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## In Praise of Sociology: Acceptance Speech for the Gold Medal of the CNRS

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*Sociology* 2013 47: 7

DOI: 10.1177/0038038513475577

The online version of this article can be found at:

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# In Praise of Sociology: Acceptance Speech for the Gold Medal of the CNRS<sup>1</sup>

Sociology  
47(1) 7–14  
© The Author(s) 2013  
DOI: 10.1177/0038038513475577  
soc.sagepub.com  


**Pierre Bourdieu**

Collège de France

Mr Minister, Mr Director, my dear colleagues:

Honors and distinctions, which should only reassure, have upon me the power to awaken disquiet and a definite feeling of indignity. But they cannot undermine my profound certainty that sociology and sociologists are fully worthy of the recognition that, through me, the scientific community is bestowing upon them. It is this conviction that I would like to share with you tonight by taking advantage of this opportunity to speak before the highest authorities of science and politics, and before the most eminent representatives of journalism, to try and answer some of the questions, often critical, that are customarily raised about that science.

Yet I would not want this apology for sociology to remain an academic exercise wholly devoid of real effects. So I would like, for a moment, to act as the spokesperson for all sociologists, or at least for all those who have told me of their pride in seeing their science thus consecrated, and to ask, in a kind of solemn petition, that French sociology, which is universally recognized as one of the best in the world, benefit from all the advantages, symbolic but also material, associated with genuine recognition. I think in particular of all those who enter the craft today and who must often live by their wits during the most decisive years of their scientific existence, without any assurance that they will one day find the teaching or research position fit to give them decent working conditions.

I wish – I shall not try to hide it – that the blessings that I call upon sociology would go first to all those who have teamed up with me, at one time or another, at the Centre de sociologie européenne and the Centre de sociologie de la culture et de l'éducation.<sup>2</sup> Most of them are here tonight and I would like to be able to name them individually so as to express publicly my indebtedness and my full gratitude. I would also like to erase all traces of the difficulties that we have encountered, both within and without, and that arose, I am convinced, from the fact that we tried, in the manner of the Durkheimians, to develop a style of collective work perhaps incompatible with the traditions and expectations of an intellectual world still wedded to the literary logic, with its mundane



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alternatives between the singular and the common, the novel and the *déjà vu*, that foster the presumptuousness of petty masters and the search for originality at all costs.

I would like to give pride of place to those who participated with me to the somewhat disproportionate research enterprise that led to *The Weight of the World* (Bourdieu et al., [1993]1999) and also to those – they are in part the same – who, over the past two decades, have helped me assume the charge of the journal *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales* and of *Liber*, its international supplement.<sup>3</sup> They have done so often for no reward other than the satisfaction of partaking of an intellectual adventure, as it can hardly be said that the scientific community proved very generous towards them. My pleasure would be fuller tonight if I were assured that they will henceforth receive from the scientific authorities that host them, or that should host them, the Centre national de

la recherche scientifique, the École des hautes études en sciences sociales, and so forth, the fair recognition of, and due reward for, their merits.

I

I can now come to sociology and to the questions that surround it. The first and the most common concerns its scientific status. It is clear that sociology possesses all the main characteristics that define a science: autonomous and cumulative, it strives to construct systems of hypotheses organized into coherent models capable of accounting for large sets of empirically observable phenomena (Bourdieu et al., [1973]1991). But one may wonder whether this is really the issue ... We know very well that this question is never raised about most of the canonical disciplines of the faculty of the humanities and the human sciences, or about the least established disciplines of the faculty of science.

In fact, sociology is always suspected – especially among conservative circles – of compromising with politics. Now it is true that the sociologist, and this is what distinguishes him from the historian and the anthropologist, typically takes as object her own society and that therefore she always runs the risk of investing in her practice prejudices or, worse yet, presuppositions. In reality, this danger is much less serious than appears to the novice: because it is particularly exposed to it, sociology supplies a particularly powerful arsenal of instruments of defense against it.

What is more, the logic of competition, which is that of all scientific universes, brings to bear upon every sociologist constraints and controls that she in turn exercises onto all others. It is the totality of the world sociological universe, in all the diversity of its scientific (and not political) positions and position-takings, which intervenes as a bulwark between each sociologist and the social world: the logic of criss-crossing censorships is such that she cannot surrender to profane seductions and worldly compromises, those of journalism in particular, without running the risk of being excluded from the ‘invisible college’ of social scientists (Bourdieu, 1991a). Such exclusion is a terrible sanction even if it is ignored by the lay public – and by many journalists, who mistake differences in scientific proficiency for differences of opinion bound to cancel each other out.

The purely negative independence thereby gained culminates in genuine autonomy only inasmuch as the sociologist masters the collective achievements of his discipline. These achievements are already immense and their mastery is the prerequisite for entry into properly scientific debates. Sociologists are divided, this is fact, but according to two very different principles of division. First, those who have appropriated the collective heritage of the discipline are united even through their conflicts over this heritage – they speak, as we say, the same language – and they oppose each other according to the logic constitutive of the problematics and the methodology issued out of this heritage. But, second, these inheritors are also divided on a wholly different basis, from those who are deprived of this heritage and who therefore are more often than not attuned to the demands of the media. So much to say that the most glaring discrepancies often invoked to question the scientificity of sociology find their basis in the extreme dispersion (in the statistical sense of the term) of those who call themselves sociologists

To be truly autonomous and cumulative, and to conform fully to its scientific vocation, sociology must also and above all be reflexive (Bourdieu, [1982]1994, 1993). It must take itself as an object and put to work all the instruments of knowledge at its

disposal to analyze and master the social effects wielded upon it and that can interfere with the properly scientific logic of its functioning. Those who would find these observations too abstract are referred to what is said in *Homo Academicus* (Bourdieu, [1984]1988) about sociology and about the institutions in which it has found its niche (but then they will perhaps find that I am too concrete ...).

## II

A prerequisite for sociologists, the sociology of the scientific universe seems to me just as necessary for the other sciences. Indeed, it is arguably the most accomplished realization of this 'psychoanalysis of the scientific mind' that Bachelard (1938) called for. It gives us the means to uncover the social unconscious, collectively repressed, inscribed in the social logic of the scientific universe, in the social determinants and recruitment of recruitment committees; in the social conditions of the hiring and conduct of scientific administrators; in the social relations of domination, exercised under the guise of relations of scientific authority, that thwart or refrain creativity and inventiveness instead of inciting them, especially among younger scholars; in the national (and nowadays local) networks of intellectual co-optation that protect some from the sanctions of scientific evaluation by denying others the full expression of their intellectual potentialities, and so on.

Since the present circumstances require that I remain either allusive or obscure on this matter, I will only evoke a passage, typically overlooked, from Max Weber's lecture on 'Science as Vocation'. In it the German scholar raises before his assembled colleagues a question fundamental to the life of science but ordinarily reserved for private conversation: why is it that universities do not select the best? (The language he uses is much more brutal than mine.) Being a good professional, Max Weber pushes aside the temptation to indict individuals, in this case 'the personal inferiority of faculty members and educational ministers'. And he invites us to seek the cause of this state of affairs in 'the laws of human co-operation, especially of the co-operation of several bodies', those same laws that lead, in the elections of popes or American presidents, to select almost invariably the 'second or third best' candidate. And he concludes with realism and a touch of humor: 'One must not be surprised at the frequent mistakes that are made, but rather at the number of correct appointments, the proportion of which, in spite of all, is very considerable' (Weber, 1948: 192).

A less resigned scientific policy could rely on knowledge of these laws to thwart their operation and neutralize their effects. I am thinking here, to give but one example, of the freedom that would be introduced in the research system if a section was created within each department to regroup all those who experience difficulties with the division into canonical disciplines and with the more or less arbitrary – and scientifically nefarious – disciplines that these entail.

I have said enough for you to understand that the ideology of the 'scientific community', as an ideal *polis* whose citizens would know but one goal, the quest for truth, does not really serve the interest of truth. Sociological analysis of the functioning of the Scientific City as it exists, and of all the mechanisms that intrude upon pure and perfect competition and thus impede scientific progress, could greatly contribute to the increase in scientific productivity about which our technocrats are so concerned. What is certain, at any rate, is that scientists – many of whom, especially among biologists, worry about the future of their science as it gets swept away by the uncontrolled force

of its mechanisms – cannot hope to gain collective mastery of their practice unless they undertake, with the help of sociologists and historians of science, a collective analysis of the social mechanisms that regulate the actual functioning of their world (Bourdieu, 1997, [2001]2006).

One may ask by what right and in the name of what special authority this budding science meddles with analyzing the functioning of sciences at once more advanced and more assured of themselves. In fact, this charge of imperialism is mostly lofted by philosophers and writers, and by a few scientists particularly inclined towards scientific self-certainty. And it is yet another virtue of the sociology of science that it offers powerful antidotes to such arrogance, profoundly nefarious to science itself. Indeed, without consigning us in any way to anti-scientific relativism (I cannot demonstrate this in full here due to time constraints), the sociology of science reminds science of its historical, or social, origins: far from being eternal essences, emerging fully formed out of the human brain, scientific truths are the historical products of a certain type of historical work accomplished under the constraints and controls of this very special social world that is the scientific field, with its rules and especially its regularities (Bourdieu, 1975, 1991b, [2001]2006).

Perhaps sociology is here to remind the other sciences, both by its very existence and by its analyses, of their historical origins, which is the principle of their provisional validity as well as of their fallibility. And it demonstrates that the ever-renewed efforts to found science on transcendent principles are condemned to the circle, evoked by James Joyce, of the self-proclamation of infallibility by a pope whose word cannot be recused on grounds of his infallibility.<sup>4</sup>

### III

I have begun to answer the question of what use is sociology. But I could, after the African-American writer Toni Morrison who, when queried whether her next novels would make room for white characters, responded, ‘Would you ask this of a white writer?’, be content to ask: would you raise the question of the utility and *raison d’être* of their science if you faced a chemist, an archeologist, or even a historian? Strangely, if the sociologist has so much trouble in feeling justified to exist, it is because we always expect either too much or too little from her. And because there are always too many ‘sociologists’ eager to respond to the most immoderate demands and to take up the impossible – and slightly ludicrous – role of the ‘state-supported petty prophet’, to borrow Weber’s words again.

We expect of the sociologist that, in the manner of the prophet, he will give us ultimate and (apparently) systematic answers to questions of life and death as they arise daily in social existence. And we deny him the function that he has the right to claim, as every scientist, that which consists in giving precise and verifiable answers only to those questions he is able to formulate in a scientific manner, that is, at the cost of a break with the questions asked by common sense as well as by journalism.

One should not infer from this that the sociologist can assume the role of the expert in the service of power. She cannot and does not want to replace political decision-makers in the definition of ends (for example, to lead 80% of an age cohort to the baccalaureate or 100% of school children to full mastery of reading). But she can spotlight the social and economic conditions of realization of these ends for those who pose them in full



misrecognition of these conditions and who therefore risk reaching results diametrically opposed to those they think they are pursuing.<sup>5</sup>

Sociology is henceforth sufficiently self-assured to tell politicians that they cannot, in the name of the commonweal, claim to govern universes of which they ignore the most elementary laws. Durkheim ([1895]1984) liked to say that one of the major obstacles to the progress of the science of society resides in the fact that in such matters everyone believes that they have innate knowledge ... And what are we to think of those politicians who, based on their puny experience as school teacher or civil servant, show no qualms in giving sociologists lectures on the sociology of education or bureaucracy!

Far from approving politicians who, at the slightest whiff of campus unrest, hasten to invite disgruntled students to take up majors less overcrowded than the human sciences, I believe that the study of sociology ought to be encouraged everywhere and expanded broadly: first in itself and for itself, in the faculties of humanities and of the social sciences; and second as a complementary discipline, in the faculties of science and in the schools of law and medicine, and also – but there at high doses – in the schools of ‘political science’ and at the Ecole nationale d’Administration.<sup>6</sup>

It would not be difficult to demonstrate that the sociological gaze has a great deal to contribute to the judge, the physician (the experiment has been carried out for years in the United States where we can study its effects), the high civil servant and policy maker, the professor and the journalist, and therefore to their clients and audiences. These sociologists that some deem in oversupply, I would like to see them present in all of our ‘total institutions’, as Goffman (1964) called asylums, hospitals, boarding establishments, and prisons, but also in social housing estates, in secondary schools, and in private firms (one would need to evoke here the Japanese experience, but in a manner wholly different from usual). These are so many complex social universes where they could analyze dysfunctionings or uncover tensions and thereby fulfill the Socratic role of midwives of groups and individuals (Bourdieu, [1993]1996).

I do not believe that one is founded to discount these views as a manifestation of corporatist imperialism. For I am deeply convinced that the development of sociology and the progress of scientific knowledge are congruent with the general interest. Sociology is warranted to define itself as a *public service*. This does not mean that it is entrusted with responding immediately to the most immediate needs of ‘society’ or of its spokespersons and, even less so, of those who rule over it. The money expended by Right and Left governments alike to pay for scientifically worthless and financially ruinous polls (a single one of these polls must cost 10 to 20 times the annual funds allocated to my Chair at the Collège de France) are the most indisputable testimony to what politicians expect of social science: not true knowledge of the social world but instruments of rational demagoguery.

Among the tasks that behoove sociology, and that it alone can accomplish, one of the most urgent is the critical unhinging of the maneuvering and manipulation of citizens and of consumers that rely on perverse usages of science. One has reason to worry indeed that the state, which represents the only freedom from the constraints of the market, increasingly subjects its action, and those of its services (especially in matters of culture, science, or art), to the tyranny of marketing studies, of polls, of audience ratings, and all manners of supposedly reliable measurements of the supposed ‘demand’ of the greatest number. We see here that sociology can be one of the critical countervailing

powers capable of efficiently opposing powers that rely increasingly on science, real or presumed, in order to legitimize their rule, provided that it strives to utilize the economic freedom that state support gives it to assert its autonomy from all powers, including the powers of the state.

I would fail the principle of reflexivity if I neglected to state in closing that I harbor no illusions as to the efficacy of this address: I know that it runs the risk of being de-realized by the very solemnity of the tone imposed upon me by the solemnity of the occasion in which I had to deliver it. But one is never forbidden to hope otherwise.

## Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

## Notes

- 1 Speech made on 7 December 1993 upon receipt of the Gold Medal of the National Center for Scientific Research, France's highest scientific distinction, from François Fillon, Minister of Higher Learning and Research. The translation, notes, and references are by Loïc Wacquant.
- 2 The Centre de sociologie européenne was founded in Paris in 1959 by Raymond Aron (with funds from the Ford Foundation) who, to remedy his lack of experience of empirical research, nominated Bourdieu as its 'secretary' (executive director) in 1960. After their split in 1968, Bourdieu formed an independent research group which was the institutional basis of his inquiries over three decades. A detailed account of the genesis and early functioning of the CSE, based on a painstaking analysis of Aron's archives deposited at the Bibliothèque nationale, is in Joy (2011).
- 3 Founded in 1975 and edited at the Centre de sociologie européenne, *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales* has been animated by Bourdieu's transdisciplinary and international vision of a sociology fusing theory, empirical observation, and civic pertinence along with formal innovation. Also based at the CSE, *Liber: revue européenne des livres* was a critical review of frontline research in the social sciences, literature, and the arts that aimed to 'denationalize' intellectual production and accelerate its circulation; it was published under various configurations in a dozen European languages and countries between 1989 and 1998.
- 4 Bourdieu alludes here to a famous passage of James Joyce's *The Dubliners* (1914]1967: 168–9), in which friends in a pub discuss the doctrine.
- 5 This refers to the policy goal, set by socialist education minister Jean-Pierre Chevènement under the Fabius Government in 1985, to bring 80 percent of each age cohort to completion of high school and thence entry into the university by the year 2000. A deft sociological analysis of the effects on this policy on the academic experience and social trajectories of lower-class youths is Beaud (2002).
- 6 A reference to the two main elite graduate schools (Sciences-Po and ENA) from which issue those who hold eminent decision-making positions in the French state and in leading corporations; for a thorough analysis of the location and function of these schools in the French field of power, see Bourdieu's ([1989]1998) *The State Nobility*. Many of the cabinet officials and staff present at the ceremony were alumni of these two schools.

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Pierre Bourdieu held the Chair of Sociology at the Collège de France, where he directed the Center for European Sociology, the journal *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, and the publishing house Raisons d’agir Editions until his passing in 2002. He is the author of numerous classics of social science. Among them are *Reproduction in Education, Society, and Culture* (1970, trans. 1977), *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (1972, trans. 1977), *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (1979, trans. 1984), *Homo Academicus* (1984, trans. 1988), *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Artistic Field* (1992, trans. 1996), and *Pascalian Meditations* (1997, trans. 2000).

**Date submitted** November 2012

**Date accepted** December 2012