

Toward a new critique of economic discourse :

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Pierre Bourdieu's interest in economic issues is obvious in his first works on Algeria, which are a major contribution to economic anthropology (Bourdieu, 1958, 1977). But from this time onwards, Bourdieu has never stopped using and discussing economic theories or models, especially the rational choice model (Bourdieu, 1974, 1977, 1979). Neither did he stop contributing to the empirical exploration of various economic realities, especially through his works on education, tastes and consumption, credit, personal housing, editors, etc. In this sense, Bourdieu is one of the main authors in what, after the Durkheimians, we call 'economic sociology' and the publication in 2000 of *Les structures sociales de l'économie* does not constitute a surprising shift in his work.

His various investigations of the economic sphere rest on a very coherent view of economy and economics, aiming at integrating the analysis of economic behaviours and institutions into a general vision of social practice, a 'general economy of practice' as he wrote in *Le sens pratique* (Bourdieu, 1979). I will argue here that Bourdieu proposes, especially in his last book *Les structures sociales de l'économie*, what I will call *a new critique of economic discourse* (I mean 'new' in comparison to the Marxist and Heterodox – institutionalist, post-keynesian, etc.- economics), which he develops in three main complementary directions. Firstly, he lays the stress upon the symbolic aspect of economic life, which relates his sociology directly both to the Weberian and the Durkheimian traditions, but he also concentrates on symbolic domination and struggles which connects him with Marx. Bourdieu secondly elaborates an original anthropological critique of the dominant economic theory (that is to say the Neo-classical theory) which he puts at the centre of his theoretical construction and of his scientific method, especially through a dispositional definition of action. He finally reintroduces 'politics' and the 'state' into the economic object(s), which, in the most recent period of his thought, has led him to a systematic critical analysis of neo-liberalism and the social uses of economics.

The symbolic dimensions of economic life

In Bourdieu's view, the distinction between 'material' and 'symbolic' dimensions of reality leads to fallacies. The most common one (developed in these very terms by the Marxist tradition) is the opposition between the economic 'infrastructure' and the intellectual 'superstructure' of social reality, which causes a disastrous ("*funeste*") division of work between economists (interested in wealth, production, wages, etc.) and the other social scientists (more devoted to cultural, psychological or intellectual issues). In the line of Durkheim, Bourdieu thinks there is no ontological heterogeneity between the sphere of 'representations', 'beliefs', etc., and the sphere of economic interests, institutions and actions. He uses the notion of "total social fact" ('fait social total') created by Marcel Mauss to refuse the idea that economic life should escape from sociological understanding because of its autonomization as a particular sphere of reality (Bourdieu, 2000). Economic sociology is an important part of sociological investigations. One therefore needs "to abandon the economic/non-economic dichotomy which makes it impossible to see the science of 'economic' practices – including those that are experienced as disinterested or gratuitous, and therefore freed from the 'economy'- as economic practices aimed at maximizing material or symbolic profit" (Bourdieu, 1990:122).

Bourdieu first considers the economic order as a symbolic order. We can speak of an 'economic' order, because a specific kind of social belief and interest has autonomized from the social reality (autonomization close to Polanyi's disembodiedness), leading social agents to refer more and more to 'economic' criteria and to leave aside other kinds of social criteria at least in some parts of their practice (which is for example attested to by the legitimization of the practice of interest rates in loans described by historians of credit). The invention of a particular *illusio* (close to *investment in a game* and also *libido*, Bourdieu, 1994) is at the origin of the existence of an autonomized economic order. The economic field is a particular case of field. '[The] fundamental laws [of the fields] are often tautologies. That of the economic field, which has been elaborated by utilitarian philosophers (is) 'business is business' (Bourdieu, 1998:83). The history of this field is the history of an autonomization process and also of an expansion process, because the law of this field tends to determine the entire social life although it is limited by the existence of other fields (religious field, bureaucratic field, fields of cultural production...). This argument has its roots in the Bourdieu's 'Algerian period' and in his analysis of the construction of a particular capitalist *cosmos* (Bourdieu, 1963, 1977). In his works on Algeria, Bourdieu pointed out the existence of an 'anti-economic' behaviour (from a 'rational' point of view), rooted in 'traditional' dispositions, for which calculation, anticipation and also accumulation were not really defined

and systematically constituted as legitimate practices. The systematic introduction of money contributes to the generalization as well as of the intensification of exchanges and the related development of a 'capitalist mind', which is nothing else than the *economic illusio*. This 'rationalization' process presupposes that certain economic and social conditions are fulfilled. The 'sous-prolétaires' –like the casualized workers in today's developed capitalist economies– are precisely those who fail to project themselves in the future, either by adhering to revolutionary goals or by *interiorizing* the laws of the capitalist cosmos.

The economic domination, essentially analysed as 'exploitation' in the Marxist tradition, is considered by Bourdieu as a particular case of symbolic domination (Bourdieu, 1989). In his conception of domination, the dominated actively participate in their domination : they perceive the world through the eyes of the dominants, and their behaviour is profoundly determined by the relation of domination in which they take part (Bourdieu, 1998). Bourdieu interpreted the word 'paternalism' used in the 1960-1970s for certain kinds of management as a way to disqualify a traditional relation of domination, comparable to the subordination of servants to their masters (still important in many sectors of the economy like small trade and also inside the domestic space). He also describes the decline of a group like the little farmers from Béarn as the result of their incapacity to adopt the dispositions (including matrimonial strategies) necessary to compete in a more global market. 'The socially exalted relationship between brothers can, (...) in [the case of] Béarn, serve as a mask and a justification for economic exploitation, with a younger brother often being an acknowledged 'unpaid servant', often condemned to celibacy' (Bourdieu, 1990:16). In the 'modern' economy, the relations of domination are much more formal (they are, for example, developed through the imposition of certain types of labour contracts), rationalised (through the existence of formal levels of hierarchy, 'professionalization', careers, etc.), legitimized with the help of science (esp. economics and management). The authority seems far from direct commandment as in the military model, because most of the salaried are involved in the game, accepting the general *illusio* of the economic field, and the 'positive' side of work (which is double faced : domination and investment). But they face a multiplicity of new forms of domination linked to the neo-liberal order.

The economic struggles can not be reduced to distribution conflicts in the sharing of added value as it is understood from a strict macroeconomic point of view. On the contrary, their symbolic dimension is, a central aspect. The existence of a class is the product of a symbolic unification taking place on the basis of similar existence conditions inside larger social spaces (Bourdieu, 1979, 1984). The creation of institutions (unions, professional

organisations, parties, etc.) which *represent* groups is a way for these groups to exist in the public sphere, not only through claims but also symbolic representations, discourses, strategies, institutions. This process of *representation* of collective interests is a determining component of economies where 'industrial relations' have been institutionalised through organisms like the Commissariat général du Plan in France, collective bargaining systems, Social Security systems, etc. These institutions are the results of symbolic struggles which result in establishing stable 'consensus' which can also be broken as it is the case now with the Neo-liberal revolution.

Economics as efficient fallacy

In Bourdieu's view, the Neo-classical theory, especially in its anthropological dimension, is a particular case of the scholastic fallacy. It is a theory which confuses the things of logic and the logic of things, and makes ordinary economic agents reason like pure theoretician. 'Denying the pretention of economic agents to possess adequate knowledge of economic mechanisms, the academic economist claims for himself a monopoly on the total point of view and declares himself capable of transcending the partial, particular viewpoints of particular groups' (Bourdieu, 1990:28). In this sense, Bourdieu describes the Neo-classical theory as an 'imaginary anthropology' which oscillates between the subjectivism of 'free, conscious choice' and a quasi-mechanical objectivism (because there is often only one rational solution to a problem) (1990:46-47, 2000). Similarly, it reduces markets to an idealised vision which is far away from the social reality of empirical markets. As we will see, the use of mathematics in this construction tends to reinforce this asocial and imaginary aspect.

The hegemony of Rational Action Theory in economics, its success in sociology found their principles in the scholastic bias. But they also proceed from the autonomization of the economic field in the sense that they can be seen as a formalisation of this process. Economic agents are supposed to behave naturally as profit or utility maximizers and markets are supposed to adjust (through variations of prices or quantities) without any institutional or social interference, as a 'natural process'. 'The 'rational actor' theory, which seeks the 'origin' of acts, strictly economic or not, in an 'intention' or 'consciousness', is often associated with a narrow conception of the 'rationality' of practices, an economism which regards as rational (...) those practices that are consciously oriented by the pursuit of maximum (economic) profit at a minimum (economic) cost' (1990:50). We find here the

example of a belief, close to the *illusio* of the economic field, which is presented as a 'pure theory' of this field : similarly, a big part of the principals of literary analysis reproduces and formalises the literary belief(s), especially the autonomy of literary criteria, the isolation of texts from social reality, etc. The most radical Neo-classicals try to generalize this economic *illusio* to the whole social reality, most of the time against the results of the other social sciences. Bourdieu's general economy of practice is at the exact opposite of this attempt, showing the specificity of the fields of cultural production where an *economy of offering* takes place on the refusal of economic criteria (Bourdieu, 1994). The appearance of some success for such a theory is due to the fact that, in some sectors of the social life (for example the financial markets, the educational orientation, the collective bargaining, etc.), these economic behaviours have expanded to such a proportion, that they can present sufficient regularity to be stylised without too much obvious errors of prediction : people sometimes behave 'reasonably' enough to be 'represented' as pure 'maximisers' (which they are not). Their decisions become probable from a microeconomic point of view, even if this point of view is an illusion when considered as universal or natural.

The mathematical formalisation of economics can not be criticised in itself but as a way for Neo-classical economists to separate further more the economic logic from the social and historical conditions in which it is embedded. The use of simple models and the practice of hypothesis testing simulate the experimental method without any chance to obtain universal conclusions because they are not explicitly understood as historical and contextual. The simplified models of economics are most of the time very distant from the ethnographic or sociological observations of the underlying realities. Bourdieu has therefore made an intensive use of geometric data analysis methods, which rest on a simple epistemological principal expressed by Benzécri : 'the model follows the data, not the reverse'. Guided by a sociological frame-model, the sociologist doesn't presuppose any strong relation between two or three variables but he tries to explore the entire system of inter-relations between many variables and, simultaneously, to reveal the *proximities* and distances between agents (which can be individuals, enterprises on a market, etc.). This use of GDA reveals structural homologies, for example between the global social space and the fields of production (for example the field of *house builders*), which allow to understand the social process of fit between supply and demand on a market.

State, politics and economy

The close link between economics ('political economy') and politics is a characteristic of the discipline, which grew close to the political powers, in order to help them to accumulate wealth and power in the world system. The two dominant traditions in after-second world war economics –neo-liberal and keynesian- have been produced in close relation with specific social elites (bureaucratic, political and economic). Economics, while describing itself as 'pure' and 'autonomous', never ceased being very close to decision-makers and in this sense, never managed to build a scientific autonomy as such. Breaking with the normative mood of economics, Bourdieu (rather far away from the Durkheimian tradition, at least from Simiand) suggests stressing the political dimension of economic objects and to consider power struggles as constitutive of any economic reality.

One of the important empirical results of Bourdieu's research on the field of personal housing stresses the role of the State in the social construction of markets. The birth of a policy called 'aide à la personne', which in the 1970s favoured the development of personal credit in order to give people a larger access to private house property, was a way for bureaucratic agents to integrate popular and middle classes into the economic system through the access to property. No market can exist without a complex set of laws, regulations, etc., which do not only 'regulate' it from the outside but 'frame' it from the inside. The bureaucratic field is a relatively autonomous social space where different actors compete, among other stakes, to impose a universal definition of the economic reality. This universal, as well as a particular kind of interest to disinterestedness, was invented through a complex historical process which presupposed the concentration of symbolic capital. 'Thus was progressively established a specific economic logic, founded on levies without counterpart and redistribution functioning as the basis for the conversion of economic capital into symbolic capital' (Bourdieu, 1998:2). For Bourdieu, it plays an important role in the social construction of the economy. It is divided between contradictory forces. Since the building of what has been called a 'Welfare State', one has to distinguish between the 'little State nobility', defining the 'left hand of the State' (teachers, social workers, nurses, agents of public services, etc.), and the 'grand State nobility', which constitutes the 'right hand of the State' (grands corps, énarques, etc.). The transformation of European states since the neo-liberal shifts has intensified the contradiction between these two forces, as show the observations based on interviews published in *La Misère du Monde*.

Bourdieu's stronger commitment into the public debates in 1995 (with the creation of the group and collection 'Raisons d'agir', soon with a call for a European social movement) can be understood as a direct consequence of this analysis. The attacks against public services

are part of a Neo-liberal project, which Bourdieu compares with Marxism-Leninism because of its economicism and its tendency to absolute determinism (Bourdieu, 1998, 2001). The use of a rhetoric of impossibility (today the impossibility of having any political effect on the 'natural' process of globalization) can be observed in the texts of central bankers, politicians, businessmen, and also unions leaders, etc. The reference to economics is essential to the understanding of a specific kind of legitimization because science is the last resource in a political attempt to 'depoliticize' politics.

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