

# The Craft of Sociology. Epistemological Preliminaries

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With *Le métier de sociologue. Préliminaires épistémologiques* (translated into English under the title: *The Craft of sociology. Epistemological preliminaries* in 1991), Pierre Bourdieu, Jean-Claude Chamboredon and Jean-Claude Passeron provide an epistemological introduction to contemporary sociology. First published in 1968 (second edition, 1972), this is an edited collection of texts in the history and philosophy of sciences, which relates to a class given by Bourdieu and his colleagues at the Ecole pratique des hautes études, but the book first aims to establish more soundly the scientific legitimacy of the discipline, by situating sociology within the continuum of the natural sciences, particularly physics and biology.

The *Craft of sociology* constitutes an important moment in the struggles inside the French, but also the international, field of sociology. It serves as an epistemological critique of positivism (dominant in the 1960s), recalls the relevance of the novel conceptualisations of the ‘founding fathers’ (Marx, Durkheim and Weber), and newly insists on their unity, as all share a common habitus, a set of ‘interiorized scientific principles’ that are incorporated into research. The book mobilizes philosophical resources from two strands (the Anglo-saxon philosophy of language and the French history and philosophy of sciences), and these are used as instruments to establish and strengthen the scientific legitimacy of the discipline.

**Keywords:** epistemology, social science, science, truth, construction of the research object, scientific language.

In its entirety, and through the collection and critiquing of significant texts on the history and philosophy of science, Pierre Bourdieu, Jean-Claude Chamboredon and Jean-Claude Passeron provided an epistemological introduction to contemporary sociology in *Le métier de sociologue. Préliminaires épistémologiques / The Craft of sociology. Epistemological preliminaries*, first published in 1968 (second edition, 1972). The authors intended to complete it with the publication of a more pedagogical and methodological book, which never appeared.

At the outset *The Craft of Sociology* aims to establish more firmly the scientific legitimacy of the discipline, by situating sociology within the continuum of the natural sciences, first and foremost within physics and biology. As last born among the empirical sciences, “this science like the others that sociology would like to be”<sup>1</sup> can benefit from its predecessors, especially when its disciples have a knowledge of their history and of their processes of development. Sociology could claim the

status of “experimental science”, if a number of obstacles are overcome, and provided that certain principles are adopted. First and foremost the necessity of a “rupture” (break) and a move away from “the construction of the research object” are imperative. The epistemology and the historical approaches of science offer a methodological approach that can be incorporated into the concrete practice of sociological research, and *Craft* sets out to justify such an approach.

The first cited references give an idea of the intellectual background to this stance. The authors muster arguments from *Cours de philosophie positive* by Auguste Comte and also the philosophers and historians of science, Georges Canguilhem and Gaston Bachelard, to recall that it is impossible to isolate methodology from the development of science. We should not “dissociate the method from practice” so techniques must be evident throughout all research activities, including the most theoretical. The authors invoke the Bachelardian label of “applied rationalism”, a conception that challenges the bureaucratic autonomisation of research operations, and defines scientific validation as the progressive convergence of a system of proofs, presuming a correct functioning of the scientific order.

### A reflexive posture in sociology

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

As a philosophical intervention in an empirical discipline, *The Craft of Sociology* deviates from the traditional stance in relation to the social sciences common in France. It attempts neither to span or underpin existing knowledge, for it offers neither a philosophical ‘crowning’ nor ‘foundation’, but instead contributes to the diffusion of a (scientific) habitus. The aim is to ‘give the means to acquire a mental disposition which is as much the condition of invention as it is the condition of proof’. This probably explains why the book has often been read rapidly and partially, and seen merely as a contribution to the philosophical debates in France around 1968, following the rupture with subjectivism, giving a theoretical / philosophical basis for reproduction theory, and the search for structural homologies, which Boudon criticizes in *Les méthodes en sociologie* in 1970 (Boudon, 1970).

It is relevant too, that despite stressing the conditions needed for the transmission of scientific habitus, *The Craft of Sociology* does not develop the practical aspects of sociological methodology. It is neither a guide nor a handbook, even though it places a strong priority on practice in scientific work. The preface to the second edition, in 1972, shows that the authors were conscious of the limits of such a perspective.<sup>2</sup> Without consensus or agreement on this point, the much needed pedagogical book will never appear.

Even if it makes some recommendations and takes a methodological stance at times, *Craft* refutes the dominant status of methodologists and methodology, which

is seen as a normative discipline associated with routinized and bureaucratized research practices. Instead, it sets aside methodological issues, without disqualifying them: they should have been the focus of a third book rather than merely mentioned within the third chapter of the presentation of texts.

*The Craft of Sociology* commands a philosophical reading: one finds here very few empirical analyses, neither qualitative nor quantitative. It is highly conceptual, which links it to the French tradition of providing a commentary to a collection of philosophical texts. However, at the same time the book argues radically for empirical research and against too rapid philosophical generalization, *a fortiori* against the big ‘Somme’ or overview, which reconciles a large range of authorial views, to offer a synthetic presentation. In this sense, the book plays a similar role within sociology to Wittgenstein’s work in philosophy, open to what it is not, and sending modest invitations to reflect on the uses of theory and sociological discourse in daily research practice. It is ‘preliminary’ in the full sense.

### An “integrative” book

*The Craft of Sociology* seeks to be an integrative book. It sits in a transitional space between traditions which at that time were in strong opposition (at least apparently) with empirical Anglo-saxon sociology, structural functionalism but also critical sociology (Mills), interactionism and constructivism; Karl Marx and Marxism (Althusser and even Aragon were present in the first edition of 1968), also the French school of sociology. This integrative posture explains why commentators have had difficulties situating the book within the intellectual space: not ‘Durkheimian’, or ‘Weberian’ or Marxist, neither hostile to quantitative research nor fanatic. It insists on a “conception of the theory of sociological knowledge which holds this theory for the system of principles defining the conditions of possibility of all acts and all discourses defined as properly sociological, and only these ones, whatever the theories of the social system developed by those who produce or have produced sociological work in the name of these principles” (p. 15-16).

*Craft* first bases this integrative will on a distinction between the particular ‘theory of the social system’ (characteristic of an author or a school) and the ‘theory of the knowledge of the social’, which is actually utilised in sociological practice, and whose foundation is the scientific habitus common to authors and traditions presented as oppositional: “it is possible to define the principles of the knowledge of the social, independently of the theories of the social which separate schools and theoretical traditions” (p. 108). This position is developed further on pages 48 and 49, and clearly highlights the supposed ‘meta-scientific’ agreement on the principles between authors *and* their diverging views on ‘partial theories of social reality’.

Against the academic doxa, which creates false oppositions, routinized epistemological couples (individualism / holism, etc.) or false reconciliations (with sociological ‘sommes’ – collections), *The Craft of Sociology* characterizes sociology by its profound unity of scientific attitude. This attitude is established beyond theoretical and ideological divisions, which become relevant only to assess the relative

weight of a particular explanatory social factor, or to validate a conceptual instrument or a local theory, in order to describe and interpret the reality of the social world, once the preliminaries of rupture and construction have been applied.

One of the foundations of this integrative perspective is the hypothesis of “non-consciousness”, which presupposes that individual actors are not perfectly aware of the totality of factors which govern their actions; a hypothesis which the authors distinguish from the notion of an opaque and reified unconscious (as was developed at the time in various guises, for example around Lacan). Another, more operational, way to formulate this hypothesis is to invoke the principle of “methodological determinism” (p. 31), and state that the causes of a behaviour are not reducible to what the actors spontaneously perceive, in the illusion of their acts, and the full freedom of their choices, whereas they are taken in the trap of spontaneous categories.

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

These two critiques at least show one thing: *Craft* has failed to impose the idea of a meta-scientific convergence between sociologists, and has contributed to the intensification of cleavages which it describes as secondary. This does not invalidate the thesis of the book, but it confirms that there is no ‘intrinsic strength of truth idea’ in the epistemological domain any more than anywhere else. Misunderstandings are not magically suppressed by integrative propositions, and contradictory beliefs go deeper than ‘partial’ theories, as they are based on ‘principles’. Jean-Claude Passeron, a few years later, will develop a more pessimistic view of this impossible convergence. However, one can remain optimistic but must recognise that the obstacles preventing convergence are stronger than was foreseen in *The Craft of Sociology*.

### **The space of reference of *The Craft of Sociology***

To substantiate their position on convergence the author’s draw on a collection of texts that is subtly polyphonic: philosophy and history of sciences represent less than a third of the texts (14), and are dominated by Bachelard (5) and Canguilhem (4). Also invoked are a series of Anglo-saxon scientists, epistemologists or historians (Darwin, Campbell, Wind, Kaplan) and the French physicist and historian of science Pierre Duhem. Durkheim and the durkheimians play an important role with 11 texts (7 from Emile Durkheim, 2 François Simiand, 2 Marcel Mauss); followed

by texts from within contemporary anglo-saxon empirical sociology (7). Here, authors represent very diverse traditions, theoretically and/or methodologically: Goldthorpe and Lockwood for British sociology with two texts; Berger, Wright Mills, Katz, Schatzman and Strauss, illustrating multiple orientations in anglo-saxon sociology; Max Weber (4 texts are included); philosophy of language and linguistics (3 authors, including Wittgenstein); anthropology (3: Lévi-Strauss, Ma- get, Malinovski); Karl Marx (2); and Panofsky (1). Marx and Marxism hold a marginal position in a set dominated by Anglo-saxon authors.

The large diversity of traditions represented within the book is striking, especially since they are presented as fundamentally converging over a certain number or principles, as we have seen. At the same time, these very general principles are explicit and implicit, practical as much as theoretical, and this book is a reflexive construction, offering a pedagogical generalization based on these principles, while refusing the recipe style of many methodological handbooks. This provides another opportunity for misunderstandings.

Beside the choice of texts, there is a large bibliography that includes the quantitative texts dominant within Anglo-saxon sociology (Lazarsfeld and Boudon, Merton, etc.); logics and epistemology (Borel, Carnap); anthropology and linguistics, also Raymond Aron and Jean Piaget. This set of references provides a useful combination of epistemological reflections and good illustrations.

The book pays homage to the traditions of both Durkheim and the French history and philosophy of science, but footnote references make frequent claims on the Anglo-saxon social sciences (Hempel, Richtie, Campbell, etc.) and the Wittgensteinian philosophy of language. The breadth of references cited is both philosophical and sociological, continental and Anglo-saxon (US and UK), theoretical and empirical, and this contributes to creating fuzzy boundaries between the classical academic divisions.

### **A polemical book**

Behind its ecumenical appearance, the book is also, and probably above all, a violent attack on the many temptations, digressions, and errors that are presented as classical in the history of human and social sciences. It is the strong coupling of diltheyen dualism and mechanical positivism that reconciles the two opposing attitudes towards the natural sciences: their absolute rejection on the one hand and their servile adoption and reproduction on the other, and the unquestioning use of norms of validation which sociologists simply forgot to question. *Craft* refutes bureaucratized and hierarchized representations of research operations, and rehabilitates the theoretical work of construction without denigrating empirical research. On the contrary it recognizes both practices and as a consequence doubly risks disparagement: it can be criticized as either infra-theoretical or hyper-theoreticist. This duality of the book may appear to be a compromise, especially between Bourdieu and Passeron themselves, the one more empirically oriented, the other more theoretical.

The critiques that deprecate the state of contemporary sociology in its dominant form are many: sociology is accused of positivist empiricism; prophetism; dependent on political will; its authors decried as too academic, its exponents too devoted to grand theory. Classical errors are pointed out, as is the misuse of words coming from other disciplines (*substantialism*) or from common parlance.

The critique is often shaped by polemical categories: “spontaneous sociology”, “daily gossip”, the “imperative of ethical neutrality turned into catechism”, the “methodological mania”, or “-isms” (“empiricism”, “positivism”, “prophetism”, “class ethnocentrism”, etc.). It also directly target authors: Hayek is positioned as an incarnation of subjectivism (p. 19); Merton, as stressing too strongly the role of chance in the history of science (p. 29); Parsons for his false reconciliation of “grand theories” (note 2, p. 45); Parsons and Merton for their theoreticism, p. 46-47; the French “sociologie gurvitchienne” (from the French Gurvitch) for its multiple typologies (p. 47); Barton and Lazarsfeld, more gently, are accused of flaws in the designation of objects in their work on the construction of the object (p. 53); Elton Mayo (p. 60) is criticized for his indifference to class and power relations, Barton and Lazarsfeld for their statistical “methodological ethnocentrism” and their subordinate use of qualitative methods (p.66); Bierstedt, author of an article in the *American Journal of Sociology* is accused of “reifying” ethnographic method, an approach which will be very successful later.

### **Heritages, traditions, and dialogues**

The standpoint adopted in the book recalls Durkheim's stance in *The Rules of Sociological Methods* and, indeed, *The Craft of Sociology* can be read as an expression, in the context of the 60s, of a modernized Durkheimian programme, in the context of the evolution of a global sociology, and also the philosophy of language. It was the rise of instrumental positivism which stirred up a counter-movement, and a focus on the construction of the research object and the multiple stakes of scientific vocabulary. Research in epistemology and history of science, and the philosophy of language, have opened up new ways for rationalist and empiricist investigations in philosophy; and thereby helped to embed sociology within the ‘normal history of science’. The classification of texts foregrounded the ‘prenotions and techniques of rupture’, and in part this was well-received due to the approach of methodological critique of language.<sup>3</sup>

Anglo-saxon empirical sociology is omnipresent in *The Craft of Sociology*, but this incarnation of empiricism and positivism serves only as a foil to the main argument, a claimed heritage. References to this tradition abound in the general discussion of texts and in the bibliography, but it is scarcely evident in the illustrative texts selected for inclusion, only included as a self-critique (within a text from Elihu Katz).

The diverse methods of sociology are evoked at various moments in the book, from an epistemological and reflexive perspective, but without detailing their use. The leitmotiv, which will become a constant in Bourdieu's work from the mid- 60s, is the stress put on the ‘system of objective relations’ which is the very focus of

sociology. It leads to the quest for structural homologies, necessitating a critical reflection on multivariate analysis.<sup>4</sup> The book includes as well a critique of the use of opinion questionnaires (developed in the article « Public opinion does not exist » in 1973), and many remarks about the discursive formalization of the scientific object. Bourdieu will refer to Marcel Maget's *Guide for the Direct Study of Cultural Behavior* to defend ethnographic observation, provided it is epistemologically grounded.

The theme of reflexivity is clearly present in *The Craft of Sociology*, especially in the conclusion which is based on a dialogue between the critical epistemology of positivism (close to C.W. Mills) and the sociology of knowledge (in line with Durkheim and Mannheim). Actually, one finds in *The Craft of Sociology* a nuanced elucidation of the necessity for self-socioanalysis (as it will be developed for example in Bourdieu, 1984) and also its limitations: it is at the scale of the entire field of sociology that ‘crossed controls’ can allow a collective progress (since ‘the objectivity of science cannot be based on a foundation as uncertain as the objectivity of scholars’, p. 102). The first enemy of the book is explicitly designated: it is the ‘positivist temptation’, which was at its highest point in the mid-60s, when technologies were imported from the US into Europe and when a scientist faith prevailed. This was to be overturned a few years later (around 1968), giving way to a period of hyper-theoriticism, especially on the Marxist side. Finally, the authors place emphasis on a conception of the ‘scientific city’ where, through informed critique, peers contribute to the emergence of an increasingly substantiated scientific reason (collectively validated). To use Durkheim’s terminology, this would allow sociology to shed its ‘fashionable’ status and gain greater academic acceptance, but at a price, the loss of a little of its esoteric stature.

### **Conclusion**

*The Craft of Sociology* constitutes an important moment in the turmoil inside the French but also the international (global) field of sociology. An epistemological critique of the overarching acceptance of positivism (of the 1960s), the book recalls the relevance of epistemological beliefs of the ‘founding fathers’ (Marx, Durkheim and Weber). Unusually, the authors insist there is unity across the two traditions, describing this as based on a common habitus, a set of ‘interiorized scientific principles’ incorporated into research. The book mobilizes philosophical resources emanating from two strands (an Anglo-saxon philosophy of language, and a French history and philosophy of sciences), and these are used as instruments to establish and strengthen the scientific legitimacy of the discipline.

If *The Craft of Sociology* failed to create a ‘consensus over the principles’ as the authors had wished, it is difficult to explain the failure without a more in-depth analysis of the structures within the field of sociology that may account for this. One can posit that the work was poised between the affirmation of the consensus and an exploration of the polemical dimension, and this prevented the authors from making their objectives totally explicit. The absence of a second volume, which the authors announced but never wrote, makes it even more difficult to interpret the

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first accurately. The craft of sociology remains therefore, if not still to be written, still to be defined.

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### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Translations by the author.
- <sup>2</sup> In French: “chacun des principes aurait ainsi pu être monnayé en préceptes, ou, au moins, en exercices d’intériorisation de la posture ; par exemple, pour dégager toutes les virtualités heuristiques qui sont impliquées dans un principe tel que celui du primat des relations, il aurait fallu montrer sur pièces, comme on peut le faire dans un séminaire, ou mieux dans un groupe de recherche, en examinant la construction d’un échantillon, l’élaboration d’un questionnaire, ou l’analyse d’une série de tableaux statistiques, comment ce principe commande les choix techniques du travail de recherche (construction de séries de populations séparées par des différences pertinentes sous le rapport des relations considérées, élaboration des questions qui, secondaires pour la sociographie de la population elle-même, permettent de situer le cas considéré dans un système de cas où il prend tout son sens, ou encore mobilisation des techniques graphiques et mécanographiques permettant d’appréhender synoptiquement et exhaustivement le système des relations entre les relations révélées par un ensemble de tableaux statistiques).” (p.5-6).
- <sup>3</sup> See for example: P.Champagne, R.Lenoir, D.Merllié, L.Pinto, *Initiation à la pratique sociologique*, issu des travaux de la “deuxième génération” des représentants de l’école de Bourdieu (Champagne et al., 1989).
- <sup>4</sup> In French: “il faudrait enfin se demander si la méthode d’analyse des données qui semble la plus à même de s’appliquer à tous les types de relations quantifiables, à savoir l’analyse multivariée, ne doit pas être soumise chaque fois à l’interrogation épistémologique : en effet, en postulant que l’on peut isoler tour à tour l’action des différentes variables du système complet des relations à l’intérieur duquel elles agissent, afin de saisir l’efficacité propre à chacune d’elles, cette technique s’interdit de saisir l’efficacité qu’un facteur peut tenir de son insertion dans une structure et même l’efficacité proprement structurale du système des facteurs” (p.68-69).

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