

Pierre Bourdieu

Return to
Reflexivity



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Edited and introduced by
Jérôme Bourdieu and Johan Heilbron

Translated by Peter Collier

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An enterprise of objectification can only be scientifically validated insofar as the subject of the objectification has been subjected to objectification in the first place.

Pierre Bourdieu, *Science of Science and Reflexivity*,
trans. Richard Nice [translation adjusted]
(Cambridge: Polity, 2001), p. 92.

Introduction

From epistemological vigilance to reflexivity

The demand for reflexivity, which has come to be accepted as a key principle for the human and social sciences, is one of the major contributions made by Pierre Bourdieu's work. Although all of his work bears the hallmark of a reflexive practice of research, he came to use the word itself rather late in the day. His systematic reflection on the research he was engaged in, designed to scientifically objectify his own scientific practice, was a disposition that preceded, and probably facilitated, his various intellectual innovations, including his concept of reflexivity.

Spurning the bureaucratic model of research as a mechanical application of standardized methods, Bourdieu started his career with fieldwork in wartime Algeria. These exceptional conditions were incompatible with ordinary research work, unless the researcher were to cast a reflexive gaze back onto precisely this

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extraordinary context, in order to register its impact on the object of research and the researcher himself. So that when Bourdieu took his native Béarn as his object of study, it paradoxically obeyed the same logic: he set out this familiar but fast-changing terrain as a mirror of Algeria, following a reflexive practice that made it possible to verify the impact of the social world on the observer. This concern to objectify and control the relationship between the observer and his object also informed the various investigations he undertook and (co)directed at the Centre de sociologie européenne (CSE), where he was recruited by his director of studies, Raymond Aron, in 1961.¹

To understand Bourdieu's sense of reflexivity, we should go back to his early research. His first investigations were characterized by the fact that nothing came easily: none of the criteria for normal research work were satisfied. In the circumstances, the usual procedures of ethnographic or statistical research were almost impossible to apply, nor were the techniques he had acquired as a trainee philosopher much help. The context of Algeria's War of Independence, involving extreme danger and emergencies, provoked a 'permanent practical reflexivity' as a condition of survival as much as a method of research.² This led Bourdieu to mount a collective enterprise, with a team of investigators and researchers who drew on their diverse forms of involvement with Algerian reality. This very diversity was rich in assets, but these needed to be co-ordinated

and organized, exploiting a variety of survey methods (observations, interviews, and statistical analysis) and academic resources (blurring the boundaries between anthropology, sociology, and labour economics, for example). These various scientific and managerial procedures were guided by a reflexive approach that came to typify all of his subsequent projects. This approach, which is explained explicitly in *Travail et travailleurs en Algérie* (1963),³ was explored and elaborated on as his work progressed.

The research in Béarn, begun in 1959, appears to be an essential complement to the Algerian work then in progress. It deals with social upheavals of a completely different nature and is situated in a radically different universe, one close to Bourdieu's heart, the childhood village that he had left when he was still young to attend boarding school at the *lycée* in Pau. These studies, later collected in *The Bachelors' Ball* (2002), focus on peasant celibacy and the crisis facing peasant families.⁴ They represent an acid test for these early experiments in research and provide a conclusive justification of the Algerian studies. In his self-analysis, Bourdieu describes his study of Béarn as the 'occasion and the operator of a veritable conversion':⁵

The word is, no doubt, not too strong to describe the transformation, at once intellectual and affective, that led me from the phenomenology of emotional life [*the initial theme of his thesis project*] [. . .] to a scientific

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practice implying a vision of the social world that was both more distanced and more realistic.⁶

In launching this twofold enterprise, Bourdieu confronted the many problems arising, not so much as technical or theoretical questions, nor even as ethical or political issues, but first and foremost in a reflexive mode. In *The Craft of Sociology* (1968), co-authored with Jean-Claude Chamboredon and Jean-Claude Passeron, this attitude is still referred to as ‘epistemological vigilance’.⁷ Instead of relying on logical techniques, as advocated by some philosophers of science, or on the ‘methodology’ of sociologists, such as Paul Lazarsfeld, it encourages the objectification of the (social) conditions of possibility of research, which depend on the generic positions of the researchers and the characteristics of their personal social trajectories. This approach requires the use of social science techniques in order to better understand and master the research in progress, its obstacles and perspectives, as well as the dispositions that researchers unwittingly deploy in their work.

This understanding of reflexivity does not imply an exercise in introspection designed to overcome some kind of lack of personal self-knowledge. Perhaps this is why Bourdieu initially preferred to speak of ‘epistemological vigilance’ instead of ‘reflexivity’, a term that he started to use more frequently only from the 1980s.⁸

The attitude of epistemological vigilance is grounded in the need to dispel the denial or ignorance of the

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effects of researchers' characteristics on their activity: a blindness based on the illusion of a personal talent for lucidity, which is the first obstacle to a relationship with the world conducive to sociological objectification. But even when subjecting themselves to an analysis of their unique personality and experience, researchers cannot escape the perceptual biases that are social. It is only by trying to take account of all the social mechanisms that construct the human person, including their belief in their uniqueness as an individual, that researchers can hope to gain some control over the effect that these can have on any attempt to represent the social world.

This perspective consists in 'objectifying the subject of objectification', that is, deploying 'all the available instruments of objectification (statistical surveys, ethnographic observation, historical research, etc.) in order to bring to light the presuppositions it owes to its inclusion in the object of knowledge'.⁹ The assumptions are of three kinds. First, the most accessible are those associated with the subject's position in the public arena, the particular trajectory that led to it, and their social origin and gender. Next come those that constitute the *doxa* specific to each of the different fields of intellectual production (religious, artistic, philosophical, etc.) and, more precisely, those that each individual scholar owes to their position in their own particular field. Finally, and even more profoundly, there are assumptions related to *skholè*, namely leisure, distance from the demands and crises of the world. As a condition underlying the