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Bourdieu and the Dead End of Reflexivity: On the Impossible Task of Locating the Subject

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Abstract

This article examines recent attempts by IR scholars to flesh out a reflexive approach inspired by the work of Pierre Bourdieu. The French sociologist pioneered the idea of turning the tools of sociology onto oneself in order to apply the same grid of social analysis to the object and subject of scholarship. This represents the culmination of a long tradition of seeking to understand from where one speaks and grasp our subjective biases through reflexive means. But as I argue Bourdieu – like most reflexive scholars – largely overestimated his ability to grasp his own subject position. For he assumed he could be objective about the very thing he had the least reasons to be objective about: himself. Instead of bending over backwards in this way and directly take the subject into account, I then propose to rearticulate the problematic of reflexivity by going back to a more classic concern with the question of alienation. Through a detailed critique of Bourdieu's reflexive approach and the ways in which it was received in IR, I set out a series of principles to reconfigure the agenda of reflexivity and offer a platform for a proper methodological alternative to positivism.

Introduction

The reflexive approach in IR was largely developed during the post positivist debate of the 1980s and 1990s. Scholars locating themselves within this approach challenged positivism by emphasising that there is no neutral and objective ground on which to base theories of IR. Emphasising that facts are informed by theories and that theories are themselves value laden, they argued that knowledge always reflects a specific perspective on the world. As Robert Cox famously put it, 'theory is always for someone and for some purpose.'² Following on this observation, reflexive scholars insisted on the need to reflect on their specific social and subjective biases and make the specificity of their viewpoint explicit.³ If there can be no absolute foundations upon which one can build theories, they argued, it is necessary to identify the subjective and normative choices that guide our research. In this way, reflexivity came to be defined foremost as a process of bending over backward to take oneself into account and thus qualify our knowledge claims by specifying where they come from. However, as Hamati-Attaya points out, this first wave of reflexive scholarship never offered concrete guidance in terms of methodology. Too often, it was satisfied with stating an ethical commitment to self-awareness rather than turning reflexivity into a concrete methodology.

However, the project of fleshing out a reflexive agenda of research has been taken up by a new wave of constructivist scholarship attempting to make good on the promises of this approach by turning to the work of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu.⁴ What makes Bourdieu's work intriguing is his emphasis on the challenges reflexivity poses. As he points out, it is not sufficient to examine oneself and disclose interests and value commitments we have. For reflexivity requires a methodology to excavate what is not readily transparent to the scholar: the deeper structures that condition and shape scholarship itself.⁵ For Bourdieu, the key is to turn the tools of sociology onto oneself, and apply the same grid of social analysis to the object and subject of IR scholarship. In the words of Pierre Bourdieu, one needs to objectify the objectifying subject in order to understand the very process by which world politics is constructed as an object of enquiry.

The aim of this article is to assess whether Bourdieu's idea of objectifying the objectifying subject can help push the agenda of reflexivity in order to establish it as a proper alternative to positivism. Engaging with Bourdieu's ideas about reflexivity is of great importance to IR not only because of the influential nature of his work in this field, but more fundamentally because Bourdieu pushed key themes latent in the first wave of reflexive scholarship to their logical end point. By insisting on the need to treat the subject as an object of research in its own right, Bourdieu essentially systematised the project of disclosing from where we speak.

In this paper, I argue that this project cannot succeed. My aim is to raise more broadly a series of problems related to the way in which reflexivity has been conceived as a project to locate from where one speaks. As I argue, Bourdieu largely overestimated, as most reflexive scholars, his ability to grasp his own subject position. Reflexive scholars who follow this course often fail to explain why assumptions that bias their understanding of world politics would not also condition how they conceive of their own subject position. Essentially reflexive scholars assume they can be objective about the very thing they have the least reasons to be objective about: themselves. Starting from this critique, the article emphasises key problems in Bourdieu's project and then traces how these were reflected in the various ways in which his agenda was received in IR. This will lead me to argue that reflexivity cannot offer a productive alternative to positivism *as long as it relies on this misleading ambition of locating the subject*. I use this critique to put forward in the conclusion a few ideas about how to rearticulate the problematic of reflexivity along the lines of a more phenomenological concern with the question of alienation.

1. Reflexivity à la Bourdieu

The problematic of reflexivity has gained a new lease of life in the past few years with the publication of a series of important interventions which have helped bring reflexivity back to the fore.⁶ This is part of a growing interest in critical methodologies within IR.⁷ One of the defining features of this trend has been a renewed interest in the work of Pierre Bourdieu, a shift partly initiated by Stefano Guzzini's critique of the drift of constructivism towards positivism.⁸ Guzzini intended to ground constructivism in a reflexive dimension. As he argued, a constructivist approach which emphasises 'the constructed nature of ideas' cannot be satisfied with simply projecting construction as a feature of world politics without deriving the logical corollary that academic knowledge itself should be treated as a construction. For meaning, indeed, is 'constructed both at the level of action

and observation.⁹ To develop this dual vantage point, encompassing both the object of world politics and the scientific community analysing it, Guzzini proposed to turn to Bourdieu's reflexive sociology precisely because of its clear program for addressing this challenge.

Since this intervention, numerous scholars have seen in Bourdieu a stepping stone for the renewal of constructivism, one which emphasises the importance of practice.¹⁰ This sociological anchor, they argue, provides a platform for a rich reflexive program that goes beyond textual analysis. According to Frédérique Mérand and Vincent Pouliot, Bourdieu opens a third path to ground constructivism firmly outside of the neopositivist camp without falling into poststructuralist relativism.¹¹ What makes Bourdieu's work particularly intriguing is the way in which it radicalises key themes of reflexivity. Bourdieu insisted that the classic reflexive stance based on making explicit one's biases is insufficient, since it risks missing the practices we have internalised and now take for granted. According to him, there is a deeper 'scientific unconscious embedded in theories, problems, and (especially national) categories of scholarly judgement' which needs to be uncovered.¹² Reflexivity thus cannot be simply concerned with disclosure. It must provide a means towards greater rigor to excavate what is not readily apparent. To meet this exigency, Bourdieu proposed to turn the tools of sociology back onto the scholar doing the analysis. This is what he referred to as objectifying the objectifying subject; a commitment to analyse the evolution of an object of research both in its given social field and in the academic field where it is conceptualised.¹³

This re-articulation of the reflexive agenda was meant to avoid the treacherous waters of the 'personal' which previously seemed the logical endpoint of reflexivity. As I mentioned, the first wave of IR reflexive scholars had emphasised the need for making explicit our normative and social commitments. But the danger with this strategy, Bourdieu argued, is that it encourages us to lapse back on one's interior life. It is both narcissistic in its assumption that one's personal life is of public interest, and politically dangerous for it opens the door to easy dismissals based on subjective grounds.¹⁴ For Bourdieu, reflexivity can be viable only if it conforms itself to scientific criteria of rigour and becomes itself an object of scientific debate.

In pushing this agenda of reflexivity, Bourdieu had the great insight to conceive of reflexivity as an integral component of scientific practice, or more precisely as a means to control for bias in the production of knowledge, rather than see it as a concession based on the inevitability of bias as other reflexivists tended to believe.¹⁵ In this regard, the French sociologist developed a distinctive reflexive approach defined by three central tenets. The first is to determine one's own trajectory and position in a social field. This is perhaps the aspect which comes closest to the classic notion of reflexivity, but Bourdieu proposed to think of these biases in sociological rather than normative terms. The point is not simply to reflect on one's own biases through some form of autobiography and announce them as axioms of our thinking, but rather to study our trajectory according to sociological categories, thus privileging experiences that are amenable to social analysis (for example one's experiences of a specific social hierarchy or of a given social struggle). The objective is to generate an account that can be subject to further sociological enquiry and scientific debate.

The second aspect of Bourdieu's reflexivity is the study of the academic field in which one operates. This aspect of his reflexive program seeks to uncover the practices and ways of thinking which shape how we approach and construct distinct objects of research. It must capture the doxa of a social field, that is the set of practices and norms which are

internalised and taken for granted within a given social field.¹⁶ This is not a glorified review of literature seeking to trace how debates about a given objects have evolved. For the central point that Bourdieu made is that the interests played out in academic debates cannot be simply read off the social field that is studied by academics. They are shaped by social struggles that are distinctive to academia as a social field in its own right. This is why, it was not sufficient in the eyes of Bourdieu to simply trace how ideas have developed in the literature while keeping world politics as the key referent for these academic developments. Instead, Bourdieu asked for a sociology of academia, a project that he himself conducted.¹⁷ For the struggles waged at the level of ideas are not simply ones that pertain to the object of study itself, but also to the studying of the object.¹⁸

Finally, the third component of Bourdieu's approach concerns the specular perspective that academics often develop when analysing social objects. The problem stems from the position of scholars as external observers which often creates a particular intellectual bias as scholars overly rationalize social situations they study, and miss their pragmatic dimension. This is an important insight inherited from Heidegger and Wittgenstein which highlights that agents often internalise practices and a sense of the game (or a logic of practice) without rationalising or intellectualising them. In that respect, one must pay attention to the illocutionary aspects of practice rather than simply rely on the way these practices are represented. There is a bias which comes from being an academic who, being an outsider, does not have direct access to the 'feel for the game' which actors have built through a long experience of their social field. The challenge is thus to avoid reifying social situations by reducing them to a set of determining rule of the game. Instead, Bourdieu wants to think about them in terms of concrete problems that agents seek to solve practically and this requires a constant reflexive monitoring of the biases that come from our own position as external observer.

These three components are the pillars of Bourdieu's reflexive agenda to objectify the objectification, or objectify the objectifying subject. It sets out an attractive framework reappropriated by various scholars in IR because it offers a concrete strategy for developing reflexivity and consolidating constructivism as an alternative to positivism. Xavier Guillaume, for example, turns to Bourdieu in order to fulfil what he sees as a necessary condition for the dialogical engagement he has sought to promote in his work. According to him, 'to integrate the idea of subjectivity and reflexivity precisely is to constitute a body of knowledge that is self-aware, through its own archaeology, of its bias and limitations'.¹⁹ From a different perspective, Leander insists on the importance of this methodology for challenging the way in which our own social field shapes our choices of subjects and understandings.²⁰ Through this, she argues, our 'inherent biases and blindness are made visible and (hence) potentially controllable'.²¹ Similarly, Eagleton Price wishes to use Bourdieu's reflexivity to objectify 'the social conditions that have formed the theorist and, in particular, how their relative position in the professional universe shapes their interests and investments'.²² Finally, Hamati-Ataya sees in Bourdieu a promising path to escape the realm of meta theory where reflexivity has too often been confined. She sees in the strategy of objectifying the objectification an approach that can yield concrete theoretical and empirical findings for the study of world politics.²³ The injunctions frequently voiced by Bourdieu-inspired constructivists attest to a renewed concern for problematizing one's own gaze on world politics. In the following section I wish to raise various problems with this proposal and use this to reflect more generally on the possibility of developing a productive reflexive methodology as an alternative to positivism.

2. The End Point of Reflexivity?

Reflexivity has always been concerned with addressing the problem that subjectivity poses for knowledge production. If we understand subjectivity as what is distinctive of a subject's experience, then it is fair to say that traditional conceptions of science have sought to remove this dimension through methodological means so that knowledge claims can stand on their own and acquire universal value.²⁴ But reflexive scholars have long assumed that such an objective account is impossible. Science, they argue, cannot be based on absolute rules, or a methodology, which would level the terrain of knowledge. Subjective differences, that is differences that pertain to what characterises a given subject in relation to others, mean that there is always something political that is involved in science. For there is no absolute ground to settle differences, since *we are always more implicated than we realise in the knowledge we produce*.

This problem has been fully documented in the work of reflexive scholars.²⁵ But being aware of these limits can only be meaningful if it makes a difference to the way we study world politics. And this is perhaps where reflexivity has most struggled to establish itself for too often it has left unclear what are the expectations it sets for itself.²⁶ It is interesting, in this regard, to note how rare are the reflexive scholars who actually live up to the very agenda they promote. For all, their emphasis on disclosure, the first wave of reflexive scholars so rarely did disclose what was at stake in their studies. Even scholars who called for a Bourdieu inspired practice of objectifying the objectifying subject, have rarely come out concretely to apply this to themselves. Anna Leander candidly recognises the virtual absence of such accounts in the work of reflexive scholars. She explains this lack by pointing to the limited space in academic writing which means that in most cases 'the reflexive grounding of the argument will most probably have to remain unarticulated'.²⁷ But, I argue that this absence should not be simply read as the product of an incomplete application of reflexivity. It is symptomatic of more fundamental problems with the way in which this agenda has been set up in the first place. In what follows, I make five propositions that challenge Bourdieu's framing of the reflexive problematic and use them to push reflexivity in more productive directions.

First proposition: *Objectifying the objectifying subject is an open invitation for further reification of the self.*

It has always been a curious turn for reflexive scholars to assume that they could be objective about the very thing they have the least reason to be neutral about: themselves. In that respect, Bourdieu's sociological reflexivity asks from the reader an incredible leap of faith in granting to reflexive scholars the ability that they themselves refuse to grant others.²⁸ This is a wager we have no reason to endorse. For if our own biases still shape our self-understanding, what respite can there be in following this circular strategy of bending over backward? Taking oneself into account will simply replay the biases we are supposed to lay bare.

The problem here is not one of intention. It concerns the incentives stacked against what reflexivity seeks to uncover. Indeed, there are good reasons for why our judgement tends to falter when thinking about the self. For there is an inevitable conflict of interest at the heart of this confessional strategy. Either scholars will disclose significant biases and risk

undermining their position or disclose meaningless assumptions which will be of little significance. Cast in these terms, reflexivity often boils down to a self-defeating task of presenting our subjective perspective in ways which do not undermine our politics. In most cases, this type of disclosure paints the subject in the broadest brush strokes, often relying on abstract principles that are difficult to tie to any concrete politics. A good example of this are the gratuitous commitments to emancipation which pepper the field. They illustrate how this reflexive duty is often fulfilled, especially by first wave reflexivists, in a meaningless way. For this disclosure never places these reflexive scholars in a vulnerable position. It speaks of politics in such vague and unassailable ways that the so called biases disclosed are rendered effectively apolitical in that they provide no help to understand what is at stake. For after all, who really is against emancipation?

Unsurprisingly, reflexivity cast in these terms tends to produce the opposite of what it purports to do. It usually betrays the inner certitude of reflexive scholars that they are on the 'right side' and thus often becomes a privileged vehicle for self-promotion.²⁹ Bourdieu's own reflexive account constitutes a good illustration of this paradoxical outcome. It tells the story that conforms to the classic themes of emancipation, in which Bourdieu plays the part of a hard-working scholar coming from outside of the establishment who is confronted to the hypocrisy of an academic field rife with self-edifying intellectuals.³⁰ Reflexivity becomes here a register for Bourdieu to claim an exceptional trajectory which would have led him to a particularly rigorous or objective world view.

If I was able, in a way which seemed to me to be rather 'exact', to objectivize the field that I had just entered, it was undoubtedly because of the highly improbable social trajectory that had led me from a remote village in a remote region of southwestern France to what was then the apex of the French educational system predisposed me to a particularly sharpened and critical intuition of the intellectual field.³¹

Interestingly, Bourdieu systematically avoids depicting himself in positions of power. The history he tells is always one of resistance to the power of others. And yet this is someone who occupied some of the most prestigious positions in French Academia, most notably the Chair of sociology at the College de France and the directorships of the Centre de Sociologie Européennes and the journal *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociale*. This is no mere lapse on Bourdieu's part. It reflects the limitations we confront when speaking of the self while seeking to avoid undermining one's own politics. This often goes hand in hand with a tendency to shift away from problematizing subjective biases in order to emphasise conscious motivations in order to better align our politics with our analytical claims. If Bourdieu's own narrative as the son of a provincial petit Bourgeois may help explain why he attacked existentialism and its cult of the intellectual.³² or why his anthropological work in Algeria led him to challenge the reification of structuralism, none of this helps us really grasp the subjective biases which shape Bourdieu's own account. On the contrary, they work to do the opposite, effectively consolidating his worldview in the name of personal crusades which are crafted in such a way as to elicit sympathy.

Even his more sociological work aimed at analysing the doxa of academic life reproduces these problems. In *Homo Academicus*, Bourdieu basically portrays the academic field as fractured between hard working, risk taking, but marginalised researchers and institutionally rooted sell outs. There is, he says, a

[...] sort of antinomy between science and respectability, between the deviant precarious career of the researcher and the more limited but safer trajectory of the profession, which can be related to differences objectively inherent in their institutional position, in their dependence or independence from the temporal powers, and also to differences in the disposition of the agents, more or less inclined towards or condemned to accept conformity of innovation.³³

Once more there is little doubt as to where Bourdieu locates himself in this portrayal. Whether he is right or not is not the issue here. The point is that there is not much that is reflexive about *Homo Academicus* because nothing here problematizes Bourdieu's own view point.

This is not to take anything away from what Bourdieu may have accomplished. Indeed, my point is not that Bourdieu failed in applying his own reflexive program, but rather that one cannot expect him to have succeeded in the first place, whether through normative introspection or sociological excavations. *For reflexive scholars should know better than to believe that they can shed their own biases when they are analysing their own trajectory.* There is little to learn about the subject in these narratives of the self, or more specifically about what it is that one has *at stake as a subject*. Such narratives seek to make sense of an experience that is often more contradictory and fragmented, they tend to exaggerate the coherency of the self. They always smoothen and rationalise one's position (or trajectory) in such a way as to make it appear more coherent and justified than it is. This is part of the normal processes by which people seek to tape together their fragmented experience in order to make sense of their life and project themselves in the future. But as a result, these accounts of the self deflect attention from the real issue of subjectivity and conceal the very biases and contradictions that are actually at work. *By definition, they point to conscious commitments and turn our gaze away from unconscious biases.*³⁴

If reflexivity should be anything in terms of methodological rigour, it should rely precisely on the opposite strategy: a systematic refusal to indulge in narcissistic narratives about the self even when they are shrouded in sociological garb. If we may grant that these narratives have a place in academia, it is not because they are a good vehicle for reflexivity. Rather, they constitute an interesting medium for establishing authorial voice, and define the identity of a project. But this does not provide an effective vehicle for reflecting on our social biases.

In sum, if the project of reflexivity is based on a recognition that we are always biased and that our knowledge claims are rooted in a subjective experience, one cannot seek to address this fact head on. For the strategy of laying bare the subject indulges reflexive scholars in a practice that is rife with conflicts of interest. Instead, reflexivity must begin with a sober realisation of its own limits and relinquish the terrain of the self. *Reflexivity is not a matter of good intentions, but of developing a responsible practice to address the very moments in our thinking where our own judgement tends to fail.*

Second proposition: *The traditional dualist framing of reflexive approaches tends to reduce reflexivity to an ethical practice rather than provide a proper footing for methodology.*

The second limitation of this agenda concerns the problematic payoff reflexivity offers. For the problem is not simply a matter of the ability of scholars to live up to the task of objectifying themselves, but a deeper structural ambiguity regarding the pay-off of this strategy. Its research program usually rests on doubling up a first order knowledge about world politics with a second order knowledge about the author. But having followed a dual

path, the problem is always to reconcile both. In what way should reflexive accounts about the author qualify our knowledge claims? What is it that can be translated from one order of knowledge to the next? Should the 'social location' of a subject become itself a matter of debate or a criterion to be used in assessing the validity of knowledge claims? These questions are rarely tackled head on by reflexive scholars. And for good reasons! Reflexive scholars pursuing a dualist strategy face an impossible task when it comes to reconciling dualist claims. Indeed, it is one of my central contentions that any attempt to translate what this 'subjective baggage' or set of dispositions can mean for the knowledge claim we make will always appear arbitrary and highly indeterminate. There is simply too much risk for analytical slippage when seeking to determine how reflexive accounts about the subject inflect the significance of knowledge claims we make about world politics.

The best way to highlight the problem is to start with an example. Let us imagine an author who opens up a discussion about neoliberalism by disclosing that she, as civil servant, has a stake in opposing the marketization of higher education and this has been a struggle she has carried out at a local level against the privatisation of certain services. Now this presumably speaks of a personal bias that this person has which will shape how she conceives of neoliberalism. But what should we make of this? Certainly this will influence how people read her analysis. Yet it will not clarify from where this author speaks in that readers will interpret differently what this location means. Depending on where readers come from, they will make different assessments of the significance this experience has had in shaping the author's conception of neoliberalism. Readers who are sympathetic to this battle will tend to look favourably on the piece and may think that this person is well placed to speak of neoliberalism because she is experiencing a version of it. Yet others may think the opposite and read this as another biased account of neoliberalism which mostly reflects the dogmatic and unrealistic opposition of someone who is not willing to recognise the broader context of economic constraints she is facing.

The basic point here is that all the work carried out to be reflexive will still fail to clarify the position from where we speak. For there is a gap between the ethical act of disclosing our subject position and the illocutionary effect of this disclosure. The meaning of what is being disclosed is not settled by the attempt to clarify from where we speak. Instead, this strategy puts into play an overriding signifier that is often more loaded and thus more liable to feed the biases of others. This is why this practice often seems counterproductive and probably why most reflexive scholars hesitate to employ it. The potential for a dismissal or judgement based on subjective grounds are too great.

Interestingly, Bourdieu was very keen to avoid shifting the onus onto the subject in this way, thus personalising the debate. He was well aware that such disclosures risk taking precedence in determining the value of our interventions often relegating the knowledge claims we make to a secondary position.³⁵ Bourdieu hoped he could avoid such an outcome by improving the quality of reflexive accounts, essentially turning them into scientific enquiries in their own right. He wanted to trade autobiography for scientifically established facts. In that regard, Frédérique Mérand and Vincent Pouliot describe Bourdieu as a hyper positivist³⁶ for the French sociologist had to count on a positivist and empirical ground in order to firmly anchor his subject beyond political re-appropriation. But Bourdieu missed that what personalises knowledge claims is not simply the quality of the account, but the very dualist framing of this form of reflexivity. How do we settle the significance of a subject's location for the knowledge claims she makes about world politics? Even if one could settle the question of the subject, we would still need to specify how this inflects first

order knowledge about world politics. It is the translation which risks turning a reflexive account into a criterion for determining the value of a knowledge claim. And if it did not, there would be no payoff for reflexivity.

This is an inescapable dilemma that the dualist framing of reflexivity cannot overcome; a dilemma that came to be reflected in the very ways in which Bourdieu's reflexive agenda was re-appropriated in IR. For the challenge in negotiating this translation was reflected in two different uses of the framework. Some scholars, usually coming out of IR constructivism, used it mostly as a rigorous strategy for objectivating the subject but struggled to show what difference this made to their analysis of world politics. Others, remained keen to keep the emphasis on the object (international sociologists) and thus criticised the former's turn to the subject, but as I argue later (proposition four) they struggled to establish in what way their work was reflexive.

While Bourdieu believed in making the reflexive component of our analysis public, he was unable to specify its significance. That such a translation is fraught with too many pitfalls may explain why Bourdieu never did say how knowledge of the subject should be evaluated in relation to first-order knowledge claims. And it probably explains why the work of reflexivity tends to be relegated to the private sphere, as Leander remarked. But this effectively vitiated Bourdieu's ambition to turn reflexivity into a proper intersubjective practice for controlling bias, or more specifically a methodology. If it was a genuinely productive practice, people would use it more systematically. But the risk of diverting attention away from knowledge claims means that reflexive scholars who use this strategy have no other choices but to treat reflexivity as an *ethic of research* that should inform scientific engagements rather than as a proper *methodology for structuring this engagement* (i.e. a set of rules of engagement for the production and exchange of knowledge). There is nothing wrong with this ethical injunction to know oneself, but this will not enable us to clarify the difference reflexivity makes to the analysis of world politics.

Third Proposition: The unconscious social and academic biases, which reflexivity is intent on uncovering, do not exist in a positive form and thus cannot be simply excavated.

At this point, I want to take a cue from phenomenology in order to highlight why we should not expect much from the strategy of objectifying the objectifying subject. Since Hegel's early elaboration of phenomenology, this approach has always put forward the idea that the subject is not something that can be directly objectified, because the subject's experience is never reducible to the objectifying terms of language. According to this tradition, the subject can be analysed through what it does, but it can never be captured in itself. This means notably that it cannot be analysed in abstraction from the object, for what characterises it is not simply the entity that it refers to (i.e. a subject), but more importantly an existential relationship that is intentional and encompasses both the subject and the object. In that sense, the subject of reflexivity is not something we can settle before looking at world politics, because there are emergent properties that are always involved in the subject-object relationship.

By contrast to phenomenology, Bourdieu is intent on indexing the subject. At the base of this reflexive project is the belief that there is nothing fundamentally irreducible about subjectivity. It is mostly amenable to sociological categories. This means that the biases and assumptions that reflexivity is intent on excavating can be identified 'as

sociological content'. In this respect, the subject of which Bourdieu speaks is very much a subject of sociology. It is conceived as an entity that has been shaped through socialisation and can be understood from the perspective of the various traits, belief and habits it has come to internalise. The subject here is thus understood as mostly determined by external forces and the work of sociology is to recover these buried layers of determinations which shape how subjects act. Applying the tools of sociology onto the reflexive scholar then becomes a matter of treating the subject as an object. But it can only do so if the subject is analysed in abstraction of subjectivity. For it must take the very thing that distinguishes the experience of the subject (subjectivity) out of the equation in order to objectify it. Without this excision, I argue, it is impossible to capture the subject as an object amenable to such sociological enquiry.

The problem here can be best appreciated when looking at two issues highlighted by phenomenology which make it impossible to objectify the subject or locate from where it speaks. The first concerns the practices we internalise. When we seek to identify what determining effects these practices have on the subject, we must conceive of the process of internalisation as a *discrete phenomenon*. In other words, the internalisation of a practice or a belief must have inherent effects which can be analysed irrespective of the broader configuration of the subject. This is important for otherwise we cannot isolate or identify what is produced by the internalisation of a practice. For example, someone who has been formed to believe that any social scientific explanation must be based on an econometric argument would have distinct biases which would be traceable to econometrics itself and the practices associated with it, as if these came with their own inherent set of biases. The point is that, in this perspective, dispositions which are internalised must be said to determine independently from the broader configuration of subjectivity. Otherwise one could not assume that econometrics necessarily impacts in the same way different subjects. In the classic sociological conception of the subject, subjectivity is thus reduced to a repository of discrete logics which are not themselves re-articulated in the process of being internalised.

The problem that subjectivity poses in this regards stems from the incredibly dense layering which defines its configuration. We are the product of a long series of socialising experiences which make all subjects very difficult to objectify. While we may certainly accept that people do internalise practices, ways of thinking, discursive structures or dispositions, the problem is to assess what difference these internalisations make. If we are going to take subjectivity seriously, we cannot treat practices or discourses as discrete phenomena which operate more or less in isolation from other internalised practices. In that respect, subjectivity cannot be treated as a passive recipient even when subjects are not intently seeking to change what they think or how they internalise specific practices. Instead it must be taken as the product of a unique synthesis which makes objectifying it impossible.

The second problem stems from the intentional structure of the subject. It is an important contribution of phenomenology to have emphasised that we cannot think of a subject without an object. The subject is constituted in its relationships with objects and can never be understood in abstraction of them. This basic idea has important consequences once more for problematizing the objectification of the subject. Too often, scholars assume that social biases operate primarily through internalisation, something that rests exclusively on the side of the subject, rather than something that concerns the specific relationship between what we have internalised and the objects towards which we deploy these

practical templates or dispositions. In the classic sociological perspective, the question of the subject is supposed to be addressed before we turn to, and largely in abstraction of, the object to which a subject relates to. It is akin to assuming that the biases that stem from using econometrics pre-exist the very object that is analysed through econometrics. As if econometrics has inherent biases which shape, for example, our view of US trade or monetary policy regardless of how a subject deploys econometrics or in which context. In other words, this objectification of the subject must deny the practical, creative and agentic dimension of subjectivity,³⁷ the way in which subjects are forced to be pragmatic because of the distinct features of situations in which they find themselves and where they confront given objects.³⁸

Bourdieu, of course, was well aware of these issues which were partly responsible for his break with structuralism. He was, himself, very influenced by the legacy of phenomenology, notably through the work of Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty. This, in fact, is partly what makes his reflexive agenda richer than previous discussions of reflexivity in IR where the subject is too often taken to be unproblematically legible. In referring to a logic of practice, Bourdieu was keen to highlight the pragmatic and layered nature of subjectivity. For these problems meant that we cannot deduce from the existence of social structures how people will act. Bourdieu, in fact, went as far as recognising the differential nature of the problem, notably with his idea of social fields and his attempt to develop a relational approach that builds on a strategic understanding of practice that is not reducible to any direct structural determination.³⁹ For it is, he argued, the specific configurations of a social field defined by the relationships between subjects and objects in the field which is determinant.⁴⁰

However, if phenomenology informed his conception of practice, he never drew out its full implication for his own reflexive agenda. For while he recognised that we cannot understand the subject simply by deriving its nature from the subject's structural conditions, he still believed in the possibility of covering the gap between structure and subjectivity through the use of empirical observation. If structures may not provide directly the key to the subjects they govern, Bourdieu thought that ethnography and statistics could help us see how it 'really' works in practice. In short, observations and empirical data would tell us what social internalisation had produced in practice; a framing which led him to conceive of the notion of the habitus and its structural account of practice. The idea of a logic of practice was thus meant to bridge the gap between the objective and the subjective dimensions of social life.⁴¹

This attempt to close the hermeneutic circle by collecting empirical facts and observations in order to triangulate the complex relationship of subjects to their surroundings essentially rests on a misunderstanding of the challenge that phenomenology poses for social sciences. For the problem does not simply stem from a representational bias which leads us to neglect the practical dimension of social internalisation. It consists more fundamentally in a problem of reverse engineering. If we cannot deduce practice from structural determination, why should we be able to reconstruct social conditioning from the observation of practice? The point here is that subjectivity filters social conditioning in such a way that its role can never be recovered. In others words, subjective multi-layering and intentionality pose insurmountable obstacles to the sociological project pursued by Bourdieu regardless of the direction we take it, whether it is going from structure to behaviour or from behaviour to structure (i.e. to the logic of practice). We are always

dealing with a unique subjective formation that is not amenable to a language of structural determination even if conceived as a logic of practice.⁴²

In his attempt to anchor the subject, Bourdieu was thus forced to revert to a highly structural conception of practice which had little to do with phenomenology. This is a key tension that runs through his work and which left him in an impossible position. For having correctly recognised the differential nature of subjectivity, there was no way for him to capture the subject in positive terms. Ironically, Bourdieu's own *Self Portrait* unwittingly makes this point. For despite his claim that we are all the predictable product of our environment, Bourdieu sees his own intellectual journey as anything but a process of internalisation. What we have instead is a trajectory that is explicitly cast as a process of individuation which marks out Bourdieu as he repeatedly puts into question the institutions in which he operates: 'Without being truly unconscious, my choices manifested themselves above all in refusals and in intellectual antipathies that were most often barely articulated; and they expressed themselves explicitly only very belatedly'.⁴³ As captured by this quote, Bourdieu's self-portrait often emphasises what distinguishes him rather than what allowed him to fit in. Granted, Bourdieu may have been an exceptional scholar, but this process of individuation is certainly not an exceptional one. For once more, the point is not that Bourdieu failed to apply his own framework to himself, but that the very experience of subjectivity is structured in this way. The specific lens that our own history provides us (i.e. the process of layering) to make sense of the world in which we are (i.e. the pragmatic relationship to the object) is always singular and of great complexity. Few believe that they are reducible to the structure in which they are embedded, especially not critical scholars who promote reflexivity. This does not mean that we do not internalise practices and discourses, but more fundamentally *that what is at stake is not defined in these terms*. To think in terms of internalisation is to depoliticise the subject, to reduce it to its surrounding and to lose in the process the very thing that reflexivity was intent on putting up front: the politics that are played out in our interventions. After all, politics is a process of settling differences.

It is interesting to contrast, Bourdieu's strategy with that of another French scholar who builds on this phenomenological tradition: Jacques Lacan. Lacan argues that there is a fundamental and unbridgeable gap between our experience as subjects and the way in which we seek to represent it. He speaks of a split subject, one which is forever divided between her experience and her rationalisation of this experience. Experience comes in an embodied form tied to perceptions, emotions, and bodily sensations. The words, images and ideas we borrow from socialisation to make sense of this experience can never do justice to it. A gap thus emerges between, on the one hand, the imagery and the narrative we construct about ourselves and, on the other hand, our experience. This productive tension, in fact, is the key to the experience of subjectivity and Lacan's notion of the unconscious. For the fact that our experience clashes with our own self understanding and fails to live up to the ideals we have of ourselves, produces the impression that there is something else at work beyond consciousness (i.e. an unconscious). For Lacan, it is in fact the failure of the objectification of the subject that is the defining feature of subjectivity.

From this perspective, the classic sociological conception of the subject overestimates one's ability to decipher subjectivity because it underestimates the role of subjectivity in mediating a process of social conditioning. Subjectivity is always grounded in a differential terrain. Try as we may, it is always what sticks out that matters and thus subjectivity can never be objectified in positive form. While we may rightly assume that our

social conditioning is key, it is still the way in which we do not fit our environment which is determinant. As Charlotte Epstein notes, we should not address the question of the subject by focusing on 'the presumed harmony between the self and its social environment, but on the inherent 'maladaptation' of a self that can never be fully socialized'.⁴⁴ In the end, there is thus no way to cover a subjective ground largely constituted in differential terms.

This constitutive gap between identity, or objectification, and our subjective experience not only helps us understand what is irreducible about subjectivity, it indicates where are the limits to theorisation, and objectification when it comes to reflexivity. It makes clear that defining one's position in a social field simply cannot capture a ground upon which knowledge would be said to be rooted (the location of the subject). This is a point, I will later argue, that was most brilliantly captured by Quentin Skinner's reflexion on interpretation and which opens the door for a very different hermeneutic; one much more geared towards phenomenological concerns, than the hermeneutic template proposed by Bourdieu and his followers.

If reflexivity may constitute a nice invitation to reflect on one's biases, it simply cannot make good on its promises to objectify the objectifying subject because subjectivity cannot be translated in objectified terms (e.g. as an identity or a habitus). Subjects and objects are not the same kind of 'things'. When Bourdieu seeks to treat both in the same way, he misses precisely the relational nature of the subject.⁴⁵ To seek to treat the subject as an object is to miss that the epistemological problem that subjectivity poses does not pertain to something that has been forgotten, a hidden baggage buried under assumptions that the subject would be carrying around with her. Rather, it concerns the way we project ourselves to make sense, act upon, or deal with a set of circumstances we have not determined. It is not of the order of an internalisation that has been forgotten, but concerns action. In that respect, the problem is indeed an issue of perspective, not simply because we interpret *from somewhere*, but more fundamentally because *the projection creates its sets of blind spots*. That is why so many scholars, critical scholars among them, can continue to reflexively look hard at themselves, thinking they understand themselves pretty well, yet continue to miss the specific nature of their perspective. For their biases are not rooted in the position they occupy, but in the relationship between their gaze and the object of their gaze.

Fourth Proposition: *Reflexive agendas, such as the one proposed by Bourdieu, place the onus on ontology rather than address the actual epistemological problem of reification which initially motivated the turn to reflexivity.*

Tracing out the limitations with the reflexive agenda outlined by Bourdieu raises an intriguing question: if reflexive scholars have struggled in practice to substantiate the category of the subject, why does this agenda continue to seem so attractive? As I suggested above, the key to this puzzle lies in the fact that reflexivity, in its current form, does not produce what it claims to produce. It consolidates more than it problematizes the ground upon which knowledge claims are made. Yet this strategy could not sustain itself simply on the basis of its normative reconstruction of the self. What lends it power and substance is not what it has to say about the subject but a subtle shift of emphasis in what it takes to be its object.

Initially, the reflexive approach was devised as a methodology for scholars to relate to themselves in order to address an epistemological concern: if we are socially conditioned,

how can we problematize what we, ourselves, take for granted. Reflexivity was intended as a strategy to deal with a problem that concerns the nature of knowledge, that is the difficulty we have to grasp the way in which our knowledge is itself socially and historically situated. How can we grasp the very way in which we are socially conditioned? However, the approach was often deployed in a very different way. For too often, reflexivity was seen as a means to address an *ontological* concern about the nature of world politics (e.g. the nature of capitalist society), rather than an *epistemological* one about the way we relate to it. In other words, reflexivity became a label assigned to approaches that put into question what we take for granted about world politics (e.g. capitalism, patriarchy, etc). Once qualified in these terms, the challenge became an ontological matter consisting in finding the best way to understand world politics. This represented a considerable shift for now ontology could be expected to take care of the epistemological problems raised by reflexive scholars. By developing the 'best' theory of capitalism, for example, one could challenge assumptions about capitalism. The result was that much of the initial epistemological concern with problematizing how we make sense, for example of capitalism, was thus lost since it was no longer clear what reflexivity was doing *in relation to the author*.⁴⁶

The task of 'reflecting' on the subjective foundations of our knowledge is now often loosely tackled through some form of hermeneutics aimed at challenging appearances, a proposition mostly sustained in the form of an account showing how things we take for granted are in fact socially constructed.⁴⁷ *As a result, the onus is placed on historicising the object of study rather than problematizing the way this object appears to us.* This drift is particularly salient among Bourdieu-inspired international sociologists such as Didier Bigo, Loic Wacquant, Yves Dezalay and Mikael Rask Madsen who often reject the way in which IR constructivists use Bourdieu's reflexive sociology to bend over backward and locate the subject. Madsen in particular, has come out strongly against such readings arguing that reflexivity is foremost a means for getting the object right.⁴⁸ For him, it is the construction of the object of research that is ultimately at stake. But this only accentuates the common drift among reflexive scholars towards ontology when time comes to specify what difference this approach can make. For what is by now a banal constructivist concern with historicising the object of research is then taken to be the hallmark of reflexivity as a methodology; a quick fix which allows once more to place the onus on the 'enlightening' features of Bourdieu's ontology.⁴⁹

The striking fact about this type of hermeneutic is that it is more and more devoid of the phenomenological concerns which had animated modern hermeneutics (Heidegger, Gadamer). Instead the emphasis is placed on constantly correcting interpretations by adjusting our respective understanding of social processes and their context. But there is little consideration for methodological strategies which can problematize how both processes and context appear to us; that is means to address the epistemological problem of reification in the first place.

It is a central argument of this article that phenomenological concerns must enter the frame in a more explicit way. By phenomenology, I do not mean here the more common concern with the everyday life that is often associated with anthropology, but rather a Hegelian concern with appearance; the recognition that we are always dealing with appearances. The point then is precisely that methodological framing is crucial for us to work on the way the world appears in the form of objects. Phenomenology places the onus on perspective, a reflexive concern with the way we, as subjects, relate to objects, rather than on the 'fit' between the object of analysis and its context. It is a matter of techniques

we can use to take some distance from our own analysis of world politics and gain a reflexive angle on our work, not a strategy to get as close as possible to the reality we seek to analyse by developing the right theoretical framework to explain how society really works.

Bourdieu comes closest to this phenomenological concern when he argues that scholars too often analyse social processes from a representational perspective.⁵⁰ But the limitations of his approach are clearly apparent in the 'ontological strategies' he proposes to address the problem. For it is once more a matter of contextualising 'in the right way', thus leading to discussions about the social field and the habitus. The belief is that connecting what agents say (and do) to their specific position in a given social field, will help capture this pragmatic and strategic dimension and help challenge this representational bias.⁵¹ But there are no reflexive hooks here to put our ideas to the test. How do we know whether we fall into this trap ourselves? It is one thing to emphasise the need to think in terms of practice rather than representation, and not over-intellectualise the rules of the game, but another to offer methodological strategies to challenge our *own* assumptions.⁵² At best, Bourdieu's reflexive sociology offers a set of cross checks to stop researchers from projecting their own biases, notably by looking at different types of evidence,⁵³ but there are no techniques here to challenge the way in which critical scholars themselves cast practices in representational terms.

This is no mere quibble, for there is something troubling in the fact that despite his emphasis on practice, Bourdieu has so often been criticised for his structuralism⁵⁴ even by his own followers.⁵⁵ Bourdieu's discussion of neoliberalism in *The Social Structures of the Economy*⁵⁶ stands as a powerful testimony to the limits of what could be labelled a reflexive voluntarism. In this book, Bourdieu peddles the most common tropes about neoliberalism as a general analytical frame for the more detailed analysis of the French housing market that Bourdieu conducts. Bourdieu seems to have little qualms about treating categories such as neoliberalism or the discipline of economics in the most general way without due regards for the strategic practices that define politics within neoliberalism or economics. He feels confident enough to shift into a suddenly highly structural and abstract account of neoliberalism.⁵⁷ Neoliberalism is thus presented as a broad movement towards deregulation and liberalisation quickly subsumed under the acting interests of the financial world, a conception which betrays precisely the certainty of a critique based more on an impressionistic sociology than a serious account of practice. Bourdieu also offers sweeping conclusions as to the imperialism of economics, a discourse he presents as naturalising a narrowly economic approach based on the idea of the *homo economicus*.⁵⁸ The problem in this discussion is not that it is necessarily wrong, something which is certainly arguable but which would require more space than what I have here. Rather it is the tendency of Bourdieu to slip into a structural gaze which seems to invalidate his own central proposition about practice. In what sense does this depiction of economics as an almost unified field or of neoliberalism as a general structure of governance capture any sense of practice?

One may assume that Bourdieu simply ventured too far thus undermining the rigour he advocated in his more substantial studies. But this would be too easy a response for the real problem is not a matter of application, but more importantly of reflexive judgement. This can be illustrated by looking towards the more empiricist quarters of Bourdieusian scholarship where the sociologist's framework is loosened up in order to avoid its more structural undertones. Here I have in mind more specifically Didier Bigo's work which readily admits to some limitations in Bourdieu's analyses and criticises the more structural elements in his thoughts.⁵⁹ Bigo, however, insists that Bourdieu's ontology can be relaxed

and driven by empirical studies in order to avoid the type of reification I mentioned above. Of particular interest here is that Bigo rejects any structural formalism pointing out that the habitus is a layered accretions of numerous fields which render it complex and open. The idea of a split habitus is based on the recognition that people take part in different social fields which produce complex subjectivities that are not reducible to the dispositions structured by a single field.⁶⁰ For this reason, Bigo argues, there can be no simple determinism deduced from the doxa of a field.

While such a reading may certainly provide a more flexible framework, it once more speaks to the methodological inadequacy of Bourdieu's reflexive sociology. For it forces Bigo to rely even more on his own judgement when doing empirical work, and assumes that he can see what he takes for granted through his own observations. The point about reflexivity is precisely to doubt our ability to decipher the 'real nature' of our object of study. It is a problematic which emerges from a desire to avoid a form of academic voluntarism, one which vests its hope in the power and commitment of critical scholarship to see how things really play out. For, as I mentioned, there is always a difficult problem of reverse engineering involved. Let us imagine, for example, doing field work within a social field and confronting a development or behaviour which challenges our expectations of the game being played out. Within a more structural and limited framework, this behaviour can either be discarded as exceptional or force us to reflect further and revise our understanding of the doxa in this field and the habitus of its actors. But in Bigo's fluid version of the split habitus, scholars can adopt a different strategy and presume that the behaviour in question can be explained by the input of a different dimension of the habitus, one which pertains to dispositions developed in another social field. In that respect, the very flexibility called for undermines the reflexive dimension of the framework for it allows scholars to protect their assumptions about the game they study and simply attribute non conforming observations to another field. Not only does the methodology not provide any guide in order to decide whether a behaviour indicates a problem with our understanding of the field, or simply a peculiarity which comes from the outside, but it also provides an easy way out to simply discard unwelcome evidence. While this certainly allows Bigo to avoid theoretical problems that dog Bourdieu, it does so by conveniently shifting the burden to the empirical level. Loosening methodology in this way may provide more space and flexibility to accommodate a complex 'social reality', but this also means that the engagement is not as useful for challenging our own assumptions. It serves a weaker reflexive purpose.

My point is that a reflexive distance is not something we gain from intention or commitment to studying how history or empirical reality really plays out. It is a conceptual space that has to be constituted through methodological means. To give a concrete example of a hermeneutic approach which incorporates explicitly a phenomenological concern with problematizing appearances, one can think of Quentin Skinner's brilliant discussion of political theory and its context. Skinner's approach stems from a basic reflexive problem we confront when seeking to interpret a text from a different political context from ours. As he argues, it is often the distance between the context in which this text was written and our own which tends to stand out at first. We thus often focus on the vocabulary or ideas that are distinctive of the age and which differ from what we know, rather than the politics of a text which are found in the way in which these are mobilised by an author to specific ends. Take for example the labour theory of value that so many scholars attribute to Marx as a defining feature of his contribution. This notion is clearly an artefact of his age. It was not invented by Marx, but borrowed from liberal theory, more specifically from David Ricardo. It

was a prominent theoretical tool people used at the time to articulate ideas. It would thus be mistaken to believe that Marx's ideas are defined by his emphasis on labour as the source of value because this was also characteristic of liberal economics at the time.⁶¹ What distinguishes Marx's contribution is what he did with these liberal concepts, his distinctive use of the labour theory of value or more specifically the way in which he used the conventions of his age. But this can only be revealed through a specific work of contextualisation.⁶²

In making this point, Skinner puts forward what is a largely counterintuitive but highly effective method of contextualisation. The purpose he assigns to contextualisation is not to assess the meaning of the text but to assess authorship.⁶³ Contextualisation serves to contrast an author's work with the conventions of his time. In that sense, contextualisation specifies what the text does. It is foremost a procedure for problematizing immediate appearances rather than explaining the text in itself. By contrast to a basic hermeneutic, which focuses on the fit with the context, Skinner challenges our assumptions about what is significant in a text. By contrasting text and context, he places the former in perspective and destabilises how the object appears to us and what we think needs to be explained. This is a direct attempt to problematize perspective, one that is much more effective than seeking to identify our own social biases and commitments before examining the actual object of research.

Fifth Proposition: *The pretention to be able to locate from where one speaks, or to objectify the objectifying subject, sets up asymmetric forms of communication which are fraught with ethical problems.*

This final point brings us back to the more general problem of what is at stake in the debate about reflexivity. As I pointed out, the big challenge is to turn this project into something that is more than a simple ethical call to awareness of the self. This has proved difficult, I have argued, because of the limitations of an agenda focusing on determining from where one speaks. For this reason, the reflexive agenda has had a greater critical impact in challenging other approaches than a productive one in defining a new methodology. But such an imbalance has often meant that reflexive scholars apply different standards on those they criticise, than what they subject themselves to, since they never clarify what expectations they set for themselves. In this way, reflexivity has often served a rhetorical purpose in claiming a distinct quality to the knowledge reflexive scholars produce, on the basis of their awareness of the limits to objectivity. What was initially a project based on recognising one's own limitations was thus turned into a claim to enlightenment;⁶⁴ one which mostly dresses up the knowledge claims we make instead of changing how these claims are produced in the first place.

Bourdieu perhaps more than any other was known to deploy such rhetorical motifs to justify, often explicitly, the objectivity of his own viewpoint. It is telling that he likened his work, or more generally the work of sociology, to that of a psychoanalyst, in that he was unearthing secrets that society was not willing to recognise. Such a framing helped entertain an asymmetrical form of communication which once more indulged Bourdieu in his self-belief of being on the right side. For it simply became too tempting for him to interpret critiques of his work as further proofs that he had grasped sensitive truths about society:

Sociology, which of all sciences is the best placed to know the limits of the 'intrinsic force of the true idea', knows that the force of the resistance which will be opposed

to it will be very exactly commensurate with the 'problems of the will' which it has managed to overcome.⁶⁵

There was much here that was reminiscent of the traditional image of psychoanalysis that Lacan had so powerfully criticised in the 1950s.⁶⁶ According to the latter, psychoanalysts had too often exploited the presumption to know patients better than patients know themselves as a way to establish relationships of power. The problem Lacan identified pertained to the communication that is then established. For when the analyst begins to buy into this very idea, there is no more space for reflexively putting into question her own interpretation. Indeed, the debate is skewed for anything the patient may believe challenges the analyst's view, can be dismissed on account of the inability of the patient to come to terms with her own repressed history. In many cases, the denial, in fact, is then taken as the very proof that the analyst is right; a sign of the other's alienation.

The problem here of course is not so much the fact that Bourdieu responds to criticisms, but rather the closure that was effectuated by his belief that his knowledge was of *a different order* and thus subject to different epistemological criteria. By using reflexivity to move at a meta level, Bourdieu could always claim 'reflexive immunity' on the grounds of his ability to see things that others could not. It was a ploy which closed the space for debate by dismissing, as he frequently did, his critiques for missing the distinctive nature of the knowledge he was producing. Such claims, unsurprisingly, contributed in making Bourdieu the target of vicious attacks from aggrieved scholars who saw Bourdieu's reflexivity as a power play to arbitrarily discount other voices.⁶⁷

Ultimately, reflexivity as an approach has little to offer if it remains trapped in the belief that reflexivity is a state that can be achieved through introspection. As Lynch pointed out, the illusion that reflexive scholars have a monopoly over reflexivity, as if reflexivity was a quality only possessed by some scholars or some approaches, is highly problematic.⁶⁸ It entertains the illusion that reflexive scholars have a knowledge of a different order, and skews the terrain for debate because what reflexivity refers to (the subject) is invoked without being properly displayed. To avoid this, reflexivity must remain a first order knowledge about world politics even when it is working on the self. It cannot be defined in terms of a condition we wish to reach (i.e. the illusory meta position of becoming reflexive). Rather the challenge is to clarify how the recognition of our subjective starting point can change the way in which we analyse world politics.

Conclusion

The problem of methodology has traditionally revolved around a concern with controlling subjective biases in the production of knowledge. Bourdieu saw this control of subjective biases as an integral component of what defines (social) science as an intersubjective practice with its rules governing the interactions between scholars.⁶⁹ But objectivity, he argued, is a product of these rules, an intersubjective quality conferred upon knowledge because of the rules, rather than a pre-existing universal quality that grounds these rules in the first place. For this reason, he saw no need to choose between the aspiration to objectivity and the recognition of the social nature of knowledge production. Instead, reflexivity became Bourdieu's plank to bring these two together as a means to clarify what is at stake in the production of knowledge. The twist was that objectivating the

subject of knowledge production would now be seen as an integral component of the process by which we control for biases.

But Bourdieu, as many other constructivists, struggled to respond to the contradictory pull that comes from recognising the need for rules but refusing to endorse the form they have at a particular point in time because of the discipline they imply. For Bourdieu, the challenge was to keep a healthy distance without wanting to abolish them. As a result, reflexive sociology was conceived as a 'middle of the road' methodology based on reasonable accommodations of these conflicting demands. His reflexive sociology offered interesting insights into the dilemmas and challenges that await critical scholars in seeking to break from common sense.⁷⁰ It identified various biases that hinder this task and pointed out that, in fact, methodology was often the source itself of these biases, rather than a means to control them. But this left him with little more than an invitation to avoid these traps. There was no well-defined methodological alternative to be found here. Instead, reflexive sociology was mostly conceived as a set of cross checks that one would carry out in order to avoid excesses. In short, Bourdieu hoped that becoming aware of the problems of others, and of our own biases, would help us avoid a similar fate. In that respect, he saw reflexivity as a means to control bias, but this was mostly an indirect and voluntarist strategy that vested its hope in the craft of the sociologist rather than in a proper methodology.

My main argument is that reflexivity can indeed offer a methodology to control for bias, although not dispense with them, if it conceives of these biases in phenomenological terms. As I pointed out, the traditional focus of reflexivity on personal biases can only lead us towards an ethical strategy, one which is of course highly laudable in its own right, but in no way robust enough to offer a methodological platform. What phenomenology does is to turn a concern with particularism (related to a specific subject) into a more general concern with the nature of subjectivity and the problem it poses for knowledge creation. It casts the problem as one concerning subjectivity (in general) rather than the subject per se (in its specificity); one that pertains to the form of subjectivity, rather than its content. From this perspective, the control of bias should not be tailored to one's specific circumstances or supposed location. If reflexivity is to offer an alternative methodology, it must think of biases in a more generic sense as emanating from the experience of subjectivity. Phenomenology is thus based on the recognition that if others have fallen into the traps of reification, chances are we will also. For this reason, we must avoid indulging in the false sense of confidence that 'reflexive' awareness may provide. Being reflexive here is to accept that alienation is a condition that applies to us all, not just to those who are supposedly un-reflexive.⁷¹ Control for bias then takes an inverted form. Instead of assuming that we can cast out these biases or make them explicit, we must start by assuming these epistemological biases and develop corrective lenses to compensate for them.

I have used the example of Skinner's strategy of contextualisation to illustrate what I mean by corrective lens. Skinner starts from a basic problem of ahistoricism that is frequently noted in the literature. The point here is not to be aware so that we can take seriously the specificity of the context, for we know that there are plenty of scholars aware of the problem who continue to reproduce it. For this reason, Skinner is not trying per se to look closer at reality to see how it really happens. Instead he proposes to refract the significance of a work in political theory through a contextualisation which is intended to mark out what is distinctive about this work from its broader literary context. From an ontological perspective, there is no denying that a political work 'belongs to its age'. But

thinking along those ways has traditionally fuelled an ahistorical bias because of the very nature of interpretation. So Skinner chooses instead to use contextualisation as a way to make the work stand out so that authorship may be assessed more concretely.⁷²

In my own work, I have used the notion of agency as a similar corrective lens intended to refract our perspective on the processes of social construction. Starting from another seemingly common concern in IR with grasping the socially constructed nature of world politics, I argue that it is misleading to believe that awareness of the importance of agency can address the problem. Try as hard as we may, we always struggle to establish whether and how people make a difference to the broad social processes we are usually concerned with. The issue here is partly one of scale and its effect on perspective. Agency is easy to perceive on a very localised basis. The challenge is to build the conceptual bridges which allow us to connect these localised developments to the broad macro processes we usually study. For this reason, a commitment to factor in agency will be insufficient on its own as reflected in the fact that constructivists so rarely made good on their promise to do so.⁷³ It can only be tackled by changing our perspective, notably through a comparative framing which is devised, not simply to look at agency, but to make it stand out.⁷⁴

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⁷ Patrick Thaddeus Jackson, *The Conduct of Inquiry in International Relations* (London: Routledge, 2011); Mark Salter and Can Mutlu (eds.) *Research Methods in Critical Security Studies: An Introduction*, ed. (London: Routledge, 2012).

⁸ Stefano Guzzini, 'A Reconstruction of Constructivism in International Relations', *European Journal of International Relations*, 6:2 (2000), pp. 147-82.

⁹ Guzzini, *Reconstruction*, p. 162.

¹⁰ Vincent Pouliot, *International Security in Practice: The Politics of NATO-Russia Diplomacy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Didier Bigo, 'Pierre Bourdieu and International Relations: Power of Practices, Practices of Power', *International Political Sociology*, 5:3 (2011), pp. 225-58.

¹¹ Frédéric Mérand and Vincent Pouliot, 'Le monde de Pierre Bourdieu: Éléments pour une théorie sociale des Relations internationales', *Canadian Journal of Political Science*, 41:3 (2008), pp. 603-25.

¹² Loïc Wacquant, 'The Structure and Logic of Bourdieu's sociology', in Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc Wacquant (ed.), *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology* (London: University of Chicago Press, 1992), p 40.

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- ¹³ Mikael Rask Madsen, 'Reflexivity and the Construction of the International Object: The Case of Human Rights', *International Political Sociology*, 5:1 (2011), pp. 259-75.
- ¹⁴ Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology* (London: University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 204.
- ¹⁵ Pierre Bourdieu, 'Participant Objectivation', *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 9:2 (2003), p. 283.
- ¹⁶ Mérand and Pouliot, *Le monde*, p. 607.
- ¹⁷ Pierre Bourdieu, *Homo Academicus* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988).
- ¹⁸ Leander, *Do we really need reflexivity*, p. 604.
- ¹⁹ Xavier Guillaume, 'Foreign Policy and the Politics of Alterity: A Dialogical Understanding of International Relations', *Millennium* 31:1 (2002) p. 21.
- ²⁰ Leander, *Do we really need reflexivity*, p. 602.
- ²¹ Anna Leander, 'The Promises, Problems, and Potentials of a Bourdieu-Inspired Staging of International Relations', *International Political Sociology*, 5:3 (2011), p. 307.
- ²² Eagleton-Pierce, 'Advancing', p. 12.
- ²³ Hamati-Ataya, 'Reflectivity', p. 14.
- ²⁴ Sandra Harding, 'After the Neutrality Ideal: Science, Politics, and "Strong Objectivity"', *Social Research*, 59: 3 (1992) p. 574.
- ²⁵ Yosef Lapid, 'The Third Debate: On the Prospects of International Theory in a Post-Positivist Era', *International Studies Quarterly*, 33: 3 (1989) pp. 235-54; Stephen Gill, 'Epistemology, Ontology and the "Italian School"', in Stephen Gill (ed.), *Gramsci, Historical Materialism and International Relations* (Cambridge 1993) pp. 21-48; Brooke A. Ackerly, Maria Stern and Jacqui True, 'Feminist Methodologies for International Relations', (ed.), *Feminist methodologies for International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 1-16.
- ²⁶ Thaddeus Jackson, *The conduct*, p. 182.
- ²⁷ Anna Leander, 'Thinking Tools', in Audie Klotz and Deepa Prakash (ed.), *Qualitative Methods in International Relations: A Pluralist Guide* (London: Palgrave, 2009), p. 26.
- ²⁸ It might be argued that Bourdieu himself did not fall in this trap since he was skeptical of the idea of objectivity. But the point is moot in that even if we adopt a softer conception of objectivity based on intersubjectivity, as Bourdieu did, the problem remains exactly the same. For the issue here is the promise that knowledge about the self can be produced for an intersubjective realm, such as the one that defines a social scientific community, in order to ground knowledge claims. Bourdieu's wager is that intersubjective standards can anchor a reflexive engagement with the self which helps control bias. But producing intersubjective knowledge about the self, regardless of the standard to which this production is subjected, will end up confronting the same problems because of the conflicts of interest that are the heart of this strategy. Ultimately, such a project underestimates how these very standards can be easily turned around and be exploited to produce the very opposite of what they intend to do, as I argue below.
- ²⁹ On this front, it must be noted that the feminist literature is perhaps alone in IR in having offered specific interventions which address more directly the problem of moral ambiguity involved in scholarship. See Elizabeth Dauphinee, 'The Ethics of Autoethnography', *Review of International Studies*, 36:3 (2010), pp. 799-818. But it is important to note that these only succeed precisely when they keep the terrain circumscribed to the personal; a terrain that is fully liable to the problems of self-understanding that I later outline as powerfully demonstrated by Hamati-Attaya. See Hamati-Ataya, *Transcending*.
- ³⁰ Bourdieu, *Sketch*.
- ³¹ Pierre Bourdieu, 'Concluding Remarks For a Sociogenetic Understanding of Intellectual Works', in Craig Calhoun, Edward Lipuma and Moishe Postone (ed.), *Bourdieu: Critical Perspectives* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), p. 269.
- ³² Richard Jenkins, *Pierre Bourdieu* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 16.
- ³³ Pierre Bourdieu, *Homo Academicus* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988), p. 62
- ³⁴ This was a point raised by Bourdieu himself when criticising the idea that the subject is a bearer of transhistorical qualities. He argued that a trajectory cannot be understood without taking into account how individuals find themselves in different social settings which necessarily inflect this trajectory in unpredictable ways, at least from the individual's perspective. See Pierre Bourdieu, *Raisons pratiques. Sur la théorie de l'action* (Paris: Seuil, 1994), pp. 81-89. But he misunderstood the significance of this point. For the issue here stems from the narrative reconstruction, not the actual bifurcations produced by history. For the latter change little to the point I make here: even if Bourdieu sought to reconstruct his trajectory differently as a series of

surprising turning points and emphasised in the process social settings rather than individual commitments, he still fell in the trap of what he calls the biographical illusion. Saying that the subject is shaped by (changing) contexts does not alter the fact that meaning and purpose are established through narrating one's life.

³⁵ Wacquant and Bourdieu, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology* (London: University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 208.

³⁶ Mérand and Pouliot, *Le monde*.

³⁷ Samuel Knafo, 'Critical Approaches and the Legacy of the Agent/Structure Debate in International Relations', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 23:3 (2010), pp. 493-516.

³⁸ Peter Winch, *The Idea of Social Science* (London: Routledge & Keegan Paul, 1958).

³⁹ Bourdieu, *Raisons pratiques*.

⁴⁰ Hubert Dreyfuss and Paul Rabinow, 'Can there be a Science of Existential Structure and Social Meaning', in Craig Calhoun, Edward Lipuma and Moishe Postone (ed.), *Bourdieu: Critical Perspectives* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), pp. 35-44.

⁴¹ Craig Calhoun, Edward Lipuma and Moishe Postone, 'Introduction: Bourdieu and Social Theory', in Craig Calhoun, Edward Lipuma and Moishe Postone (ed.), *Bourdieu: Critical Perspectives* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), pp. 2.

⁴² Elsewhere I have made the argument that this phenomenological problem compels us to place agency at the center of our methodology in order to move away from the idea of structural determination. Knafo, *Critical Approaches*.

⁴³ Bourdieu, *Sketch*, p. 2.

⁴⁴ Charlotte Epstein, 'Who speaks? Discourse, the Subject and the Study of Identity International Politics', *European Journal of International Relations*, 17:2 (2011), p. 335.

⁴⁵ This move essentially leads Bourdieu to take phenomenology out of the equation by assuming that there is nothing specific about the question of how an object presents itself to a subject. The outcome is then a superficial solution for the gaze of the author is not captured through this process of bending over backwards. It is simply transferred to another level as it now looks upon the object of research and an objectified self. For this reason, the subject object relationship cannot be solved by treating the subject as an object, for you still need a subject to look upon the new assemblage. In this respect, Hamati-Attaya fails to recognise that a similar critique as the one she so effectively addresses to autobiography to this effect also applies to her own Bourdieusian project of objectifying the objectification. Inanna Hamati-Ataya, 'Transcending Objectivism, Subjectivism, and the Knowledge In-Between: The Subject in/of 'Strong Reflexivity'', *Review of International Studies*, 40:1 (2014), pp. 153-75.

⁴⁶ Kevin Maton, 'Reflexivity, Relationism, & Research: Pierre Bourdieu and the Epistemic Conditions of Social Scientific Knowledge', *Space and Culture*, 6:1 (2003), pp. 52-65.

⁴⁷ Ian Hacking, *The Social Construction of What?* (London: Harvard University Press, 1999).

⁴⁸ Madsen, *Reflexivity*.

⁴⁹ This is not to deny that reflexivity can be a means to conduct empirical research as international sociologists wish to do, but rather to emphasise that when it comes to empirical research, they have little left to specify what is reflexive about their work, by comparison to any other empirical work.

⁵⁰ Pouliot, *International Security*.

⁵¹ Yves Dezalay, and Bryant Garth, *The Internationalization of Palace Wars: Lawyers, Economists, and the Contest to Transform Latin American States* (London: University of Chicago Press, 2002), p. 9.

⁵² When Bourdieu seeks to address more technical matters, such as the issue of interviewing, it is striking how much of what he writes places the onus on disposition rather than concrete methodological techniques once more reflecting the optimism of a scholars confident in his own judgement rather than challenging it (see Pierre Bourdieu, *The Weight of the World: Social Suffering in Contemporary Society* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002).

⁵³ Pierre Bourdieu, Jean-Claude Chamboredon and Jean-Claude Passeron, *The Craft of Sociology: Epistemological Preliminaries* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1968).

⁵⁴ Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot, 'The Sociology of Critical Capacity', *European Journal of Social Theory*, 2:3 (1999), pp. 359-77; Bruno Latour, *Re-assembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

⁵⁵ Anna Leander, 'Pierre Bourdieu on Economics: Les structures sociales de l'économie', *Review of International Political Economy*, 8: 2 (2001), p. 351.

⁵⁶ Pierre Bourdieu, *The Social Structures of the Economy* (Cambridge: Polity, 2005).

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- ⁵⁷ For another example of a highly structural account of neoliberalism produced by a reflexive sociologist see Loic Wacquant, *Punishing the Poor: The Neoliberal Government of Social Insecurity* (London: Duke University Press, 2009).
- ⁵⁸ Michael Grenfell, *Pierre Bourdieu: Agent Provocateur* (London: Continuum, 2004), p. 129.
- ⁵⁹ Bigo, *Pierre Bourdieu*.
- ⁶⁰ See also Leander, *The Promises*, p. 351.
- ⁶¹ Samuel Knafo, 'Political Marxism and Value Theory: Bridging the Gap between Theory and History', *Historical Materialism*, 15: 2 (2007) pp. 75-104.
- ⁶² This is a point that Skinner makes, for example, with the notion of *virtu* in Machiavelli. See Quentin Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought. Volume One: The Renaissance* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1978).
- ⁶³ Quentin Skinner, 'Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas', in James Tully (ed.), *Meaning and Context: Quentin Skinner and his Critics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), pp. 29-67.
- ⁶⁴ Dick Pels, 'Knowledge Politics and Anti-Politics: Toward a Critical Appraisal of Bourdieu's Concept of Intellectual Autonomy', *Theory and Society*, 24:1 (1995), pp. 79-104; Michael Lynch, 'Against Reflexivity as an Academic Virtue and Source of Privileged Knowledge', *Theory, Culture & Society*, 17:3 (2000), pp. 26-54.
- ⁶⁵ Bourdieu, *Homo Academicus* p. 35.
- ⁶⁶ Jacques Lacan, 'The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis', in *Ecrits* (New York 2002), pp. 197-268.
- ⁶⁷ Jeannine Verdes-Leroux, *Deconstructing Pierre Bourdieu's Sociological Terrorism: Against the Sociological Terrorism from the Left* (New York: Algora Publishers, 2000).
- ⁶⁸ Lynch, *Against Reflexivity*.
- ⁶⁹ Pierre Bourdieu, *Science of Science and Reflexivity* (Cambridge: Polity, 2004), p. 72.
- ⁷⁰ Bourdieu, et al, *Craft of Sociology*.
- ⁷¹ See my 'The Fetishizing Subject of Marx's Capital', *Capital and Class*, 76: (2002) pp. 183-213.
- ⁷² Although Skinner offers a brilliant strategy to think of *textual contextualisation*, he decided, for some reason, not to apply across the board the same principles of contextualisation based on differentiation and authorship. As a result, Skinner's social and political contextualisations are very superficial and mostly concerned with establishing the reasons motivating someone to write, rather than a broader attempt to use social contextualisation to place their work in perspective and understand its historical significance. This is, in a way, the problem I seek to tackle with the idea of agency.
- ⁷³ Jeffrey T. Checkel, 'The Constructivist Turn in International Relations Theory.' *World Politics*, 50:1 (1998), pp. 324-348.
- ⁷⁴ Knafo, *Critical Approaches*.