Pierre Bourdieu

SOCIOLIGISTS OF BELIEF AND BELIEFS
OF SOCIOLOGISTS
Translated by Véronique Altglas and Matthew Wood

What I am going to say are some of those things that everybody already knows – and they will not fail to tell me so. I believe, however, that it is worth taking pains to say them and to hear them said. I definitely mean pain. Because it is about things that cause pain, both to the one who says them and to those who hear them. And yet they are good to say, not as a sort of masochistic self-punishment often identified with political or scientific clear thinking, but for properly scientific reasons.

I would like to say, before beginning, that I do not wish to play the accuser – indeed I do not see by what right and in whose name I could do that. Nothing is more horrifying to me than spontaneous and ordinary Zhdanovism’s inquisitorial use of the questioning of the social determinants of scientific production. Most of the time, questioning the interest of others is only a transparent mask of resentment and it is not by chance that it is so often used as a defensive instrument by those threatened with scientific devaluation. On the contrary, I would like to show that the sociology of sociology, on condition that it is used by researchers themselves to understand their own scientific practice and not as a defence against the questioning inflicted upon them by the productions of others, is an instrument of intellectual, and perhaps also personal, liberation. By this I mean that the act of making public things that are said on the sly, as tittle-tattle, in the disputes of daily life, can have a considerable effect: by stripping from them what may be slightly shameful so long as they are only named in the half-calumnies of daily gossip (‘Him? But he was a priest’, or ‘Him? But he wrote in La Croix’, etc.); and by constituting them, for others and for the interested party, as inevitable social properties which cannot in themselves be used to discredit cultural production, especially when this shows all the visible signs of control of, and breaks from, the attachments implied by these properties. As professional classifiers, we all belong to categories and are liable to be judged by categorems. That is to say, we are all potentially the accused (katégoresthat, I tirelessly repeat, means to accuse publicly).

Without doubt, many sociologists have been led to sociology, more or less consciously (and a priori I do not exclude myself), by the more or less conscious project of settling scores, of classifying, which can be only a means of insulting (‘you’re only a…’). I think that a mature social science must be capable of mastering its social impulses. And
this, it seems to me is the principal function of the sociology of sociology: to allow each sociologist to know a bit more about what he involves in his sociology. This is why I wanted to say what I am going to say here; that is to say, in front of sociologists of religion, in their presence, in other words with them and not against them, behind their backs, softly-softly, in secret (we often confuse the sociology of science with gossip in corridors); and publicly, that is to say, openly, thereby proving that these things can be said and are worth saying, and said, as we say, face-to-face, to face up to, as the Kabyles say; that is to say, with respect. To end this preamble, I would simply say that part of our truth, perhaps the most important, is written on our backs – without being limited to only what others say and write behind our backs – and it seems to me very important to try to see and read what is written on this notice that we all carry. For my part, I would like to know what this is very much, and in particular everything that will undoubtedly be very obvious to future sociologists of science.

Is there a sociology of belief? I have decided not to deviate, but to reformulate the question: can the sociology of religion as it is practised today, that is to say by producers who participate to various degrees in the religious field, be a genuine scientific sociology? And my answer is: ‘with difficulty’; that is to say, only on condition that it comes with a scientific sociology of the religious field. But such a sociology is a very difficult venture, not because the religious field is more difficult to analyse than any other (although those involved have an interest in making others believe this), but because when we are part of it we share something of the belief inherent to belonging to a field, whatever field it is (religious, academic, etc.), and when we are not part of it we risk, firstly, failing to include belief in our model, etc. (I will come back to this) and, secondly, depriving ourselves of some useful information.

Illusio

What does it consist of, this belief involved in belonging to the religious field? The question is not to know, as we often pretend, whether those who practise sociology of religion have faith or not, nor even whether they belong to the Church or not. Leaving aside the problem of faith in God, in the Church, and in all that the Church teaches and guarantees, it is about posing the problem of investment in the object, of adherence linked to a form of belonging, and of knowing what belief, understood in this sense, contributes to determine the relationship to the scientific object, to determine the investments in this object and the choice of this object. It is not about subjecting sociologists to an interrogation or even to an ethico-political inquisition; it is for each sociologist of religion to ask, in the interest of their own research, when he speaks about religion, whether he wants to understand the struggles in which religious things are at stake, or to take part in these struggles. This question is all the more difficult to resolve because, in the religious field, that is to say in the object itself, there are people who use sociology to conduct struggles internal to that field. The scientific limits of this objectively-involved sociology follow from the fact that it does not recognise itself as such, that it does not know from which point of the religious field it is produced and
what it owes to being produced from that point. So, for example, among the Church’s dignitaries, oblates had an interest in recognising the aristocratic principle of leftist positions – in the style of the bishop of Créteil – in order to take up a central position, that is to say a dominant one, between two bourgeois-aristocratic deviations of left and right. In doing so, they ignored the global space in which they situated themselves – although they knew how to operate in it in practice.5

We are beginning to understand better which belief I want to talk about: it is the belief associated with belonging to the religious field, what I call illusio; in other words, the investment in this game, associated with specific interests and profits characteristic to this field and the particular stakes it offers. Religious faith in the ordinary sense has nothing to do with properly religious interest in the sense in which I understand it; that is to say, the fact of having something to do with religion, with the Church, with bishops, with what is said about it, with taking sides for this theologian against the dicasteri, etc. (of course the same thing could be said for Protestantism or Judaism). Interest, in its true sense, is what is important to me, what makes differences for me (which do not exist for an indifferent observer because it is all the same to him); it is a differential judgement oriented not only by the ends of knowledge. Practical interest is an interest in the object’s existence or non-existence (the inverse of aesthetic disinterest according to Kant, and of science which puts existential interest into abeyance): it is an interest in objects whose existence and persistence directly or indirectly command my existence and my social persistence, my social identity and position.

If the problem is posed with particular acuteness in the case of religion, it is because the religious field is, like all fields, a universe of belief, but in which it is a question of belief. The belief that the institution organises (belief in God, in dogma, etc.) tends to mask the belief in the institution, the obsequium, and all the interests associated with the reproduction of the institution. Even more so as the boundary of the religious field has become blurred (we have bishops who are sociologists), and as we might believe we have left the field without really having done so. Investments in the religious field can survive the loss of faith or even a break, more or less declared, with the Church. This is the paradigm of the former priest who has unfinished business with the institution (the science of religion is straight away rooted in this sort of relationship of bad faith). He goes too far, and the cleric knows what he is doing: his fury, indignation and rebellion are marks of interest. His very combat proves that he is still part of it. This negative, critical interest can orientate all research and be experienced as purely scientific interest thanks to the confusion between the scientific attitude and the critical (leftist) attitude in the religious field.

This is not how it works

The interest linked to belonging is associated with a form of interested, practical knowledge, which is denied to those who are not part of it. To protect themselves against the effects of science (or, when it concerns sociologists, against scientific competition), those who are part of it tend to make belonging the necessary and sufficient condition...
of adequate knowledge. This argument is very commonly used, and in very different social contexts, in order to discredit any external knowledge (‘you cannot understand’, ‘it must be experienced’, etc.). We can object that if, to know certain things, we must be part of it, when we are part of it we are neither necessarily willing nor able (for we know the difficulty involved in the work of making explicit what goes without saying) to know them scientifically and to make them known. That said, the argument contains an element of truth: to begin with, because the objectivist sociologist - that is to say, a person who is in all likelihood indifferent by position or will to the stakes of the game he describes – is likely to omit taking into account in his analysis the belief that he had to ignore in order to construct his object as such, and to have little inclination and ability to recreate in the description the enchanted experience, the *illusio*, which is associated with belonging. When a native facing objective analysis says ‘this is not how it works’, he is pointing out two things. On the one hand, since the analysis is reduced to scientifically relevant features, it leaves out little details, little nothings – that is to say, all the things that prevent the eyes of native curiosity from seeing the wood for the trees, all the little knowledges that we only have if we are interested in them at first hand if we enjoy a complicit pleasure in collecting them, memorising them, and thesaurising them (the best fieldwork ethnologists are hounded by this temptation of regressing to native curiosity, which is an end in itself, and it is not always easy to differentiate, in the discourse of sociologists of religion, between what is an amateur native’s anecdotal information and what is expert knowledge – the same could be said for politics). And the critical reservations of the ‘native’ reading are perfectly understandable if we know that in any group the possession of fully up-to-date anecdotal information is valued less as evidence of competence and knowledge than as evidence of recognition, of investment in the game, of *compliance*, of subjective belonging, of true interest in the group and in its naive, innate interests (we know the role played in reunions by interrogation – implying knowledge of surnames, first names or nicknames, and the interests that go with them – about common acquaintances, as well as the exchange of memories and anecdotes in the upkeep of relationships in families, schools, etc.).

On the other hand, the reluctance of the native, sometimes expressed in criticisms of specialists bound to their object by a ‘naïve’ interest, contains an important question that bears on the philosophy of history or the action that the observer is engaged in more or less consciously: it reminds us that the structural effects reconstituted by the analyst – through a process analogous to moving from a nearly infinite number of pathways *à la carte* to a model capable of grasping all the paths at a single glance – are achieved in practice only through apparently contingent events, seemingly singular actions, thousands of infinitesimal adventures, the integration of which engenders the ‘objective’ meaning apprehended by the objective analyst. If it is not possible for the analyst to reconstitute and enact restitution of the innumerable actions and interactions in which innumerable agents have invested their specific interests, which are totally foreign in intention to the result to which they have nevertheless contributed (loyalty to a company, a school, a journal, an association, rivalries, friendships, etc.), all these singular events, associated with proper names, singular circumstances in which the
Pierre Bourdieu: Sociologist of belief and beliefs of sociologists

native’s outlook is (happily) immersed, then the analyst must at least know and recall that the most global tendencies and the most general constraints only come about through the utmost particularity and chance, in (apparently) random encounters, seemingly fortuitous liaisons and relationships that shape the singularity of biographies. It is against the reductive brutality of the foreign observer that all of this is invoked, more or less clearly, by the native and the person who could be called ‘the original sociologist’ (by analogy with Hegel’s ‘original historian’) who, ‘living in the spirit of the event’, assumes the presuppositions of those whose history he relates – which explains why it is so often impossible for him actually to objectify his quasi-native experience, to write and publish it.

I will not speak about those who go so far as to consider native knowledge as a sufficient condition for adequate knowledge, for example all the former members of the P.C. who grant themselves a sort of statutory monopoly of knowledge about the P.C. (thus playing the game of P.C. members who have a vital interest in strengthening the in/out, communist/anti-communist dichotomy: the anti-communism of ex-communists, who remain invested in the game, is one of the best protections for the communist apparatus against scientific objectivation). In fact, all misunderstandings arise from locking ourselves into the alternative between the partial and the impartial, between the interested and partisan insider and the neutral and objective outsider, between the compliant (if not conniving) view and the reductive vision, ignoring that militant unbelief can be just an inversion of belief and, above all, that there is space for participant objectivation, which presupposes an objectivation of participation and of everything implied by this, which is to say a conscious control of interests associated with belonging and non-belonging. Scientific sociology of religion presupposes an objectivation as complete as possible of the field within which it produces itself, and of the position in this field of the person who produces it.

Double belonging and double play

From being an obstacle to objectivation, belonging can become an aid to the objectivation of the limits of objectivation, on condition that it is itself objectified and controlled. It is on condition that we know we belong to the religious field, with its related interests (and who can say they do not belong to it, at least negatively through non-indifference?), that we can control the effects of this belonging and draw out the necessary experience and information to produce a non-reductive objectivation that is capable of moving beyond the alternative of the inside and the outside, of blind attachment and partial lucidity. But this movement presupposes an objectivation, without compliance (self-analysis is nothing like a public or private confession or ethico-political self-criticism), of all bonds, of all forms of participation, of objective and subjective belonging, even the most tenuous. I am thinking of the most paradoxical forms of belonging, because they are negative or critical and often associated with past belonging, of all the adherences and ambivalences associated with the fact of having been part of it, of having been through the seminary, major or minor, of being or having been a seminarian or priest, etc. The
epistemological break, in this case, works through a social break, which itself supposes
a (painful) objectivation of bonds and attachments. One can belong to the religious field
and do scientific sociology of religion, but on condition of knowing this belonging and
its effects, instead of concealing them, in the first place from oneself. The sociology of
sociologists does not take its inspiration from any polemical or juridical intention, but
only aims at rendering visible some of the most powerful social obstacles to scientific
production. To refuse the objectivation of adherences, and the painful amputation this
calls for, to spare oneself the suffering inscribed in the break from adherences, is to condemn oneself to play the socially and psychologically profitable double play that allows one to accumulate the profits of (apparent) scientificity and of religiosity.

I think this temptation of the double play and double profit especially threatens specialists
of the great universal religions, Catholics who study Catholicism, Protestants who study
Protestantism, Jews who study Judaism (we have not remarked upon the rarity of cross-
studies – Catholics studying Judaism and conversely – or of comparative studies): in this
case, there is a serious danger of producing a sort of edifying science, destined to be used
as the foundation of an erudite religiosity, allowing accumulation of the profits of scientific lucidity and the profits of religious fidelity.

This ambiguous relationship betrays itself in its language, and notably by introducing
into the heart of erudite discourse words borrowed from religious language,
through which slip in the ‘default assumptions’9, as Douglas Hofstadter says, the tacit
presuppositions of the native relationship to the object. An example of such a presup-
position is the propensity to treat beliefs as mental representations or discourses and to
forget that, even among the defenders of a religion purified from all ritualism, to which
sociologists of religion are sociologically very close, and among these sociologists
themselves, religious fidelity is rooted (and survives) in sub-verbal, sub-conscious dis-
positions, in the folds of the body and turns of phrase, when it is not found in diction
and pronunciation; that the body and language are full of sluggish beliefs, and that reli-
gious (or political) belief is firstly a bodily hexis associated with a linguistic habitus.

We could show, according to this logic, that the whole debate about ‘popular religion’,
like so many discussions in which the ‘people’ and the ‘popular’ are in play, finds its
basis in presuppositions inherent in an ill-analysed relationship with one’s own repre-
sentation of belief and religion. This prevents one from perceiving that the relative
importance of mental representation, theatrical representation and ritual mimesis
varies with social class and level of education; and that the religiosity of popular
classes is scandalous in the eyes of the ‘virtuosos’ of religious consciousness (as well
as of aesthetic consciousness) because, in its ritualistic automatisms, it is undoubtedly
reminiscent of the arbitrariness of social conditioning that is at the basis of the belie-
vary’s dispositions.

In the end, the sociology of the social determinants of sociological practice appears
as the only means to accumulate, other than in the fictional conciliations of the double
play, the profits of belonging, of participation, and the profits of exteriority, of separa-
tion and of objectifying distance.

To finish, I want to say again that the sociology of sociology does not want to be,
and should not be, a falsely sublimated form of everyday disputes and that, far from
summoning any condemnation upon this or that person, or upon the group, it would at least like to have the virtue of enabling everyone to face up to their social determinants – which does not mean accepting them – and to resolutely affirm their interests, by controlling and scientifically reformulating these, which are only able to become interests of reason on condition that it is clear for anyone animated by them that, at least initially, they are never completely based on reason.

Notes


3 A widely-read French Catholic daily newspaper.

4 A term used in Aristotelian philosophy to mean categories.

5 In the context of the text this refers to the Catholic Church, but it can be taken in the more generic sense as any religious organisation.

6 This sentence refers to an article Bourdieu wrote with Monique de Saint Martin, ‘La sainte famille. L’épiscopat français dans le champ du pouvoir’, Actes de la Recherche en Sciences Sociales, 1982, No. 44–45, pp. 2–53. This compares the social trajectory of three generations of Catholic bishops in Twentieth Century France, emphasising competition and power in the Church. It distinguishes between two co-existing populations in the French episcopate. On the one hand, the ‘oblates’, who coming from a rather rural, poor and traditionalist background are devoted to the institution that has given them education, respectability and status. On the other hand, the ‘inheritors’ who, before being ordained, already possessed social capital through their bourgeois or aristocratic background, with the result that they have a more distanced relationship with the institution and could be more liberal and modernist, such as affirming solidarity with the working class. Interestingly, this article already noted the Church’s use of sociology to present itself as a socially homogeneous institution, and criticised the sociology of religion for participating in hiding this ‘clerical struggle’ (p. 16).

7 Parti Communiste, the French Communist Party.

8 In English in the original text.

9 In English in the original text; Hofstadter is an American cognitive scientist.

10 In this context, Bourdieu is addressing the community of French sociologists of religion who, at that time, predominantly belonged to the Groupe de Sociologie des Religions (GSR; now known as the Groupe Sociétés Religions Laïcités).