

Retrieved from:

The European Journal of Psychoanalysis

Jul 12, 2024

<https://www.journal-psychoanalysis.eu/articles/reason-and-history-a-conversation-of-sergio-benvenuto-with-pierre-bourdieu/>

Pierre Bourdieu & Sergio Benvenuto

Reason and History: A Conversation of Sergio Benvenuto with Pierre Bourdieu

Sergio Benvenuto. *Professor Bourdieu, from their inception, the social sciences have affirmed themselves by adopting a specific philosophical approach, historicism. Historicism tends to relativize knowledge and values in relation to epochs and cultures. Do you think that the social sciences, cultural relativism and historicism are closely linked? Do you think, in other words, that the social sciences, cultural relativism and historicism are all connected?*

Pierre Bourdieu. The social sciences do indeed historicize, thus they relativize knowledge in one way or the other. All universal discourses, like law, religion, literature, art and philosophy itself, are influenced by the historical point of view of the sociologist. When sociologists address productions of the spirit of any kind they always lead them back to the historical conditions of production.

It is interesting to note that the two fields mostly spared until now from the historicization operated by the social sciences are law and philosophy. Until now jurists and philosophers have distinguished themselves from other specialists because they have preserved a monopoly on the history of their discipline. Apart from a few attempts at a social history of law or a social history of philosophy, until now historical studies have always consisted in histories of philosophical or juridical ideas, which they consider an empire within an empire, derived from an exclusively “ideal” genealogy. This vision seems to me antonymic to what the social sciences, which always lead the products of human action back to historic conditions, do. The fundamental question, a difficult one to answer, is whether historicization implies relativization and whether the social sciences, by historicizing, destroys its own fundamentals, insofar as it has to historicize itself and consequently relativize itself. Some philosophers – not the best ones, I must say – periodically rediscover this already frequently used argument. For example, a great founder of sociology like Max Weber debated this problem his entire life, while philosophers like Husserl faced the same question; the relationships between logicism and historicism.

What answer did Weber try to give to the problem of the relationship between historicism and relativism in the social sciences?

Weber suggested a Kantian answer: he thought there were universal conditions for the construction of the historical object and that, through a sort of theoretical reflexivity, the specialists of the social sciences could make the theoretical conditions of objectivization operations their own. I proposed this solution, arguing that the antinomy in which one tries to confine the social sciences is more apparent than real, because they offer at once a way to historicize and to evade historicism. It’s true that the sociologist or the social historian

(which are the same thing) will lead the products of the human spirit – for example of mathematics or literature – back to the historical conditions of production, to the specific position occupied by the cultural producer, whether a philosopher or a mathematician, in the social universe of his time.

In all fields – law, literature, art, and so on – we have the same debate organized around the great opposition between those I shall call the “internalists” and the others. The former believe we can lead cultural creations back only to themselves; that is to say that in order to understand a text or a painting, the only reference can be the work alone. According to the Russian formalists, the reference is the space of the works insofar as they relate one to the other. For example, Lévi-Strauss, when he studies with Roman Jakobson a sonnet by Baudelaire, *Les chats*, *The Cats*, he studies it in and of itself, with no references to the historical context nor to Baudelaire’s works, in which we could find a dozen of poems about cats that could provide keys to understanding that particular sonnet. This internalist attitude is very common and has undergone a sort of update today. It’s an old opposition, born in the Middle Ages, according to which there are two categories of cultural producers: the *lectores*, i.e. the hermeneuts, the interpreters, the specialists of readings – and the *auctores*, the creators of reading material. The professors are *lectores* who read texts or paintings as if they were texts. In France, during structuralism, interpreters would say: “Now let’s read that painting.” They approached any cultural production as a text to decipher. “Deciphering” means that there’s a cipher, a code to reinvent in order to decode. “The work is in itself self-sufficient”: this is the philosophy of reading of most cultural producers, who think that their works contain their own keys and that there’s no need to look anywhere else in order to understand them.

The opposite position, a very classic one, often associated to Marxism, consists in leading the text back to historical conditions. This is the point of view of Goldmann in France or Lukács in the German tradition; in painting we have a great specialist of the 15th century, Frederick Antal. They’re very different scholars who work in very diverse fields. When we go slightly beyond our specialties, we notice that the same debates are taking place in the various disciplines.

In my opinion we can go beyond this debate by affirming that texts, or paintings, or anything else, exist independently from the conditions of their production, but that they also constitute a system. This is the great contribution of the Russian formalists: the texts of a particular period represent a system and to understand them we must start from a postulate of intertextuality; i.e. we need to think that texts speak between themselves.

When Foucault, for example, talks of “texts” he doesn’t only refer to written texts, but to culture as a whole: is he thinking of all cultural production and, perhaps, even of certain habits?

No, not habits! He asserts that cultural productions will be the cultural works, the treatises on law or linguistics. In one of his texts, published in *Cahiers pour l’Analyse* in the sixties, he argues that there is a “space of strategic possibilities,” i.e. the space of texts as a space for the possible modes of doing painting, science, and so on. It is important to clearly distinguish between this space of possibilities and of “mental habits” and “interests” from the space he calls “doxological.”

I think the space of texts is important: take, for example, the presence of a new poet who, around 1850, will have to confront the symbolist poets or Victor Hugo. He will have to situate himself in relation to his possibilities, to the various ways of doing poetry, and will take on one of these approaches or invent one of his own. But he will also be situated in a real space, a small autonomous space, the microcosm of the literary and artistic field. This is a social universe where poets compete with poets, mathematicians with mathematicians, historians with historians, sociologists with sociologists. Within every mini-universe there are permanent socially founded ways to think about, perceive and appreciate the world. There are also interests that push towards confuting a theorem, or saying “It’s no longer possible to do poetry in this way, we need something new.” To understand what happens in these universes of thought, we need to know at

once the space of the texts, of the possibilities a creator deals with, and the space of social struggles, of competition struggles, of struggles for priority. The history of the sciences, for example, is full of sinister stories: stolen ideas, plagiarism and so on. Here the problem of relativism presents itself in a different way: I think that the solution to this apparent contradiction comes from here. Practically all philosophers, especially in the 19th century, took as the focal point of their reflections the following question: “Without postulating the existence of a transcendent revelation, can we escape history? How can we tear away truths, values such as beauty or truth, from history without returning to a sort of Platonism, to essences of Truth, Beauty and Good?” I think that starting from this idea of field we can attempt an answer.

Let’s take, for example, mathematics, one of the most universal disciplines, in the sense that the field of mathematics is global: it is a field coextensive to the universe. Within it there are people fighting for Truth with particular weapons. To “kill” my opponent, if I’m a mathematician, I must confute him with a demonstration or a solution a little different from his. In the same way, if I want to “kill” my opponent being a jurist, I must use exclusively juridical arguments. Thanks to this autonomy, each universe has its own constitutional principle, its own fundamental law, different from that of the contiguous universe: the philosophical universe has a different *nomos* from the scientific. Very often the constitutional acts peculiar to each field are tautologies. Each universe has its original tautologies, a set of fundamental laws that must be accepted when you decide to become a member of that universe. But it’s not only a question of accepting to respect the laws; another requirement is having the competencies that allow you to accept these laws. In other words, you can only have access to a field if you have a certain knowledge, which is a condition for entering and being successful in the game.

If, as you say, each field is autonomous, does this imply that certain competencies can be considered universal? Is it these competencies that make a being a rational being?

This is a very complicated question. Unfortunately, very often when we fight against sociology we’re fighting something very primitive: the brutal reduction of cultural productions to the global social world. On the other hand, one of the merits of my way of doing sociology, a completely “abnormal” one, is linked to the fact that I recognize the specificity of each universe. Sadly, ordinary sociology, in particular the sociology of art, is identified with what I call the “external” tradition. When we talk of sociology of art, of literature or of science, we think of people like Lukács or Antal. For example, in the field of art, artistic production is traced back to the values and moral representations of those who commissioned works. This is how Antal, for example, operates: to understand 15th century painting we need to understand the representations and mental structures of the clients who commissioned these works. This is the ordinary vision, which I think destroys what’s essential: it forgets that starting from the 15th century painters had their own specific universe within which they referred to each other. They had achieved a certain autonomy, they signed their works, they had a specific culture. Another interesting fact is that they fought for their *nomos*, their manner or craftsmanship. In a wonderful book about this world, Antal quotes some discussions about contracts between painters and clients. One of the most expensive colors at the time was a blue known as ultramarine, which, as the name “beyond the sea” suggests, came from far away and was, like gold, extremely costly. At the time clients wanted executions worthy of their expenses, as if the painters were house decorators on whom to impose a certain price per square meter for a top quality work. But gradually the painters began to affirm that the value of a painting is not defined only by the quantity and the quality of the paints materially used, but also by the way the paints are used, by the form and the mastery of the form; in other words, the artist’s competency. We can therefore describe the entire historical process of painting as a sort of collective work by the painters, in competition with each other, to make form independent from content. All the way to abstract art, where the painter becomes the absolute master of his work, as requirements regarding object and matter no longer exist. Painting has freed itself from the impositions of both matter and work on commission.

Some sociologists, for example Marxist ones, could say that in the case of art the primacy of form over content began in the 15th century, when a market and a bourgeoisie developed.

Of course there are economic and social conditions that make it possible to have access to autonomy, but they are negative conditions. For autonomy and the claim to autonomy to appear, very particular conditions are necessary. It is true that a part of the “social actants” the various fields answered to, for example religions, disappear when, through the development of technology, science and the economy, the conditions for a certain type of response are abolished. This is something that has been discussed for various generations, but it is no longer a particularly interesting issue today. Marxists imposed interminable debates on the relations between base and superstructures, which today sound very old-fashioned. But even if these debates are no longer interesting, the fact remains that an autonomous field does not develop in a social void: negative conditions for development do exist. But it’s more interesting to look at what that microcosm consists of, how it starts to work and what happens when, instead of painting with their eyes fixed on the client, they point them at other painters. To say there’s a field means that when I speak or write as a sociologist or a philosopher my look is on reality, but also on the universe of other producers, who are my competitors. To have this look on the others I must have the specific competency that at once brings me close to the others and opposes me to them. For example, let’s consider the naïve painters, in particular Henry Rousseau, known as “the customs officer”: he entered the artistic game as an outcast. He paints, but he doesn’t really know what he’s doing: he copies the painters known as the “*pompier*s” and generally copies from everything, sometimes from fashion magazines like *L’Illustration*. As he’s quite maladroit, when painting he hides his hands; after all, he has his own spontaneous aesthetics. But he has some ambiguous friends, like Picasso and Apollinaire, who make fun of him, are very ceremonious with him, and at the same time establish him as a painter. Rousseau is hence established as a painter from the outside: he paints, but he doesn’t ultimately know what he’s doing. This is the law of fields: entering the field means already knowing the internal problems of the field.

For example, it’s very difficult for us sociologists when we talk to journalists or specialists of other fields, because their impression is that we deal with what everyone else deals with. They don’t see that we’re sociologists to the degree that we’re not naïve. We tackle the problems of actuality through systems of questions that are the product of the entire history of our discipline. Ultimately, what specifically defines belonging to a field is the mastery over the issues, over what’s under discussion, over what’s at play in it. So, this issue is historical. The questions I pose myself today are not the same Weber posed himself yesterday, even though my questions are included in his. The fact I’m up to date supposes I have knowledge of the previous debates, of the space of these debates. So, the issue is historical, it is dated, but it is also very autonomous in relation to history: i.e. it is not the direct product of the historical circumstances. One must know the entire history of the discipline: the more I am an authentic sociologist, the more will it be difficult for me to explain myself directly through the historical conditions of production, the more it will become necessary to refer to the fact that I’m in a determined space.

Which is the difference between the autonomy of the higher classes and that of the lower ones?

Autonomy isn’t necessarily linked to class membership. The autonomy I’m talking about is that of universes, of fields. For example, a space of production by artisans has many properties of its own, it can also function as a field: it has a tradition, a history, a learning, a training, it has field effects. To understand the production of each, it is necessary to know the opposition they occupy in the space of the field and how they situate themselves in relation to the others. There are more accomplished forms that correspond to the highest degree of autonomy, to the most eminent level of independence in relation to historical conditions: pure poetry, pure art, pure mathematics. These are social universes with an autonomy that goes back to the past, with a rupture with the surrounding historical world dating back to a very long time ago, so to understand what happens in them we must consider centuries of progressive accumulation. It’s here, particularly in the field of art, that internalist theories developed. Kantian philosophy is a daughter of art, it

is the very type of the definition internalist; but these formulations developed later. For example in Eliot, in Valéry, we find internalist formulations on the basis of which we can say that to understand a poem by Mallarmé we need not bring up peasant strikes or other struggles, the 1833 Anzin riots, the crisis of the iron and steel industry: we must only look at it in itself. But in this way we fail to see the paradox that these works assume: they are challenges to historicization because they are the product of a history that is the history of a progressive liberation from history. This is what we're talking about. And so, when someone looks at a monochrome by Klee, a completely black painting, the common-sense person will say that his son does the same kind of thing. To be able to understand that the monochrome is a work of art one must have a historical culture that places it among the historical inventions in relation to which it is situated. Therefore, artistic inventions are always relational inventions. The metaphor by Merleau-Ponty on the organism comes to mind. He fought against the theory of reflexes, according to which a response follows a stimulus; instead, as we have a field, there is a stimulus, but the reaction deriving from it supposes all history, the history of everything. Merleau-Ponty said it's like when we dial a telephone number: the fifth number assumes a sense in function of the four previous. Here things are similar: there's a historical series of which contemporary works are the product. These historical series are present in the last number, and to understand the last number we need to know an entire history, surpassed and preserved from the last action.

For example, the entire history of poetry is a series of ruptures, of liberations: this goes for meter and other stylistic aspects, all the way to forms of art increasingly cleansed from their original bonds. Ultimately, the idea of field is very important to indicate that, for example, an independent poetic reason exists. There are authors, instead, who believe that all historical reasons should lead back to a "historical reason," to an "economic reason," as in the case of economism. These are forms of reductionism; that is, every reason is led back to the economic reason. The economy has its logic and the economic field has constituted itself like all the others and its fundamental law is *business is business*. The reductionists are often defined as sociologists, but in my opinion they are merely butchers who reduce specific reasons to a general reason.

Some sociologists want to reduce society to certain acts or products of reasonable rational men, but not in the strictly economic sense. They mean that what in society and in human life may come across as irrational, far from us and our civilization, can be explained in rational terms because social actors are in any case people who have reason. What is your answer to this approach that tends to universalize history in relation to a common basic rationality?

I think there's at least one invariable definable "economy principle," or referable to the Leibnizian principle of the *optimum*. In short, it's the principle of optimization, that is maximizing the yield of a rare resource. Then we can consider this economy principle common to all economies. I'll borrow an example from Weber. He says that, at a certain point, religions rationalize because a rationalization process occurs. I think the weakest part of Weber's work is precisely this idea of a rationalization process according to which human history tends towards Reason. It really comes across to me as flawed philosophy of history: on the contrary, I think we should speak of "autonomization." To return to the example of the rationalization of religions, Weber speaks of the so-called "prayer wheel." Some people have a particular relationship with divinity that we can describe, according to Voltaire's vision, as a "*Do ut des*" exchange: I shall give to the divinity so that it will give me something in return. The more I pray, the more favors will I receive from the divinity. This is in itself a kind of economy. It is still in any case a sociology of religion, though one that is too simple. The "prayer wheel" marks a sort of industrialization of prayer: homespun prayer, like saying the rosary, becomes industrial prayer, with a tool allowing us to pray more in less time.

It is true that all the interpretations we can offer of human conducts, in my opinion, suppose the postulate of rationality in this sense. I shall take the example of honor behaviors. In certain Mediterranean societies we find revenge behaviors: if my brother has been killed, I must kill the brother of the person who killed him. Or behaviors of sexual honor: if my sister has been insulted, I must take revenge against whoever insulted her. Or, through my sister's wedding, I must obtain prestigious allies that will bring me honor. All these

behaviors have a very particular economy, a deeply anti-economic one. One principle, for example, is that to win one must lose. It's a case of *potlatch*.

Could you explain the concept of potlatch?

Potlatch is an extreme example of exchanging gifts. We constantly exchange gifts: I give to you and you give to me and, generally, you're obliged to give me a little more. *Potlatch* is a very strange exchange in which the giver crushes the receiver: the former gives the latter so much that the former will never be able to reciprocate. Apparently the giver loses a lot, but, when all is said and done, he gains much more. I say that he loses in terms of economic capital, but gains in symbolic capital: in terms of honor and prestige.

Norbert Elias tells a very beautiful story: a nobleman gives his son a bag full of crowns and after a while the boy, undoubtedly contaminated by the bourgeois Jansenist morals that were beginning to develop at the time, proudly tells his father that he has not spent a single one and returns the bag. The father takes it and throws the crowns out of the window: "You must learn to spend money!"; a nobleman must be generous. In other words, there exists an economy of the symbolic which is the negation of the economic economy, in which throwing money out of the window means making a gain. You have to make losses on one table in order to make gains on another. But make what gains? Honor, prestige, nobility. But is there then in this economy with its reasons, in this symbolic economy of honor, the antinomy of the economy of Benjamin Franklin, of calculation and interest, the same reason that's at play in Franklin's economy? This economy of economic calculation seem opposed to that of anti-calculation. Being generous means not calculating. But isn't it just another way of calculating? Do I possibly know, though in a confused way, that losses on one ground mean profits on another? In other terms, I tend to believe that there's an universality of reason, intended as an economic principle, as a principle of optimization.

Some philosophers and sociologists think that reason is historical and that, therefore, there are changes in reason itself.

No: in reason we don't simply have the principle of optimality. It seems to me that to understand behaviors we need to postulate the fact that people do nothing for nothing, that there's a sort of economy. So, today the problem is to find out whether starting from this very poor principle, which leads to the theories of rational action, we can understand human behaviors. At this point I would positively say no. What we must postulate is equivalent to saying: "People aren't crazy." People don't do absolutely anything, there exists in any case a principle of sufficient reason. Nothing, among all the things a man does, is without reason. But there are in any case extreme situations when we resort to violence. In these extreme situations, men or women find themselves confronting objective conditions that are so outrageous that even the principle of sufficient reason may be wiped out. I'm thinking of forms of gratuitous violence we sometimes witness; for example, kids burning cars. Here we must be careful not to project our rationalist philosophy, which makes us accept this principle of sufficient reason in people who are not in adequate historical conditions to apply it. Therefore, there are cases in which this principle does not work.

If we wanted to save your principle of rational behavior, we would manage to do so in any case. We could say that even the young vandals you mentioned behave violently to assume the role of heroes, at least to the eyes of other youngsters. In any act, however crazy, it's always possible to find a rationality.

I think we can safely say so. One important element I try to systematically introduce into sociology is a reflection principle: we must always reflect ourselves when reflecting. In particular, we should reflect on the historical conditions of the production of the historical instruments we use to think about the world. In these

cases I would say: “Be careful, you’re faced with a violent phenomenon. As you must find some causes immediately, then say that the violence is related to unemployment, or to this, or to that.” I wonder, instead, whether in certain cases we shouldn’t make a sort of *epoché* before the issue of reasons. This is all I’m saying. I hope someone will confute it, because I believe that scientific intention consists in finding reasons. It supposes that one will at least be able to account for things. “To account for” means to explain. «I account for a phenomenon» means giving reason to it. That the behavior was apparently absurd; these were the achievements of Mauss, Durkheim and Lévi-Strauss.

Let’s take rituals: they seem to have no head or tail. But though apparently incoherent, with no logical sense, they do have a reason. In the sense in which we say a mathematical series has a reason: if we look at it in a certain way, we notice that it is not a hodgepodge. This, in my opinion, is the principle every man of science tacitly accepts. But it’s not what the theorists of rational thinking say. They affirm that there’s always a universal reason. Gary Becker, to explain marriage in Italy or France, says: “Work it out in terms of costs and benefits and everything will become clear.” I say that these are hyper-simplifications.

You argue that a historical criterion may be applied to the social sciences too, and that therefore even the knowledge of the sociologist, which is supposed to be objective, is relativized. Sociology is not a pure neutral knowledge of the world, but it is produced historically. What can we say about this argument?

I think that sociology, like all cultural production, produces itself in an autonomous field and is subject to certain rules. Derrida argues that I want to restore for sociology the position Comte gave it, as the science of sciences. I do not. I think that sociology is in a particular position, in the sense that the sociologist can take his own conditions of production as object. The sociologist says to the philosopher: “Careful, you make *epoché*, you don’t produce any theses that you don’t then question.” Philosophers very often forget to question the premises related to their social condition of production, i.e. the fact that they belong to a certain era, that they’re the product of a philosophical tradition, of a philosophical universe, of a scholastic system; they have historical categories in their heads. But what the sociologist does to others he can do to himself: therefore he will interrogate every type of knowledge, not only on the conditions of pure possibility, but also on the historical and social conditions for asking questions and the way to answer them. I think the sociologist can objectivize the objectivizing subject, and not only in others. Sociology is seen as a polemical instrument, as Marxism very often has been: an instrument of simplistic objectivization, an instrument for fighting. In fact it isn’t an instrument for fighting others, it’s an instrument for fighting oneself; it’s an instrument through which we can objectivize the conditions in which it objectivizes itself. I’m not sure this can be completely achieved, but we can make an effort to achieve it.

I published a book, *Homo Academicus*; an attempt to define the limits of sociological intelligence taking as object the social field of which this intelligence is the product. In practice, through objectivization techniques, through the use of statistics, mathematical techniques and correspondence analysis, I try to capture, objectively, the universe in which my thoughts and I myself have the possibility of being reproduced in the diagram. This space is both an object of sociological knowledge and the place of determinations that may weigh on the subject who constructed the object. In other terms, one of the problems we concretely pose ourselves in research is the complicated relationship between cognitive subject, theoretical subject and empiric subject: there’s a sort of split personality. For example, in my diagram of the French field in 1967 I situate myself in a certain point, but that’s not me, it’s the empirical Bourdieu defined by the empiric properties, by his social regime, his studies, the qualifications he obtained. Then there’s a cognitive or epistemic Bourdieu who constructs the empirical Bourdieu with whom he tries to break off relations, even if the empirical Bourdieu continues to exist. It’s a very complicated problem: it’s the problem of theoretical posture. Is there the possibility of making a theory of theoretical posture and, above all, can we can talk in a theoretical way of the posture I assume when I’m not being theoretical? It’s a field bristling with paradoxes and, in fact, it’s the same type of difficulty logicians struggle with.

Can we say that what you call “autonomization” is the condition of a subjectivization? That is to say, only when something autonomizes itself is a dialogue between participants really possible. This is also the condition of a subjectivizable social life.

Yes, absolutely. I think, for example, that the universe of rational dialogue of which Habermas speaks is not a given but a historical construction. In this sense, I disagree with Habermas, who is a Kantian in a different sense from me. I look for the social conditions of possibility, he looks for the transcendentals. Instead I think that reason is actually historical and that the historical conditions for the appearance of a rational subjectivity exist. In other words, I think the subject the classic theories of knowledge give themselves is a historical construction: i.e. it doesn't fail to have notable consequences. I once had a discussion with Habermas, who tends to think that, being a sociologist, I'm a historicist, and hence a relativist; I told him that he's an absolutist. Indeed, we can distinguish between ourselves when I say that reason is a historical product and, as such, it is an achievement, and that, therefore, a rational politics of Reason is possible.

The defenders of the person see me as a sort of scientist because they say I reject the subjectivity of social agents, in particular of intellectuals, who instead are of great help. I respond by saying that I try to understand the conditions under which we can have possibilities of being subjects of our own thoughts. I think at the condition of knowing that who thinks nine times out of ten is an empirical Bourdieu. In addition, I have the slightest possibility to have some freedoms in relation to this empirical Bourdieu, thus becoming an epistemic Bourdieu, i.e. a subject. I think that among all the social categories intellectuals are the biggest victims of the illusion of freedom, the illusion of the non-determination of social conditions; it is an illusion due to social reasons. But this illusion of freedom is the worst thing, because it is through this that intellectuals are socially determined. So, discovering that we're determined by our preceptors, by our teachers, by our professors and, even more so, by our social class, is perhaps the only way to give ourselves a possibility of being subjects, however slight. Perhaps it's the only way of achieving the slightest possibility for a true dialogue that is not simply, like in Plato, an “endoxic” dialogue, as Aristotle would have called it, a dialogue applauded only by those who share more or less the same *doxa*, the same opinion.

Publication Date:

November 24, 2019