

## BOOK REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

**Pierre Bourdieu**, *Sketch for a Self-Analysis*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008, 128 pp. \$US 20.00 paper (978-0-226-06751-3), \$US 55.00 hardcover (978-0-226-06747-6)

**P**ierre Bourdieu's *Sketch for a Self-Analysis* can be recommended equally to devotees and critics. The short text revisits many of Bourdieu's classic themes—including symbolic violence, the “scholastic fallacy,” and habitus, this time in the context of his personal experiences and development.

Is this an autobiography? The heavily freighted denial which opens the text rides very low in the water. “I do not intend to indulge in the genre of autobiography,” he writes, “which I have often enough described as both conventional and illusory” (p. 1). Such a claim cues the central tension of Bourdieu's work, the dialectics of structure and agent, as well as the Freudian-Weberian inflection that Bourdieu gives to intention, as something rooted in the range of meanings available to particular actors in particular social contexts and in “barely articulated” predispositions based in deep feelings, revulsions, and attractions, even when raised to the level of critical reflexivity. Bourdieu, however, by means of what he calls self-socioanalysis, intends to subject his experience “to critical confrontation, as if it were any other object” (p. 1). If intention and result do not match, Bourdieu places the responsibility in the reader's inability to read the text in the right way.

By his own admission Bourdieu refuses the “autobiography” label partly because if he did not, he would have to contradict his earlier claims that the genre is “conventional and illusory.” It follows that Bourdieu's intention is to be both unconventional and genuine. It does not take an unusually exercised critic to note that such a claim could not be, for the genre of autobiography, any more conventional. Just as conventional (although here autobiography as *apologia* very decisively breaks from autobiography as confession) is the insistence that with regard to the past one is going to “take nothing back.”

One need not engage in this sort of exegesis to recognize that this text is polemical in several ways. The main targets are all academic. He focuses on philosophers, social scientists, and boarding schools in turn, criticizing each for their peculiar way of splitting the world, as the higher

and the lower, into the spiritual and the material. It begins with a discussion of the “state of the field” of philosophy when Bourdieu entered it in the 1950s. He justifies this beginning with his claim that “To understand is first to understand the field with which and against which one has been formed” (p. 4). This discussion is another rehearsal of his critique of the “scholastic fallacy,” that is, of the obduracy of philosophical activity to any recognition of its material conditions of possibility. Jean-Paul Sartre remains his exemplar in this regard. Against the assurance and arrogance of the Sartrean “total intellectual,” Bourdieu contrasts the hardworking, head-down humility of Georges Canguilhem, the historian of science and epistemology who shared with Bourdieu a provincial origin. For Bourdieu, the best scholarly work is that done by one with deep ambivalence about the academic world, by one with the kind of “cleft habitus” that makes one observant everywhere and completely at home almost nowhere.

Even this cleft habitus needs a kind of counterformation if it is not to spend itself in unproductive resentment. And in this self-analysis Bourdieu is, among other things, giving the reader a kind of recipe for the sociological imagination. For Bourdieu, a transformation or conversion from philosophy to sociology occurred during his sojourn in Algeria (first as a soldier with the French army, and then teaching at the University of Algiers while doing ethnographic studies of marriage patterns among the Kabyle). Bourdieu’s time in Algeria during the violent years before it achieved independence in 1962, simultaneously an experience of displacement and connectedness, was also a form of penitential release from the atmosphere of the French academy. This apprenticeship also allowed the return to Béarn, where Bourdieu, newly provided with the techniques of ethnography, achieved a kind of respectful reappropriation of his past during his study of unmarried bachelor farmers. “A whole part of myself was given back to me,” Bourdieu writes, “The return to my origins was accompanied by a return, but a controlled return, of the repressed” (p. 62). Bourdieu sums up this period as a “conversion of the gaze,” first from the naive view to the objectivating gaze, and then to the reflexivity that allows for the “reappropriation of the truth of the logic of practice” (p. 64).

Bourdieu’s return to French academia in the 1960s as a sociologist rather than a philosopher is described as a kind of inspired mission to lead a “liberation movement of the social sciences against the imperialism of philosophy” (p. 72). The polemic against philosophy returns as a critique of conventional social science. The dominant figures on the French and American scene (Aron, Levi-Strauss, Lazarsfeld) are discussed and largely panned. In each case, however, the discussion is am-

bivalent, with Bourdieu acknowledging a variety of personal, practical, and theoretical debts to them. Although Bourdieu and Aron eventually had a permanent falling out, Aron was the one who, in 1960, brought Bourdieu back to Paris from a politically tense Algiers.

In contrast to the criticisms of Aron and Levi-Strauss, Foucault's work is warmly extolled. Invariably Bourdieu sides with those scholars who, like him, came from "lower-class or provincial origin" (p. 10); the opposition, of course, is that between the "working" academic and the "arm-chair" philosopher. Bourdieu implies that his friendship for Foucault was based in a kind of "homologous affinity" of habitus and a shared interest in being critical of the social order. Describing friendships as "affinities of habitus" (p. 58) will certainly be read as confirmation for those critics who have seen Bourdieu as deterministic.

Finally, Bourdieu turns to his childhood, and a harsh depiction of boarding school, but here as well he acknowledges debts. As he writes, "The experience of boarding school no doubt played a decisive part in the formation of my dispositions — in particular, by inclining me to a realistic (Flaubertian) vision of social relations" (pp. 90–91). It is easy to feel as if this story of boarding school may be the heart of the matter, for real pathos is borne in the anger with which Bourdieu contrasts the conflicts, humiliations, and disenchantment of his boarding school experiences and the enchantment of the classroom where "spiritual" values reigned. It is in these vivid remarks, which include a number of elliptical references to what seem to have been a period or periods of major depression, that he most effectively articulates the ambivalence about the intellectual world that he calls a "cleft habitus."

Whether the particular form of cleft habitus that Bourdieu describes, a kind of resentment partially made over into a commitment to science (and to justice) is really the ideal character structure for a sociologist, may have to remain an open question. This text lends itself, as Bourdieu feared, to reductionistic readings, and it is not always clear that Bourdieu succeeded in transforming resentment into commitment to the scientific field. In critiquing the "scholastic fallacy" he certainly does not seem to have replaced arrogance with humility or with an ability to admit to mistakes. The narrative, however, is at times touching, and succeeds in depicting a scholar who was, in the end, "a person like me" (p. 113), with whom it is certainly possible to identify, and who may aid his readers, if not in achieving their intentions, then perhaps in more deeply reflecting on the conditions of their intentionality. Whether he avoided autobiography and achieved what he calls a self-socioanalysis is not certain. To what will be a long debate over the meaning and legacy of Bourdieu's work, however, the translation of the *Sketch* is a useful contribution.

Bourdieu is one of those writers capable of writing sentences that are simultaneously awkward and eloquent, circuitous and punchy. This text contains many of his maddening parenthetical remarks (the ones that can go on for several pages, severely testing, to use a rather barbarous metaphor, the short-term memory's lung capacity. There are a couple of closing parentheses I did not manage to trail to their hidden lair, and I cannot be sure whether editor, writer, or reader is to blame).

*Sketch for a Self-Analysis* was written in the last months of 2001. It was published first in German, in 2002, and then in French in 2004. Earlier versions of some parts of the *Sketch* appeared in an appendix to chapter 1 of *Pascalian Meditations* (2000), and in a section at the end of *Science of Science and Reflexivity* (2004).

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