Pierre Bourdieu : genèse d'un sociologue by Victor Collard (Paris: CNRS Éditions, 2024)

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Victor Collard's study addresses an enigma that has often been commented upon but rarely documented with such precision: the social and intellectual genesis of Pierre Bourdieu prior to his consecration as a leading figure in world sociology. Rather than relying on the accounts provided by Bourdieu himself (notably in *Sketch for a Self-Analysis* [*Esquisse pour une auto-analyse*]), the author mobilizes an extensive corpus of unpublished archival material to objectify the conditions of possibility governing Bourdieu's trajectory. The volume unfolds as a rigorous socio-historical investigation aimed at deconstructing the academic 'miracle' in order to expose its underlying social mechanisms.

The initial merit of the book lies in its break with the idealized trope of the working-class student as an educational 'miracle'. Collard demonstrates that although Bourdieu was not an inheritor in the strict sense, he nonetheless benefited from a favourable domestic and social environment. The analysis of his secondary schooling at the Lycée Louis Barthou in Pau reveals decisive determinants: a civil-servant father, a postal clerk, embodying the lower-middle class, alongside an intense family investment characteristic of strategies for upward mobility through the educational system. The author brings to light the essential role of institutional intermediaries and frequently neglected figures of social 'sponsorship'. The profile of Bernard Lamicq, headmaster of the Pau lycée and a former *normalien* whose trajectory mirrored Bourdieu's, is brought to the fore. Lamicq served a dual function: facilitating identification, enabling what may be termed anticipatory socialization, and providing institutional backing. It was this localized social capital, combined with academic success marked by a first *accessit* in Latin translation at the 1947 Concours Général, that enabled Bourdieu's entry into the *classes préparatoires* at the Lycée Louis-le-Grand. In this regard, the book provides an indisputable factual contribution to the sociology of academic elites under the Fourth Republic.

The investigation is not restricted to his formative schooling. It examines Bourdieu's earliest professional appointments, notably his year of teaching at the Lycée de Moulins (1954–1955). This chapter offers detailed insight into Bourdieu as an 'unruly' and innovative pedagogue. It shows the young *agrégé* introducing the reading of *Le Monde* in the classroom and decorating walls with art prints to offset his provincial pupils' lack of museum culture. The recovery of

the graduation address delivered by Bourdieu in 1955, an 'Eulogy of Boredom' marked by an ironic, detached tone, represents one of the most compelling archival discoveries in the volume.

To account for Bourdieu's integration into the intellectual field, the author seeks to objectify the French philosophical space of the 1950s. He introduces a quantitative mapping of dominant references, cataloguing the frequency of articles dedicated to Marx, Sartre, or Husserl across contemporary journals. This approach intends to show that the young philosopher's theoretical choices were not instances of pure elective affinity, but rather positional stances within an objective space of possibilities constrained by intellectual fashions and publishing visibility, following the sociology of intellectuals developed by Gisèle Sapiro or Jean-François Sirinelli.

However, once this empirical richness has been acknowledged, the work reveals a methodological limitation that demands examination. The persistent impression throughout the volume is that the inquiry remains enclosed in a circularity in which the concepts of Bourdieu's maturity (*habitus*, field, capital) are deployed to decipher the emergence of the very thinker who formulated them. This theoretical enclosure operates at the direct expense of a genuine conceptual history.

While the quantitative mapping of the philosophical field provides a 'snapshot' of the period, it fails to capture the internal specificity of Bourdieu's intellectual labour. Statistical tables reveal little about what Bourdieu specifically extracted from Husserl, Leibniz, or the French, Anglo-Saxon, and Austrian traditions in epistemology. The absence of close textual and conceptual analysis is striking: the choice of Leibniz for his DES (*diplôme d'études supérieures*) thesis is treated as a simple indicator of position, without examining how this rationalist grounding structured the future sociologist's scientific *habitus*. Consider the distinctly Leibnizian tenor of the programme behind *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, which revived Leibniz's ambition 'to see the origins of inventions, which are in my opinion worth more than the inventions themselves, because of their fertility and because they contain within themselves the source of an infinity of others that may be drawn from them by a certain combination'[1]. Likewise, mobilizing Weberian categories, such as value rationality, would have allowed a more adequate articulation of Bourdieu's subjective ambitions with his theoretical affinities, without reducing his path to a mechanical social physics of positions.

This methodology leads at times to a form of teleology that Bourdieu himself contested. The treatment of the Moulins appointment is indicative: the author tends to interpret the young teacher's pedagogical practices as 'rational pedagogy in action' (p. 192), reading into them the arguments of *The Inheritors* (1964). Such retrospective analysis bypasses the temporality of ongoing research and suggests a preordained intellectual destiny. Lacking a problematic framework linking theoretical developments to biographical events, the narrative struggles to move beyond a juxtaposition of archival documents. Chapters succeed one another without a continuous epistemological thread – such as his engagement with the physiology of emotions

[1]G. W. Leibniz, Letter to J.-P. de La Roque (1675), in GP V, 89 (reprinted in A III, vol. 1). All translations in this paper are my own.

or the phenomenology of perception – to structure the passage from philosophy to sociology. As evidence of this posture, one finds assertions such as: 'Whatever his personal relationship to phenomenology may have been, it was, in a sense, too ubiquitous to be ignored' (p. 203).

The aporia of this quantitative method is most apparent in the table listing monographs published between 1945 and 1959, intended to objectify positions in the field. One observes that only two books on Husserl and Heidegger were published between 1950 and 1954, alongside editorial 'giants' like Pascal, Marx, or Bergson. Yet stopping at this empirical metric obscures the actual circulation of ideas within seminars and the intensity of oral academic life, particularly at the École Normale Supérieure and the Sorbonne. It suggests that Bourdieu's interest in phenomenology defied statistical probability, whereas a history of concepts would have highlighted the prevailing 'phenomenological atmosphere' of the period, which cannot be measured simply by publication counts. Under the author's statistical reasoning, Bourdieu should not logically have turned towards phenomenology given its marginality relative to Marx or Pascal. In practice, the intellectual milieu remained deeply oriented towards phenomenology. On this issue, one can consult recent works such as *L'angle mort des années 1950*,[2] or the lectures by Maurice Merleau-Ponty.[3]

On a different level, one must also account for the DES thesis topics of the period. The recent publication of Michel Foucault's 1949 DES thesis on 'the constitution of a historical transcendental in Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit', edited by Christophe Bouton, should prompt scholars to examine what was involved in choosing a thesis author at that time.[4] Academic life then unfolded through seminar exchanges and student manuscripts. Foucault's thesis on Hegel is absent from Collard's catalogue, as are the contents of other DES theses defended during the same period – a significant gap. Yet this study demonstrates the renewed interest in phenomenological thought in the postwar years and would have permitted a critical comparison between two major figures of late-twentieth-century human and social sciences.

Furthermore, Collard's archival documentation should be brought into closer dialogue with the work of Laurent Perreau,[5] who conceptualizes a tripartite model of demarcation, conversion, and subversion, rather than a single trajectory of 'field defection' [*transfuge de champ*]. Multiple Correspondence Analysis (MCA) – a core method in Bourdieu's sociology – would have made it possible to cross-reference trajectory variables (social background, DES honours, institutional sponsors) with theoretical position-takings (choosing Leibniz or Husserl for the DES, publication venues, interest in empirical data, etc.). By projecting these relational properties into a geometric space, MCA would have revealed the topology of the 1950s philosophical field and its structural oppositions, which are central to Bourdieu's understanding of social fields. Without such an

[2] Giuseppe Bianco and Frédéric Fruteau De Laclos (eds.), *L'angle mort des années 1950. Philosophie et sciences humaines en France*, Paris, Éditions de la Sorbonne, 2016.

[3] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Résumés de cours. Collège de France (1952–1960)*, Paris, Gallimard, 1968; see in particular the course 'Matériaux pour une théorie de l'histoire' (1953) edited by Dominique Séglard.

[4] Michel Foucault, *La constitution d'un transcendantal historique dans la Phénoménologie de l'Esprit de Hegel* [Mémoire de diplôme d'études supérieures, 1949], Christophe Bouton (ed.), Paris, Vrin, 2024.

[5] Laurent Perreau, *Bourdieu et la phénoménologie*, Paris, CNRS Éditions, 2019.

analytical apparatus, the study remains confined to juxtaposing raw frequencies, failing to reconstruct the relational dynamic that defined the young Bourdieu's position among his peers.

Bourdieu's abandoned philosophy dissertation is mentioned by Collard, but solely to emphasize that it positioned him at the interface between the philosophical and sociological fields, without exploring how it fit into his intellectual evolution. The dissertation's bibliography and core arguments remain inaccessible today, preventing the reader from forming a concrete assessment of this abandoned research. One would want to know how Bourdieu developed this 'phantom' philosophy thesis, abandoned yet persistent across his later work (his formulation of temporal experience would recur through to *Pascalian Meditations*). How did his fieldwork in Algeria reshape this project? These questions remain unaddressed at the end of chapter 4.

Midway through his demonstration, Collard acknowledges that his method cannot account substantively for the epistemological influence of phenomenology or other traditions: '(. . .) the fact remains that, in most cases, social position alone cannot explain the relationship sustained with particular ideas or authors. It is difficult to see by what method one could directly deduce Bourdieu's interest in German phenomenology rather than Sartrean existentialism from his social position' (p. 208). Yet clarifying an author's epistemological choices and their analytical stakes – rather than claiming to 'deduce' them – remains the central task of any genetic inquiry into a major thinker. Often silent on its methodological rationale, Collard's inquiry revives Bourdieu's critique of both the 'strong programme' and Marxist reflection theory, which were rejected under the concept of the 'short-circuit'. Ultimately, the study adopts the solution formulated by Bourdieu himself: field theory.

To grasp Bourdieu's development, this volume should be read as a necessary but insufficient starting point. It must be supplemented by a conceptual history that takes his studies on Leibniz, Husserl, or Spinoza seriously – not merely as strategies of distinction, but as conceptual reservoirs supplying theoretical problems and solutions for an emergent empirical practice. The Bourdieusian 'double enigma' is situated at the junction of rigorous social history and historical epistemology. *Pierre Bourdieu : genèse d'un sociologue* constitutes an informative study for anyone examining the empirical details of this trajectory and provides valuable documentation on the 'learning Bourdieu' as well as the social conditions of his emergence. Nevertheless, by relying on the theoretical schema of the subject under study, the book leaves those seeking an intellectual genealogy unsatisfied.

References

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[5] Merleau-Ponty, Maurice, *Résumés de cours. Collège de France (1952–1960)*, ed. by Dominique Séglard, Paris, Gallimard, 1968.

[6] Perreau, Laurent, *Bourdieu et la phénoménologie*, Paris, CNRS Éditions, 2019.