

## SYMPOSIUM

### Pierre Bourdieu's *Méditations pascaliennes*

# The Double-Edged Sword of Reason The Scholar's Predicament and the Sociologist's Mission

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For philosophers, one of the most difficult tasks is to descend from the world of thought to the actual world.

Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology*, 1845

I shall quite gladly say that, in sociology, we need still more anthropology and more history. I will go so far as to say that a complete anthropology could replace philosophy for it would comprise precisely this history of the human mind that philosophy presupposes.

Marcel Mauss, *Debate on Primitive Mentality*, 1923

*Méditations pascaliennes* is a highly idiosyncratic, even odd, book that juts out in the landscape of contemporary social thought. Part (anti-)philosophical treatise, part manifesto for a resolutely historicist conception of social action, structure and knowledge, and part theoretical stock-taking, explication and extension of a distinctive set of methodological stances and analytical devices tested on a vast and rugged empirical terrain, it is bursting with paradoxes – which, its author reminds us, means a breach of the *doxa*: here the accepted, taken-for-granted, ways of thinking (and, indeed, being) that undergird all scholarly activity, starting with the historic division and muffled rivalry between philosophy and sociology.<sup>1</sup>

In this long-gestating, hybrid sequel to *Outline of a Theory of Practice* and *Homo Academicus*, Pierre Bourdieu turns the weapons of theoretical reason on to theoretical reason itself and mobilizes the arsenal of philosophy to exorcise the philosophical intellectualism which he regards as the single major impediment to an adequate understanding of practice, power and society. He asserts the radical historicity of social science but also undercuts the facile relativism currently in vogue under the label of 'postmodernism'. He ruins the claim of philosophy to pure thought and explodes its core tenets in epistemology, aesthetics and ethics,

but purports to do so for philosophy's sake – to release it from the burden of its social unconscious and enable it to fulfill its appointed task.<sup>2</sup> He doggedly defends the autonomy of science, yet he simultaneously stresses its inescapably political import and sounds a clarion call for the reaffirmation of its civic mission. And he invokes the pessimistic Augustinian vision of Blaise Pascal, fixated as it was on man's fundamental corruption, but, somewhat unexpectedly, stands closer to René Descartes in his guarded optimism about the capacity of reason to curb domination and to help create the good society. Everything in Bourdieu's vision of the social world and of the science of it that he advocates is *double-sided and double-edged, starting and ending with reason*, this peculiar product of human history that can help us, to a degree, (re)make history by escaping its ambit: reason is both boon or bane, the ultimate instrument of social violence – Bourdieu writes vividly of the 'fanaticism of reason' – and our best shield yet against it.<sup>3</sup> As reason turning back on to society, sociology itself is this strange 'bifocal point of view absolutely inaccessible from within practice' which 'holds together, in order to integrate them', the (folk) point of view of agents and the (analytical) 'point of view on this point of view' to which the work of objectivation of the scholastic gaze gives access but which, nonetheless, perpetually threatens to obliterate the specificity of practice as incarnate complicity with the world that excludes the taking of such a point of view.<sup>4</sup> This double-edgedness is amply illustrated in and by the papers that compose this symposium.

From these varied contributions, it emerges that *Méditations pascaliennes* is not one but three books contained within each other in the manner of Russian dolls. In the first, Bourdieu discloses the epistemological underpinnings of his work and offers a compressed portrait of his own experience of 'scholastic confinement' as a budding philosopher trained at the *École normale* in the 1950s, in the heyday of Sartrean existentialism. Johannes Weiss thus has good reason to draw a parallel with Marx's early work for, from that angle, *Méditations pascaliennes* is Bourdieu's *German Ideology*: an opportunity to 'settle accounts with [his] erstwhile philosophical conscience' (Marx, 1977: 5) and, in the course of a selective critique of philosophical idealism (signposted by Hegel, Kant and Heidegger), to formulate the principles of the historical rationalism that has animated his work from its inception. In so doing, Bourdieu removes a major obstacle to fruitful engagement with his thought.<sup>5</sup>

Like it or not, world social science has been dominated since mid-century by American social science, which in turn has been dominated by a positivist philosophy of science.<sup>6</sup> In the German sphere, the *Geisteswissenschaften* have offered a protective shield against positivism and a warrant for pursuing an interpretative inquiry into society, as represented by the neo-Kantian sociology of Weber and Simmel, the critical theory of the Frankfurt School and the hermeneutic tradition running from Dilthey to Husserl and Gadamer (and thence to phenomenology and its sociological offshoot, ethnomethodology). The French school of sociology, by contrast, has developed in the distinctive atmosphere of a historicized rationalism originating with Condorcet and Comte, sociologized the first time by Durkheim and the *Année sociologique* team, and resurgent in the postwar

period in the guise of the 'philosophy of the concept' of Gaston Bachelard, Georges Canguilhem, Alexandre Koyré and Jean Cavailles. This epistemological tradition is little known outside France due to its double marginality: in Europe it has been trumped by phenomenology and later by deconstruction; in England and the United States it has been pushed out by analytical philosophy.<sup>7</sup> Yet, as Johan Heilbron perceptively points out, it is only by replacing Bourdieu in this ramifying lineage that one can discern how he is launching a 'new branch' of this 'constructive skepticism' that has pre-empted from its origin the false opposition between the modernist certainty and the postmodernist disbelief in reason.

In the second book within the book nested between the covers of *Méditations pascaliennes*, Bourdieu refines and draws out the full implications of what is arguably his greatest 'discovery' and contribution to social theory to date: the specific logic of practice and everything that separates it from the 'logic of logic' (Bourdieu, 1980/1990). Practice is an im-mediate and mutual 'inhabiting' of being and world, carnal entanglement with a nexus of active forces pregnant with tacit invitations and invisible interdictions that work simultaneously from within, via the socialization of cognition and affect, and without to constitute both desires and possibilities, choices and constraints. The ordinary knowledge that makes us competent social agents is an embodied, situated, 'knowing-how-to' that is blind to itself and operates beneath the controls of discursive consciousness and ratiocination.<sup>8</sup> Yet it is only by escaping this primary relationship of ontological collusion with the world and by use of analytical reason that we can hope to understand and explain it. The scholar's predicament is rooted in what Bourdieu calls the 'fundamental ambiguity of the scholastic disposition': it allows us to know the world but it also mutilates it because it inclines us to view that world as something other than what it is for itself, as a *spectacle* liable to be read in the manner of a text, as with Geertz, or reduced to the autotelic workings of a semi-otic algebra, as with Lévi-Strauss and so-called poststructuralism. Hence comes Bourdieu's attraction to the two strands of contemporary philosophy that stand out for their anti-intellectualist conception of action and knowledge, pragmatism and the ordinary language philosophy of Austin and the second Wittgenstein.

A sustained examination 'not only of the limits of thought and of the power of thought but also of the conditions of its exercise', namely, detachment, gratuitousness and distance from the press of necessity, reveals that 'scholastic confinement' is at the root of three originary mistakes that philosophy, as the historic prototype of all scholastic universes, could not but commit. In the order of knowledge, 'scholastic epistemocentrism' leads one to overlook the embodied and embedded logic of practice by collapsing practical reason into theoretical reason and by confounding the detemporalized, totalizing view that one may gain of the world by standing outside of (and above) it with how it actually operates. In the order of ethics, it gives rise to an intellectualistic universalism which forgets that reason is not given in the structure of mind or language but a historical invention permitted by the emergence of these peculiar social microcosms that are fields of cultural production. In the order of aesthetics, Bourdieu points out

that the 'pure pleasure' postulated by the Kantian critique of judgment has 'impure conditions of possibility', namely the autonomization of the artistic field, on the one hand, and the monopolization of social positions conducive to the acquisition of the 'cultured habitus' for which refined taste is second nature, on the other.<sup>9</sup> What is more, these 'three forms of the scholastic fallacy' reinforce each other and make up a powerful system of philosophical self-defense immune from critique so long as the unconscious universalization of the particular vision of the world associated with the scholastic condition that they have in common is not called into question as such. The need to extirpate scholasticism at its root, suggests Nicos Panayotopoulos, puts Bourdieu's endeavor on a plane quite different from Mannheim's, to which Salvador Giner would liken it.

The third book within the book is an explication of Bourdieu's philosophical anthropology leading to a political program for the epistemic and civic renewal of the social sciences. Borrowing the rhetoric of the young Marx, its motto might be: 'For a Ruthless Historicization of Everything Existing'.<sup>10</sup> Historicization of the systems of social *positions* that make up the various semi-autonomous microcosms (fields) composing differentiated societies, starting with the fields of cultural production within which are waged the merciless symbolic struggles for the universal that push reason onward. Historicization of the embodied systems of *dispositions* (habitus) that govern action from within and whose increasingly prevalent discordance with external social structures enlarges the possibilities for concerted political intervention. Historicization of social science itself through a continual, collective work of rational critique of reason, an *Aufklärung* of *Aufklärung* that explicitly thematizes and develops the repressed self-critical dimension of the rationalist tradition.<sup>11</sup>

Here Bourdieu refutes once and for all the utilitarian misreadings of his work by planting at the core of being the thirst for recognition, which alone can snatch humans from the jaws of absurdity: (wo)man finds a *raison d'être* only in 'the judgment of others, this major principle of uncertainty and insecurity, but also, and without contradiction, of certainty, assurance, and consecration' (Bourdieu, 1997: 280).<sup>12</sup> This, in turn, makes the distribution of symbolic capital the most consequential and 'one of the most cruel' grounds for inequality. As the 'negation of denegation', the solvent of *doxa* that reveals the arbitrariness of the continually naturalized construction of the world as it is, sociology then inherits a unique civic mission: embracing its own historicity, it must spearhead a 'permanent political struggle for the universalization of the conditions of access to the universal' to put an end to this 'logical and political scandal that is the monopolization of the universal' and disseminate in the widest possible manner the instruments of the rational critique of domination (Bourdieu, 1997: 100). As Brian Singer notes in this issue, Bourdieu's philosophical anthropology and historicist conception of science entail a definite and activist conception of politics proper, which is illustrated in his recent interventions in the French and European public debate.<sup>13</sup>

One of the purposes of *Méditations pascaliennes* is to 'liberate philosophy in order to liberate the social sciences from the reactive – to not say reactionary –

critique that it continually opposes to the very possibility of sociology' (Bourdieu, 1997: 40), most recently under the banner of postmodernism. But what of philosophy then, where does this exposition of its 'blindness to its own scholastic blindness' leave it? Must it wither away, reconvert itself into one of the fine arts of the scholastic caste, or merge with a historical and empirical sociology of knowledge, ethics, aesthetics and being? Frustratingly, Bourdieu leaves the question in suspense and the contributors to this symposium thus offer each their own divergent interpretations of its resolution. One possible answer is that Bourdieu has done to philosophy what Durkheim did to religion earlier this century, which the latter appositely sums up as follows:

What science disputes in religion is not its right to exist but its right to dogmatize about the nature of things, its pretension to special expertise for explaining man and the world. In fact, religion does not know itself. It knows neither what it is made of nor what needs it responds to. Far from being able to tell science what to do, religion is itself an object for science! (Durkheim, 1917: 432)

Durkheim insisted that there is 'something eternal' in religion, namely, its expressive function and capacity to serve as engine for the periodic 'moral remaking' of humankind. Its cognitive function, however, is and must be gradually taken over by science. The conundrum here becomes: is there, for Bourdieu, 'something eternal' in philosophy that would survive his critique? Does not a 'complete anthropology,' entailing 'this history of the human mind that philosophy presupposes' and that the historical sociology of fields of cultural production proposes, spell the end of philosophy as we know it, nay of all philosophy? The ball is now in the philosopher's half of the court and the sociologist is at the net.

## Notes

- 1 Bourdieu (1997: 14) is acutely aware of these paradoxes, tensions and contradictions: in the opening pages of the book, he speaks of the 'paralyzing feeling' he experienced while writing, in a scholastic mode, a critique of scholastic reason and confesses that he 'had never felt with such intensity the strangeness of [his] project, a sort of *negative philosophy* exposed to appearing self-destructive'.  
English translation forthcoming; see References.
- 2 On this count, *Méditations pascaliennes* amplifies and brings to climax arguments adumbrated in the course of the dissection of *The Political Ontology of Martin Heidegger* (Bourdieu, 1989/1993).
- 3 See the provocative analysis of the historic contest over the monopoly and national incarnation of reason between the United States and France in Bourdieu (1992).
- 4 See especially Bourdieu's (1997: 225–40) elucidation of 'The Double Truth' of the social world, exemplified in his new reworking of Mauss's classic analysis of the gift.
- 5 Here *Méditations pascaliennes* may be read as the sequel to *The Craft of Sociology*, in which Bourdieu laid out the principles of the 'applied' and 'regionalized' rationalism that he adapted from Gaston Bachelard's 'philosophy of no' (Bourdieu et al., 1968/1991).

- 6 The United States developed its own brand of 'instrumental positivism,' distinct from the French lineage (Comte to LePlay and Durkheim) and from the German tradition of the Vienna Circle (cf. Bryant, 1985). In reaction, it evolved a highly discursivist and formalist conception of theory severed from actual research, epitomized by the 'analytical realism' of Parsons and the various strands of contemporary US 'theorizing'.
- 7 One indicator among many of the invisibility of French historical epistemology on current maps of philosophy: Bachelard rates a brief one-column entry in the *Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy* and Cavallès, Canguilhem and Koyré are all absent from it. Conventional taxonomies of 'continental philosophy' include phenomenology, critical theory, hermeneutics and deconstruction but omit historical epistemology. The latter's centrality to Bourdieu's project (as well as to Foucault and the entire 'structuralist' generation) is elegantly argued by Louis Pinto (1999: 19-37).
- 8 'Twenty centuries of diffuse Platonism and of Christianized readings of the *Phaedon* incline us to see the body not as an instrument of but as an obstacle to knowledge and to ignore the specificity of practical knowledge, which is treated either as mere obstacle to knowing or as a rudimentary science' (Bourdieu, 1997: 170). Here Bourdieu receives a major assist from Lakoff and Johnson's (1999) *Philosophy in the Flesh*, a potent attack on the mentalist tradition of Western philosophy using the tools of cognitive linguistics and neural science. Lakoff and Johnson argue that all thinking is embodied, unconscious and metaphorical, three properties that are central to Bourdieu's characterization of practical sense. See also Valverde's (1998) intriguing discussion of 'habit' as occupying that murky middle ground between freedom and constraint in liberal modes of governance.
- 9 On the side of disposition, see Bourdieu's analysis, *Distinction* (Bourdieu, 1979/1984); on the side of field, see his recounting of the genesis and structure of the artistic field in *The Rules of Art* (Bourdieu, 1992/1997).
- 10 One of Marx's first writings is a letter to Arnold Ruge, published in the *Deutsch-Französische Zeitung* in 1844, entitled, with youthful vigor, 'For a Ruthless Criticism of Everything Existing'.
- 11 Against the glib denunciation of reason that has become *de rigueur* this past decade in some circles, one needs to reassess that reflexive critique is a constitutive feature of the Enlightenment since its very origins, as demonstrated by James Schmidt's (1996) remarkable collection of *Eighteenth-Century Answers to Twentieth-Century Questions*.
- 12 One hopes also with Salvador Giner that explicit recognition of the discordance (itself historically fluctuating) between habitus and field and of the variable degree of integration of habitus (according to social position and trajectory) will nail the coffin of the interpretations of Bourdieu as high priest of 'reproduction theory'.
- 13 In particular in the critique *On Television and Journalism* (Bourdieu, 1997/1998) and of the 'tyranny of the market' (Bourdieu, 1998 – horrendously and inexplicably translated as *Acts of Resistance*, a title which contradicts Bourdieu's insistence on the need for *collective* organization and *routine* intervention of intellectuals in the civic sphere), the publication of and debate triggered by *The Weight of the World* (Bourdieu et al. 1993/1999), the creation of a publishing house (Editions Liber), the activities of *Raisons d'agir* (an association founded in the wake of the December 1995 strikes that brings together academics, trade unionists and left activists) and select direct intervention on the political scene (through interviews, petitions, public appearances and sponsorship of various associations of the 'non-institutional' left – now commonly identified in political debate as the 'Bourdieuian Left'). I have argued that this political

dimension has always been present in Bourdieu's work, albeit repressed, muffled or sublimated (Wacquant, 1998).

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