000), then the economic field is dependant on struggles which occur in the world of economic policies. Indeed, it is in a politico-bureaucratic field that some of the rules of the game (including law) which determine the result of economic struggles are defined. Thus, for example, the development of the market of the individual house is not separable from an incentive policy whose genesis was the object of a process of social and political

construction by some bureaucratic and political dominating agents³. Moreover, each company appears as a field where the aim is to elaborate a strategy within a wider economic universe and to reconvert forms of capital according to the exchange rates determined by the structural dynamic of the field. The strategies of the economic units are, in fact, the product of the combination of their positions in the field and of the dispositions of different agents who contribute to the definition of their strategies: the economic *habitus*, linked to the positions occupied, is a central dimension of the very specific social struggles which occur in the economic field.

The « structural » sociological economy, which arises, turns away from an « individualistic » philosophy and from an « interactionist » philosophy of the action. It has an affinity with the heuristic usage of the correspondence analysis, and more particularly, of the analysis of multiple correspondences, in which Pierre Bourdieu sees a starting point of the formalisation of the theory of the fields (Bourdieu, 1997, not14 p.52). This formalisation is geometrical (Rouanet, Le Roux, 1993). The agents who contend within one field can be represented by points in a Euclidean, multidimensional space. Each agent is associated to a number of properties defined by their structural relations. The distances between the agents are defined, in each analysis of the correspondences (and therefore in the implicit theoretical model on which it is based) by the efficient proprieties characterising the agents: the position and the path in the field, the origin and the social and educational path, etc. The analysis of the correspondences makes it possible to summarise the positions on principal axes and to highlight (by projecting them on these axes) the objective relations between the space of the positions and the space of the different agents' position takings (stances).

The reactivation of the Durkheimian project

Even though Pierre Bourdieu's first works on economic sociology by can be qualified as « Weberian », because of their insistence on the process of rationalisation, which is characteristic of capitalism, it is the reference to Durkheim and to the Durkheimian school which imposed itself forcefully in the 1990s. In 1993, with *La Misère du Monde* (Bourdieu (dir.), 1993), Pierre Bourdieu and his team proposed a first sociological assessment of the economic policies of liberal inspiration carried out in France since the end of the 1970s; this assessment is strongly reminiscent of that of Durkheimian sociologists dedicated to the

³ In a similar way, in another world, the history of the state control of the family is the product of structural transformations in the bureaucratic-political field, as was shown by Remi Lenoir (Lenoir, 1992).

reflection and the « socialist » action at the beginning of the 20th century: The withdrawal of the state from a number of sectors and areas resulted in an increase of social suffering among the agents who were the most underprivileged economically and culturally (with the development of the « misery of conditions ») and simultaneously, of the suffering affecting «The State nobility», teachers, social workers, paramedical workers, junior civil servants (the misery of position »).. Because their social means and prestige were decreasing, they were confronted with consequences which were more and more anomic of a mode of development originating from the reconstructions of the economic field and from the inflections of the political field, but which also benefited from the connivance between the dominating forces of the media world, and the intellectual field (see Bourdieu, 1996). It is in such a context that Pierre Bourdieu, with the publications of the *Liber-raisons d'agir* Editions whose creation followed the social movement of December 1995, became, in the second half of the 1990s, the principal representative of the committed sociology which he has always defended as the logical consequence of the position of autonomous researchers in social sciences (see Duval and alee, 1998). The research on the evolutions of the American society carried out, among others, by Loic Wacquant (Wacquant, « De l'Amérique comme utopie à l'envers, in Bourdieu (dir.), 1993,p.169-179), confirms the hypothesis that the movement of deregulation is accompanied, when it is taken to an extreme, by the setting up of a new mode of « crisis » management (crisis originating from social insecurity) with the choice of a systematic «law and order policy» and the almost exponential increase of the number of prisoners originating from the stigmatised groups (first of all the black youth). This embryo of a social state (compared, for instance, to that of Northern Europe) tends to be replaced by an over-developed penal state which allows for the « normal » functioning of a market economy from which a number of the most basic social norms have sometimes disappeared. Unless a social European State, capable of imposing itself as a pole of social stability and security in a world facing the American domination, is created, the European societies, in their diversity, will be facing a historical choice, since the model of the penal state tends to accompany a tendency towards a neo-liberal adaptation to the rules of international trading¹.

In a « Durkheimian » inspiration, Pierre Bourdieu's project puts forward the idea of an economic sociology which integrates, in the economy, the social costs and factors which the neo-classical theory as well as national finance tend to exclude from their object by a choice of debatable methods and construction of objects. This « mutilated » science is also in the

¹ See issues 121/122 and 124 of *Actes de la Recherche en Sciences Sociales*, dedicated in 1998 to the « tricks of the imperialist reasoning » and to « from a social to a penal state », also see Bourdieu, 1998.

wrong when, in the name of a high degree of mathematical sophistication which would make it closer to natural sciences, it denies the socially constructed– and therefore partly arbitrary– character of the economic institutions (like that of « consumption » for example, which is the product of a specifically political endeavour of the institution, as Pinto indicated (1992), or the market which, in some extreme cases, appears as the product of an effort aimed at making the economic theory exist in the social reality, Garcia, 1986). Refusing to admit that economic facts are « matters of opinion » (as Durkheim used to say), this « science » abstains from any reflective position, and thus from considering itself as an element of a larger process of social construction of the economic reality. And yet, Several empirical works make it possible to display the role of economists in the neo-liberal revolution (Dezalay, Garth, 1998; Dixon, 1998), and, helped by the sociology of the scientific field, to characterise the economic discipline as a strongly « heteronomous » world, affected by dominant forces, whether they be economical, administrative or political, contrary to the image it has of itself (Lebaron, 1997, 2000).

A Durkheimian inspiration is found in the conception of a social reality where the classification systems (the divisions into « classes » to start with) play a central role, because, as products of the social structures, they are also producers of the structures of the perception of the social world (Boltanski, 1982, Bourdieu, 1984). Such a conception, which is both structuralist and constructivist, can be applied to the economic world because it allows one to think of the process of construction of the economic reality as the product of objective structures and regularities (for instance, the transformations of the « production system » which distort the structure of the economic field by favouring the fall and rise of some sectors, firms and social groups, etc) but also as the schemes and operations of classification they are then subjected to (including, by the organisational activity of the State and of international organisations which consider some objects such as inflation or the money supply, as economic objects, by giving them the authority associated with their official nature). This kind of economic sociology extends over a very wide spectrum of problems and objects, which ranges from the positive analysis of social regularities which underlie the ordinary functioning of the economy, in conformity with the positivist and critical project of François Simiand (see for instance Simiand, 1932), to the more introspective and constructivist analysis, of the world of agents who are struggling to impose a certain vision of the economic reality and make the economy a world of well founded beliefs.

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