

**BOOK REVIEW**

# Bourdieu & Chartier: Sociologist and Historian

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Pierre Bourdieu and Roger Chartier: *The Sociologist and the Historian*, translated by David Fernbach

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This slim volume consists of the edited transcripts of five interviews of sociologist Pierre Bourdieu conducted by historian Roger Chartier in December 1987 (broadcast in January 1988 on the French radio program *À voix nue*), along with an introduction added recently by Chartier. The interviews were previously published in French in 2010 as *Le Sociologue et l'historien* (Éditions Agone, Marseille, & Raisons d'Agit, Paris), and have been translated very effectively into English by David Fernbach. In his introduction, Chartier seeks to contextualize the interviews by locating them in the chronological development of Bourdieu's work and its public reception, and in the development of the discipline of history in France and its engagement with the social sciences. Because of the title and the co-authorship implied in the attribution of this text, the reader might expect a dialogue of ideas between scholars and disciplines on a more equitable ground, but instead Chartier is constrained by his position as the interviewer, and the encounters dwell on Bourdieu's thoughts and concepts. Indeed, Chartier brings unique reflections to the interviews, and serves as an excellent interviewer, but it is Bourdieu's conceptual framework that is debated throughout, and not Chartier's own contributions to historiography and the history of written culture.

Bourdieu and Chartier reflect on the nature, constitution, and uses of "fields" and "habitus" especially, among many of Bourdieu's other concepts and claims. There are, for example, productive discussions of the constitution and transformation of scientific and artistic fields, of the sociology of intellectuals, and of the possibilities of scientific progress, which draw heavily from Bourdieu's (previously or soon-to-have-been) published studies. The reader also encounters interesting reflections on Bourdieu's relationship to the work of other scholars, including Michel Foucault and Norbert Elias, that are perhaps unique. The text is enlivened by anecdotes and examples from Bourdieu's own life, and Bourdieu offers interpretations of his published work as well as sociological reflections on its polarized reception. In his introduction, Chartier argues that the real virtue of the interview format is in reviving Bourdieu's way of thinking in real time, and in recording him in a context freed from the various academic and political roles he was compelled to play.

In particular, Chartier's introduction highlights the "anxiety" that Bourdieu evidently felt in his efforts to understand the incomprehension of, as well as the violent resistance to, his work. There are glimpses in the interviews of Bourdieu seeking to convey how his self-reflexive sociology puts him in the position of seeking simultaneously to carry on discourses at several levels. In one interview, he draws from Gaston Bachelard's characterization of the use of "quotation marks" in science to help make his point (p. 16): sociologists engage in recording value judgments as social facts, for example, and so put those judgments in quotation marks, simultaneously claiming them and disclaiming or seeking to comment upon them. Sociology, for Bourdieu, attempts both to "preserve and destroy" distinctions in its analysis, and always maintains a running "metadiscourse" that implicitly warns, "Be careful what you read" (p. 18). He acknowledges the "impossible" situations that confront researchers who attempt to study the social worlds they, themselves, inhabit, and he underscores the skepticisms that plague the social sciences.

Still, there is much more to this volume than a revived sense of Bourdieu's thoughts and anxieties, and Chartier sells himself (and Bourdieu) short if we miss the work these two scholars undertake to conceptualize the relationship between sociology and history, and in particular to use history as a crucial proving-ground for Bourdieu's concepts. These aspects of the interviews will appeal to historians and sociologists of the social sciences, even if the discussions serve to raise many more questions than they answer. At several points in the interviews Bourdieu and Chartier challenge the taken-for-grantedness of the classificatory schemes of investigators, whether they are historians anachronistically applying contemporary notions to historical problems or sociologists ethnocentrically applying their class-based notions to other groups in contemporary society; both disciplines alike must continually take up the task of "questioning one's own system of questioning" (p. 13) as the very object of their analysis.

Chartier argues that Bourdieu's notion of "field," in particular, provides a tool for conceptualizing historical discontinuities lying beneath apparent continuities, and for preventing the "reductionist naiveties" of historians who directly relate social positions to cultural practices without examining the "mediations" or reformulations between position and practice imposed by the state of a field (pp. 62, 74). In these endeavors, Chartier argues, historians and sociologists have a common object of analysis: the conditions of emergence of social fields. These two interlocutors also consider the challenges of conceptualizing long-term processes in terms of fields, and one particularly novel, but inadequately resolved, direction of their discussion is whether scholars can use the notion of shifting and differentiating fields to understand discourses that are, in some sense, "about" the same thing but employ different languages and practices available in the fields of different contexts. Chartier uses Molière's theatre and Bourdieu uses Flaubert's novel as examples of "discourse about the social world" before the differentiation of a "sociological" field (pp. 74-8). This leads to further, although relatively brief, reflections on the work that "form" or "mode of writing" (including the various forms of narration and evocation) does in objectivating reality in different ways.

Even though Bourdieu and Chartier challenge simplistic distinctions between the disciplines of history and sociology, across the interviews they both seem to propose that the stance taken toward the objects of analysis in the two fields, and the reactions that those stances provoke publically, are very different. History takes its object to be "always at a remove" and the interests of the subjects of its analysis as of "a different order" from those of the investigators (p. 45). This stance "neutralizes," or provides "protection" from the radical challenge of social analysis, even allowing it to function as a discourse that "comforts and reassures" – "supplying roots, references, identities to those who perhaps feel a lack of these" – or as Bourdieu quips, writing history books becomes the "production



of Christmas presents” (pp. 5, 45-7). Sociology lacks the claim to neutralizing distance, and instead takes as its object the “present” in the sense of whatever is “still sufficiently alive to be the object of struggles,” even when that includes past events such as the French Revolution (p. 16). It is constituted as a discipline, then, in a provocative stance toward ongoing struggles, leading the discipline to be subjected to a “permanent test” of justifying its existence, and obliging it (at least potentially) to “a permanent lucidity about its own existence” (p. 48). This distinction between social phenomena objectivated either as “past” or as “present” is certainly intriguing, but its problematics and implications, perhaps especially for endeavors in “historical sociology” or “contemporary history,” deserve to be further worked out.