

The craft of sociology. Epistemological preliminaries

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Abstract

With *Le métier de sociologue. Préliminaires épistémologiques* (translated in 1991 in English under the title : *The Craft of sociology. Epistemological preliminaries*), edited collection of texts in history and philosophy of sciences, Pierre Bourdieu, Jean-Claude Chamboredon and Jean-Claude Passeron, give in 1968 (first edition), and 1972 (second edition), an epistemological introduction to contemporary sociology.

This introduction first aims at establishing more solidly the scientific legitimacy of the discipline, by situating it in the continuity of natural sciences, first and foremost physics and biology.

The *Craft of sociology* constitutes an important moment in the struggles inside the French but also the international (global) field of sociology. Epistemological critique of triumphing positivism (in the 1960s), the book recalls the relevance of epistemological conceptions of the “founding fathers” (Marx, Durkheim and Weber), and, novelty, insists on their unity, which it describes as based on a common habitus, that is “interiorized scientific principles” incorporated into research. It mobilizes philosophical resources taken from two strands (Anglo-saxon philosophy of language, and French history and philosophy of sciences), which are used as instruments to establish and strengthen the scientific legitimacy of the discipline.

With *Le métier de sociologue. Préliminaires épistémologiques / The Craft of sociology. Epistemological preliminaries*, edited collection of texts in history and philosophy of sciences, Pierre Bourdieu, Jean-Claude Chamboredon and Jean-Claude Passeron, give in 1968 (first edition), and 1972 (second edition), an epistemological introduction to contemporary sociology.

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As last born among empirical sciences, “this science like the others that sociology would like to be”¹ can benefit from its predecessors, especially through a knowledge of their history and of their process of development.

Sociology could claim the status of “experimental science”, provided a certain number of obstacles is overcome, and provided a certain number of principles is adopted, among which the necessity of a “rupture” (break) and “the construction of the research object” are founding dimensions. Epistemology and history of sciences, as methodology, are incorporated into the concrete practice of sociological research, which is the aim of the book.

The first cited references give an idea of the intellectual background of this posture. The *Cours de philosophie positive* by Auguste Comte, but also the philosophers and historians of science Georges Canguilhem and Gaston Bachelard are mobilized in order to recall that it is impossible to isolate methodology from the development of sciences, to “dissociate the method from practice”, and that techniques must be inserted in the totality of research operations, including the most theoretical. The adopted conception claims the bachelardian label of “applied rationalism”, conception which consists in recusing the bureaucratic autonomisation of research operations, and to define scientific validation by the progressive convergence of a system of proofs, which presupposes a correct functioning of the scientific order.

A reflexive posture in sociology

¹ The translations are from the author.

The main message, sometimes simplified, which will be remembered from *Le métier de sociologue / The Craft of Sociology* is that there is no empirical fact without a theory, at least implicit, and no method without practice. It is vain to pretend being free from any a priori hypothesis before undertaking a research in social sciences, especially through a “fetishist” use of techniques which are only apparently neutral.

Philosophical intervention in an empirical discipline, the *Craft of Sociology* doesn't adopt the classical temptation of the philosophical “crowning” or “foundation”, the traditional posture in French philosophy as regards the social sciences, but to contribute to diffuse a (scientific) habitus. The aim is to “give the means to acquire a mental disposition which is as much the condition of invention as it is the condition of proof”.

It probably explains why this book has often been read rapidly and partially, and basically seen as a contribution in the space of the philosophical theories debated in France around 68, with the rupture with subjectivism, or a theoretical / philosophical basis for reproduction theory, with the search for structural homologies, which Boudon criticizes in *Les méthodes en sociologie* in 1970: (Boudon, 1970).

It is also true that, despite the stress it puts on the practical conditions of the transmission of scientific habitus, the *Craft of Sociology* does not develop the practical aspects of sociological methodology, and is neither a guide nor a handbook, even though it puts a strong priority on practice in scientific work. The preface of the second edition, in 1972, shows that the authors were conscious of the limits of such a perspective².

² [In French : « chacun des principes aurait ainsi pu être monnayé en préceptes, ou, au moins, en exercices d'intériorisation de la posture ; par exemple, pour dégager toutes les virtualités heuristiques qui sont impliquées dans un principe tel que celui du primat des relations, il aurait fallu montrer sur pièces, comme on peut le faire dans un séminaire, ou mieux dans un groupe de recherche, en examinant la construction d'un échantillon, l'élaboration d'un questionnaire, ou l'analyse d'une série de tableaux statistiques, comment ce principe commande les choix techniques du travail de recherche (construction de séries de populations séparées par des différences pertinentes sous le rapport des relations considérées, élaboration des questions qui, secondaires pour la sociographie de la population elle-même, permettent de situer le cas considéré dans un système de cas où il prend tout son sens, ou encore mobilisation des techniques graphiques et mécanographiques permettant d'appréhender synoptiquement et exhaustivement le système des relations entre les relations révélées par un ensemble de tableaux statistiques)» (p.5-6).

Without consensus or agreement on this more pedagogical second book, it will never appear.

Even if it gives some recommendations and methodological position-takings, the book refutes the dominating status of methodologists and methodology, described as a normative discipline associated to a routinized and bureaucratized practice of research. It therefore leaves aside methodological issues, without disqualifying them: they should have been the object of a third book and are evoked in the third chapter of the presentation of texts.

This text calls, by its content, a philosophical reading: one finds here very few empirical analyses properly speaking, neither qualitative nor quantitative. It is highly conceptual, which links it to the French tradition of the commented collection of philosophical texts. But at the same time it argues radically for empirical research and against too rapid philosophical generalization, *a fortiori* against the big “Somme”, which conciliates a large set of authors in a synthetic presentation. In this sense, it is a sociological Wittgenstein book, opening to what it is not, and sending modest incents for a reflection on uses of theory and sociological discourse in daily research practice. It is “preliminary” in the full sense.

An « integrative » book

The Craft of Sociology wants to be an integrative book. It is at the passage point between traditions which are at that time in strong opposition (at least apparently) with empirical Anglo-saxon sociology, structure-functionalism, but also critical sociology (Mills), interactionism and constructivism ; Karl Marx and Marxism (Althusser and even Aragon were present in the first edition, in 68), and the French school of sociology. This integrative posture allows to interpret why commentators have had difficulties to situate this book in the intellectual space: neither “Durkheimian”, nor “Weberian” nor Marxist, neither hostile to quantitative research, nor fanatic. It insists on a “*conception of the theory of sociological knowledge which holds this theory for the system of principles defining the conditions of possibility of all acts and all discourses defined as properly sociological, and only these ones, whatever the theories of the social*

system developed by those who produce or have produced sociological work in the name of these principles” (p. 15-16).

It first bases this integrative will on a distinction between the particular “theory of the social system” (characteristic of an author or a school) and the “theory of the knowledge of the social”, which is concretely engaged by her in sociological practice, and whose foundation is the scientific habitus common to authors and traditions presented as opposite: *“it is possible to define the principles of the knowledge of the social, independently of the theories of the social which separate schools and theoretical traditions” (p. 108).* This position is also developed page 48 and 49, and leads to a strong opposition between a supposed “meta-scientific” agreement on the principles between authors and their diverging views on “partial theories of social reality”.

Against the academic doxa, which create false oppositions, routinized epistemological couples (individualism / holism, etc.) or false reconciliations (with sociological “sommès”), *The Craft of Sociology* characterizes sociology by its profound unity of scientific attitude. This attitude is established beyond theoretical and ideological divisions, which become relevant only to assess the relative weight of such or such explanatory social factor, or to validate a conceptual instrument or a local theory, in order to describe and interpret the reality of the social world, once the preliminaries of rupture and construction have been operated.

One of the foundations of this integrative perspective is the hypothesis of « non-consciousness », which presupposes that individual actors are not perfectly aware of the totality of factors which govern their actions, hypothesis which the authors distinguish from the notion of an opaque and reified unconscious (as it developed at the time in various variants and debates, like for example around Lacan).

Another, more operational, way to formulate this hypothesis is to claim the principle of “methodological determinism” (p. 31), stating that the causes of a behaviors are not reducible to what the actors spontaneously perceive, in the illusion of their acts, and the full freedom of their choices, whereas they are taken in the trap of spontaneous categories.

The claim of the « non-consciousness postulate », even though it is free from anthropological presupposition, has created many misunderstandings, provoked radical oppositions, and has contributed to an accentuation of the cleavages that it was supposed to help overcoming. For some authors, it is a determinist negation of the individual actor or subject, with an infinite number of illustrations in French and world sociology. For authors, it creates a very asymmetrical relation between the sociologist and ordinary people, who have developed capacities of creation and cognition: this is the spirit of critiques of the cut between scientific and ordinary knowledge, which one finds in many sociological developments (first in ethnomethodology).

These two critiques at least show one thing: the book has failed to impose the idea of a meta-scientific convergence between sociologists, and has participated to the intensification of cleavages which it describes as secondary. It does not invalidate the thesis of the book, but it confirms that there is no “intrinsic strength of truth idea”, in the epistemological domain not more than anywhere else. Misunderstandings are not magically suppressed by integrative propositions, and struggle go further than “partial” theories, also being related to “principles”. Jean-Claude Passeron, a few years after, will develop a more pessimistic view of this impossible convergence. One can remain optimistic but think that obstacles to convergence are stronger than what was foreseen in *The Craft of Sociology*.

The space of reference of *The Craft of Sociology*

Concrete illustration of this posture, stake of representation, and position taking, the choice of the texts is subtly polyphonic: philosophy and history of sciences represent less than a third of the texts (14), with a domination of Bachelard (5) and Canguilhem (4), before a series of Anglo-saxon scientists, epistemologists or historians (Darwin, Campbell, Wind, Kaplan), and the French physicist and historian of science Pierre Duhem ; Durkheim and the durkheimians have a large place with 11 texts (7 from Emile Durkheim, 2 François Simiand, 2 Marcel Mauss) ; then comes the contemporary anglo-saxon empirical sociology (7), with authors representing very diverse traditions, either theoretically or methodologically. (Goldthorpe et Lockwood, for British sociology, with two texts, B.M.Berger,

C.W.Mills, E.Katz, Schatzman et Strauss, illustrating multiple orientations in anglo-saxon sociology), Max Weber (4 texts), philosophy of language and linguistics (3 authors, including Wittgenstein), anthropology (3: Lévi-Strauss, Maget, Malinovski), Karl Marx (2) and to finish Panofsky. Marx and Marxism have a reduced place in a set dominated by Anglo-saxon authors.

The large diversity of traditions represented in the book is striking, especially since the book presents them as fundamentally converging over a certain number of principles as we have seen. At the same time, these very general principles are incorporated and implicit, practical as much as theoretical, and this book appears as a reflexive construction, on the mode of pedagogical generalization, based on these principles, while refusing the recipe style of many methodological handbooks. Another reason for misunderstandings.

Beside the choice of texts, the large bibliography, including the quantitative dominant Anglo-saxon sociology (Lazarsfeld and Boudon, Merton, etc.), logics and epistemology (Borel, Carnap), anthropology and linguistics, without forgetting Raymond Aron and Jean Piaget. The first set of references is clearly the dominant point of reference of the book, which mobilizes for that a combination of epistemological reflections and good illustrations.

The presentation of the book is placed under the double patronage of Durkheim and the French history and philosophy of science, but references in footnotes are frequently coming from the Anglo-saxon recent epistemology of social sciences ((Hempel, Richtie, Campbell, etc.) or the Wittgensteinian philosophy of language.

The space of references is both philosophical and sociological, continental and Anglo-saxon (US and UK), theoretical and empirical, which contributes to make the academic classical boundaries rather fuzzy.

A polemical book

Behind its ecumenical appearance, the book is also, and probably above all, a violent attack against many temptations, derives, and errors, which are presented as classical in the history of human and social sciences. It is the strong

couple formed by Diltheyan dualism and mechanical positivism, which relates to two opposite attitudes towards the natural sciences: their absolute rejection and their servile adoption and reproduction, using blind norms of validation which one simply forgets to be questioned. It refuses bureaucratized and hierarchized representations of research operations, and rehabilitates the theoretical work of construction without denigrating empirical research, on the contrary. (Therefore, it can appear either infra-theoretical, or hyper-theoretical).

This duality of the book may appear as a compromise, especially between Bourdieu and Passeron, one more empirically-oriented, the other more theoretical.

Critiques are various against the state of contemporary sociology in its dominant form: positivist empiricism ; prophetism ; dependency to political command ; academism of the authors of handbooks ; grand theory. Classical errors are pointed out, like substantialism, the misuse of words coming from other disciplines or from the common sense.

The critique often uses polemical categories: « spontaneous sociology », « daily gossip », the « imperative of ethical neutrality turned into catechism », the « methodological mania », or « -isms » (« empiricism », « positivism », « prophetism », « class ethnocentrism », etc.). They also directly target authors : Hayek as an incarnation of subjectivism (p. 19), Merton, for a too strong stress put on randomness in the history of science (p. 29), Parsons for his false reconciliation of « grand theories » (note 2, p.45), Parsons and Merton for their theoreticism, p.46-47, posture close to the French « sociologie durkheimienne », with its multiple typologies (p.47), Barton and Lazarsfeld, more softly, about some flaws in the designation of objects in their work of construction of the object (p.53), Elton Mayo (p.60) for his indifference to class and power relations, Barton and Lazarsfeld for their statistical « methodological ethnocentrism » and their subordinate use of qualitative methods (p.66), Bierstedt, author of an article in the *American Journal of Sociology* which « reifies » ethnographic method, an approach which will have later a great success.

Heritages, traditions, and dialogues

The posture adopted in the book recalls Durkheim's posture in *The rules of sociological methods* and, indeed, *The Craft of Sociology* can be read as the expression, in the context of the 60s, a modernized Durkheimian program, in the context of the evolution of the World sociology, but also the philosophy of language. It the rise of instrumental positivism, which gives birth in reaction to the stress put on the construction of the research object and the multiple stakes of scientific vocabulary. Research in epistemology and history of science, and philosophy of language, which have opened new ways for rationalist and empiricist investigations in philosophy; contribute to embed sociology in the "normal history of science". The classification of texts put in the forefront the "prenotions and techniques of rupture", and part of the reception was centered on this attitude of methodological critique of language³.

Anglo-saxon empirical sociology is omnipresent in the *Craft of Sociology*, but as omnipresent behind as a foil (an incarnation of empiricism and positivism) as a claimed heritage. References to this tradition abound in the presentation of texts and in the bibliography, whereas it is almost absent from the chosen texts, and above all, it is only present when self-critique (with a text from Elihu Katz).

The diverse methods of sociology are evoked at various moments in the book, in an epistemological and reflexive perspective, but without entering the detail of their use. The leitmotiv, which will become a constant in Bourdieu's work after the second half of the 60s, is the stress put on the "system of objective relations" which is the very object of sociology. It leads to the quest for structural homologies, this conception leads to a critical reflection on multivariate analysis⁴. The book includes as well a critique of the use of opinion questionnaires, which is developed in the article « Public opinion does not exist » in 1973, and many remarks on the stakes of the discursive formalization of the scientific object. He refers to Marcel Maquet's *Guide for the direct study of cultural*

³ See for example : P.Champagne, R.Lenoir, D.Merllié, L.Pinto *Initiation à la pratique sociologique*, issu des travaux de la « deuxième génération » des représentants de l'école de Bourdieu (Champagne et al., 1989).

⁴ In French : « *il faudrait enfin se demander si la méthode d'analyse des données qui semble la plus à même de s'appliquer à tous les types de relations quantifiables, à savoir l'analyse multivariée, ne doit pas être soumise chaque fois à l'interrogation épistémologique : en effet, en postulant que l'on peut isoler tour à tour l'action des différentes variables du système complet des relations à l'intérieur duquel elles agissent, afin de saisir l'efficacité propre à chacune d'elles, cette technique s'interdit de saisir l'efficacité qu'un facteur peut tenir de son insertion dans une structure et même l'efficacité proprement structurale du système des facteurs* (p.68-69) ».

behavior to defend ethnographic observation, provided it is armed epistemologically.

The theme of reflexivity is very present in *The Craft of Sociology*, especially in a conclusion which is based on a dialogue between the critical epistemology of positivism (close to C.W.Mills) and the sociology of knowledge (in line with Durkheim and Mannheim). Actually, one finds in *The Craft of Sociology* a nuanced formulation of the necessity for self-socioanalysis (as it will be developed for example in Bourdieu 1984) and also its limits: it is at the scale of the entire sociological field that “crossed controls” can allow a collective progress (since “the objectivity of science cannot be based a foundation as uncertain as the objectivity of scholars”, p. 102). The first enemy of the book is explicitly designated: it is the “positivist temptation”, which was at its highest point in the middle of the 60s, when technologies were imported from the US in Europe and when a scientist faith prevailed. It will be broken a few years after, around 68, with a period of hyper-theoriticism, especially on the Marxist side. The book finally stresses a conception of the “scientific city” where the armed critique of the work peers contributes to the emergence of a more and more solid scientific reason (collectively validated). It will allow sociology to go far from “fashion success”, at the price of a certain esotericism, following the famous citation by Durkheim.

Conclusion

The Craft of sociology constitutes an important moment in the struggles inside the French but also the international (global) field of sociology. Epistemological critique of triumphing positivism (in the 1960s), the book recalls the relevance of epistemological conceptions of the “founding fathers” (Marx, Durkheim and Weber), and, novelty, insists on their unity, which it describes as based on a common habitus, that is “interiorized scientific principles” incorporated into research. It mobilizes philosophical resources taken from two strands (Anglo-saxon philosophy of language, and French history and philosophy of sciences),

which are used as instruments to establish and strengthen the scientific legitimacy of the discipline.

If the book failed in creating a “consensus over the principles” as it had wished, it is difficult to explain this failure without a more in-depth analysis of the structures of the sociological field which may account for it. One can consider that the work was taken between the affirmation of the consensus and its polemical dimension, which prevented it from being totally explicit on its objectives. The absence of second book makes this even more difficult to interpret. The craft of sociology remains therefore, if not to write, at least to invent.

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