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## SYMPOSIUM

*Méditations pascaliennes?*

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## 1

Sociology has, like all modern sciences, developed from one philosophy. And like the other sciences, only in this way has it been able to establish itself by convincingly demonstrating its complete independence and superior intellectual penetration vis-a-vis philosophy. In addition, however, there have again and again been attempts to show that sociology – or ‘theory of society’ – is called upon in a very general and fundamental sense to take the place of philosophy: The questions hitherto posed by philosophy – and earlier by theology – about the nature and the boundaries of knowledge, scientific knowledge in particular, as well as about the meaning of human life and the highest goals of human action, should according to this view be taken over by sociology and answered for the first time in a purely scientific way (Weiss, 1993).

## 2

The strongest justification for such a criticism and surpassing of philosophy by social theory is to be found in the *German Ideology* and in the *Theses on Feuerbach* by Karl Marx: if not the nature of God or the nature of being, but the nature of human beings is the first and last object of all knowledge and if human nature exists in the ‘ensemble of social conditions’, then the science of social conditions and social practice must be regarded as *scientia scientiarum*, and not theology or philosophy. ‘The quarrel about the reality or non-reality of thinking – isolated from practice – is a purely *scholastic* question’ (2nd thesis on Feuerbach).

This view has not only dominated the tradition of Marxist theory (right up to Habermas, at least in his early programmatic writings), and is not bound therefore to any materialistic orthodoxy. In France it has its completely own history, following above all Auguste Comte. Thus Emile Durkheim pursues no lesser purpose than the replacing and surpassing of the critical philosophy of Kant, the *Critique of Pure Reason* included, by the sociological critique of philosophy with the means of empirical science.

## 3

Pierre Bourdieu's understanding and treatment of sociology obviously stands in this tradition. The only astonishing thing is that this has hardly been noticed in the German reception of Bourdieu up to now. The *Méditations pascaliennes*, in which Bourdieu presents his views in a very concentrated and programmatic form, is well suited to overcome this deficit in the reception of his work.

A radicalization of critical thinking in the sense of Immanuel Kant is explicitly what matters to Bourdieu here. And this radicalization should mean that the philosophy of criticism itself is subjected to a sociological critique of philosophy. This criticism is truly radical, because it uncovers the social conditions and determinants of philosophical reflection – 'les présupposés inscrits dans la situation de skholè' – and thus exposes the claim of philosophy to autonomy and to a 'position élevée' as fiction and false consciousness. The *semblance* of the autonomy of philosophical thinking, its independence from a 'société historique' generally, and in particular from the social pressures and struggles of the 'champs philosophique', is produced according to Bourdieu with the aid of certain social mechanisms, and re-established again and again: through absoluteness and canonization, indeed through an 'éternisation' and a corresponding 'lecture liturgique' of philosophical texts, through a displacement or logicalization of the social history of philosophy, through the initiation rites and the esotericizing of academic institutions (the École normale in particular) as well as through a corresponding professional esprit de corps.

## 4

The empirical evidence which Bourdieu presents in this book to establish his criticism of philosophy (and his increasing distance from it), is of a very particular and limited kind. It deals with his own philosophical apprenticeship years and in particular with his experiences at the École normale, and that is much too narrow a basis for his general and apodictic assertions. There are people most certainly with completely different personal experiences and, also in France, there are completely different institutions, and it is rash and not a sign of particular sociological credibility to deliver sweeping statements about an 'enfermement scolastique' and an 'ambition hégémonique' not only of the universities of Oxford, Cambridge, Yale, Harvard, Göttingen and Heidelberg, but of the entire research and teaching practices of philosophy from Plato to Kant, Hegel and Heidegger.

But even if one could grant Bourdieu's sociological analyses very much more weight and persuasive power than they deserve, his criticism would still stand on very weak foundations. Philosophical reasonings which prove to be problematic, untenable or wrong through evidence of the historical and social conditions of their origin and enforcement, must suffer from great intellectual inadequacy. Otherwise it cannot be seen – and cannot be demonstrated by Bourdieu or by anybody else – how, in all intellectual honesty, one could arrive at an adequate analysis – to say nothing of the refutation – of philosophical argumentation in the style of the

idealist doctrine of Plato, the construction of the Leviathan in Hobbes, the transcendental philosophy of Kant or Heidegger's *Daseinsanalytik*.

## 5

Nobody has criticized the pretentiousness of philosophy more sharply than Blaise Pascal. He considered René Descartes's attempt to create a 'fundamentum absolutum et inconcussum' of human knowledge and action by means of mere reason to be impossible and absurd. Philosophy appeared only necessary and credible to him if it considered its own preconditions and limitations: 'La dernière démarche de la raison est de reconnaître qu'il y a une infinité de choses qui la surpassent.'

One could hold it to be very appropriate, thus, that Bourdieu ties his meditations to the name of Pascal and lets him speak for himself in selected quotations again and again. And yet this appeal to Pascal appears to me not only problematical, but in principle wrong and misleading. For Pascal's criticism of philosophy is not thoroughly sociological – *avant la lettre*, of course – but philosophical (or anthropological) itself, and theological. The social activities and institutions (power, prestige, money, entertainment), which he analyses so shrewdly, fulfil in Pascal's view one purpose, namely to distract from the forlornness and wretchedness of human existence. This insight, however, is neither intended to produce, nor is it capable of producing, dissolution of existing power structures and the abolition of social inequalities, but only a sudden, and therefore for most people unbearable, confrontation with the fundamental misery of their existence. And because he sees this misery as 'misery of human beings without God', he puts his sole hope in the salvation which was revealed by the 'God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob' and that itself is not accessible to the reason of philosophers (and scientists), but only to belief.

## 6

Pascal's belief (and theology) is mentioned in Bourdieu's *Méditations pascaliennes* only at the very end, and very briefly. That is astonishing and lies evidently in a sociological theorem which Bourdieu takes from Durkheim. Accordingly, what Pascal calls 'God' was never anything other than what sociology discovers in it – 'society': 'la société, c'est Dieu' (p. 288). And all hope which people put in God, all meaning in life which their religion offered them, they must from now on expect from society without this 'diversion': 'le monde social offre aux humains ce dont ils sont le plus totalement dépourvus: une justification d'existence' (p. 282).

## 7

'La misère de l'homme sans Dieu' has revealed itself, therefore, as the misery of human beings without society, and therefore the science of society, i.e. sociology,

alone is called upon to illuminate the misery of the world and the possibilities of overcoming it.

All that has a certain inner logic. At the same time, however, it has nothing to do with Pascal. Rather, it is diametrically opposed to his ideas. The true misery of human beings, according to Pascal, is neither created nor to be overcome by society, but at best concealed by it. The weakness and the limitations of human reason – and so of philosophy, too – are an essential part of this misery. It is completely unthinkable that an empirical and decidedly objectivist sociology could recognize this limitation as such, and, that is to say, transcend it though reflecting upon it. In fact, Bourdieu's assertions on the social circumstantiality of human knowledge and behaviour are such that not even the possibility of a mental – therefore sociological or philosophical – liberation from these conditions is understandable. Accordingly, the scope for change in social practice is very narrow in his view, and this, in spite of everything having to be aimed at practice. With the help of the same 'oversocialized' understanding of human existence, Bourdieu repeatedly criticizes – and very vehemently – all 'humanistic' and individualistic (or subjectivist) ideas of human action.

Luckily in this, he is, as in his criticism of the 'intellectualist' trust of the power of discourse (compare p. 10 with p. 15), highly inconsistent. If there was not something like the self-reflection and the self-determination of human subjects, Bourdieu's sociology also would be unnecessary and even impossible – its continual self-reflection and self-justification even more so. And sociology is only interested in the power of social determination because there is reason to assume its fundamental limitedness and susceptibility to change. Sociology can neither found and justify itself through itself nor limit itself. Therefore, sociologists are required again and again to think about the conditions and boundaries of the concepts and explanations they use as well as to think about the practical and existential scope of sociological reasoning. With this meditation, however, sociology ends and philosophizing begins – in the academic or in the non-academic sense.

## Reference

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