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# Examining the Case for Reflexivity in International Relations: Insights from Bourdieu

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When scholars identify themselves as studying international political practices, they are frequently bound to, or rely on, certain epistemological commitments, which may or may not be made explicit to the reader or, indeed, appreciated by the author. In an effort to understand the political world, researchers draw upon their existing visions and dispositions, but such conceptions and habits may result from, and be shaped by, what they are trying to describe and explain. The struggle for objectivity can thus be characterised as an enduring problem which colours the relationship between the scholar and the research object. Yet within the study of international relations (IR), one is often struck by how the field has tended to lack a sociology of itself, including its participants and multiple relations with political agents and forces (Waever, 1998; Smith, 2002). This is particularly surprising when one considers how IR has experienced a general turn towards sociological theories and ideas, to the point where constructivism has become a mainstream conceptual approach. But when it comes to turning those techniques of sociology upon themselves, to critically interrogate their own interested actions as cultural producers, many IR analysts are absent. This arguably presents a problem for the examination of international politics. If every scholar carries with them their own social histories, political inclinations, and ideological biases, how can we control for such factors in the research process? How do we minimise the danger that such conditioning may remain hidden from others and yet inform various research choices? In short, how can we objectify the IR theorist for the purposes of enhancing the science of objectivity?

Here, in this short paper, I seek to explore these problems and propose an agenda for the practice of methodological reflexivity in IR. As the term suggests, to be reflexive is to actively 'turn or bend back', to take account of the self in relation to

other subjects and objects. In debating this notion, I am inspired by the work of Pierre Bourdieu and his 'signature obsession' with developing the reflexive method throughout his career (Wacquant, 1992, p. 36). Although Bourdieu was an extremely ambitious writer who has made an important contribution to the social sciences and humanities, the examination of his work in IR has only recently become a focus of attention (Ashley, 1986; Guzzini, 2006; Williams, 2007; Jackson, 2008, 2009; Pouliot, 2008). Within these discussions, however, a particular analysis of the concept of reflexivity is almost nonexistent (the exception being Leander, 2002, 2008). I will argue here that an investment in learning reflexivity could reap rewards for two main reasons. First, at the most basic level, reflexivity matters for good research, in terms of not only identifying the choice of subjects and issues to study, but also how the specific problems are treated, and hence what kind of results can be expected (Leander, 2002). Second, and of equal importance, a reflexive orientation can help reveal how the interested actions of IR theorists can be positioned in relation to a broader struggle for recognition and authority, a struggle which operates within both the academy and the political arena. While Bourdieu did not ever provide an easy, step-by-step guide for acting reflexively, he did clarify his thinking over time. Through adapting these ideas, I will map out why and how a reflexive method can be pursued in three ways: autobiographical, institutional, and collective. These methods are inter-related and, when considered in this sequence, represent increasing degrees of critical ambition.

At the risk of confusion, however, it is important to stress how the term 'objectivity' is being used in this context. For Bourdieu, reflexivity is needed for the purpose of objectifying the very conceptualisation and action of scientific objectification. Thus, when one speaks of 'enhancing the science of objectivity' this does not mean a defence of forms of objectivism, such as positivism. Rather, reflexivity aims to illuminate a deeper need to think through, and break from, the many dilemmas and biases contained in *both* objectivism and subjectivism. For instance, objectivist accounts, such as those produced in the rational actor tradition, often project images of agents engaged in purposeful calculation when it may be more accurate to define their behaviours as experimental or non-intentional. At the same time, purely subjective accounts also have problems, such as often over-emphasising the individual as a category of analysis to the expense of groups and structures. In other words, reflexivity offers a strategy of 'participant objectivation' for Bourdieu, focusing on 'objectivizing the subjective relation to the object which, far from leading to a relativistic and more-or-less anti-scientific subjectivism, is one of the conditions of genuine scientific objectivity' (Bourdieu, 2003a, p. 282). What needs to be objectified, therefore, are the social conditions that have formed the IR theorist and, in particular, how their relative position in the professional universe shapes their interests and investments. Through developing the reflexive instinct, one can hopefully contribute, in metatheoretical terms, to an IR that uses social scientific techniques in a twin move:

to unravel the political world through a simultaneous critical questioning of the scholar in their social milieu.

To empirically ground these issues, the paper takes the field of international trade policymaking as its main focus of analysis, although examples are also drawn from other areas in IR. By 'field', I refer to what is sometimes popularly called the 'trade community', a social space of agents who are united by their recognition of, and common stake in, an international trading system (the notion of 'field' is another concept drawn from Bourdieu). Within this space, I am particularly interested in the relationship between academics and other participants, such as national policymakers and recognised experts in international institutions. The trade field is an interesting site for studying how the craft of reflexivity could be practiced because it continues to display features of an 'insider' community, complete with certain rules or codes of participation between authoritative agents. Notwithstanding a general movement towards increased openness – such as signalled by the establishment of the World Trade Organization (WTO) and the emergence of a multitude of critical observers – I would argue that the trade field continues to valorise only certain forms of knowledge and position-taking, which are, at the same time, often an expression for control over particular types of power. Thus, I will argue that reflexivity can be used to better reveal the internal logic of this important field and, in the process, gain a measure of freedom from some of the social determinants of intellectual practice.

### **Autobiographical reflexivity**

For some researchers, this call for reflexivity may appear to be not so much a radical departure, but a reaffirmation of existing tendencies and common attitudes. Bourdieu is certainly not the first or only scholar to invoke the idea of reflexivity; one can find similar formulations and traces in the work Émile Durkheim (1895), George Herbert Mead (1934), Alvin Gouldner (1971), and Anthony Giddens (1984) among others. All these writers have noted how ideas, including sociological ideas, are socially situated and the product of historically constituted agents. For Bourdieu, the first and most elementary form of reflexivity parallels this thinking and involves the researcher critically examining their own social background and coordinates, most notably in terms of categories such as gender, class, or geography.

In IR, this autobiographical reflexivity is often invoked by scholars, particularly when they seek to explain to audiences their own research trajectory and how environmental circumstances have shaped certain enquiries. For instance, in Stephen Gill's *Power and Resistance in the New World Order* (2008, p. 2), he recounts how his research interests originally stemmed from not only observing a world of superpower rivalry, but also the 'pernicious effects of the British class system' which served to 'forge a sense of injustice and resistance to illegitimate power that have been

driving forces in much of my intellectual and political work'. A similar methodological approach has long been advocated by feminist IR scholars who often 'describe how they have been motivated to conduct projects that stem from their own lives and personal experiences' (Tickner, 2005, p. 8; also see Enloe, 2004). Elsewhere, in respect to studying civil society actors, Cecelia Lynch (2008, p. 712) has argued that constructivist scholars have a duty to analyze their own positionality and how 'all assumptions embody ethical ideas and judgements'. Thus, for these authors, reflexive practices are viewed as essential for accounting for various subjective preconceptions and distortions that infiltrate the decision-making process. As Sandra Harding (1993) once expressed it, if 'strong objectivity' is a goal, it requires 'strong reflexivity'.

However, in turning to the trade field one rarely encounters this same degree of critical self-awareness on the part of researchers. In the literature on international trade, questions regarding the gender or class identity of specialists are conspicuous by their absence. How can one explain this? Two perspectives can be offered here. First, it could be argued that an examination of autobiographical reflexivity is simply not desirable because the method is too introspective without any 'tangible' sense that it could increase our understanding of trade politics. Far from strengthening social science, it may be read as a rather distracting, navel-gazing pursuit, without a clearly defined 'endpoint'. Such concerns were recognised by Bourdieu (2003a, p. 282) who always condemned the 'explosion of narcissism sometimes verging on exhibitionism' seen in many postmodern critiques. Indeed, there exists a risk that the reflexive researcher spends so long explaining their life story and intently searching for some (illusory) position free of bias, that they never get to the point of their research or explore it in adequate depth! Second, and more specifically, one could argue that the dominant systems of knowledge that have historically structured the trade field have played a role in marginalising gender and class concerns. A glance at major textbooks is illustrative of this point. For instance, in Bernard Hoekman and Michel Kostecki's *The Political Economy of the World Trading System* (2001), a mainstream volume of more than 500 pages, there is no explicit discussion of how WTO rules as constituted could have detrimental consequences on the livelihoods of both women and men in many countries. The closest one gets to the subject of gender is through a short discussion on labour standards, leading to an impression that the WTO is gender-neutral in its culture and material impacts. A similar limited treatment is also found in Michael Trebilcock and Robert Howse's *The Regulation of International Trade* (2005), another popular textbook. Thus, since economics and law act as the major gateways for students to study the international trading system (IR being a subservient third), and since each discipline has tended to ignore such categories in approaches to teaching trade issues, it would only be 'inevitable' that gender or class would not be seen as a problem by many theorists, either in explaining trade in the 'real world' or in the own intellectual makeup.

Yet the potential value of autobiographical reflexivity in the study of trade politics should not be so readily discounted. For sure, as Bourdieu (1999) often underscored, one is never able to eradicate all potential sources of prejudice or deconstruct all the cognitive schemes that can shroud the scholar. Rather, one should try to exercise, as Leander (2008, p. 25) has expressed it, 'epistemological prudence'; that is, to be as conscious as possible of the motivations involved in research practices and how such motivations structure the results that are obtained. For instance, one potentially interesting enquiry would be to question why some scholars choose to study less powerful actors in the trading system. This is usually justified by stating that such players represent empirical problems and, therefore, are worthy of investigation. Some researchers argue that the WTO Aid for Trade initiative is important because of preference erosion concerns voiced by African countries (see Njinkeu and Cameron, 2008). Others have chosen to address strategies of coalition-building pursued by countries such as Brazil and India in recent negotiations (see Hurrell and Narlikar, 2006; and Narlikar and Wilkinson, 2004). These are certainly legitimate research enquiries, but are there other motivations which go unstated? For instance, are such research questions informed by a deeper normative conception of justice on the part of the scholar? If so, what is this thinking and how has it been shaped by life experiences? In particular, how can one avoid the risk that the scholar projects under-examined interests onto their research object, such as claiming for the existence of agency when relatively little, or perhaps none, may exist in practice? Does the researcher believe that they have some degree of 'affinity' with the less privileged actor and can, indeed, even speak on behalf of them? If so, where did such presumptions come from and how valid are they? These are all the types of questions a reflexive method would pose. However, for Bourdieu, the focus on the individual was also in some ways too simplistic. It is on this note that we can turn to the second mode of reflexivity which addresses how particular practices are generated and reproduced in the broader institutional environment.

### **Institutional reflexivity**

I have already raised the importance of the academy as a centre of knowledge production in discussing why questions of gender or class may be considered 'unorthodox' in the study of trade relations. This brings to the surface the notion that reflexivity can be applied to the practice of social science itself. Indeed, for Bourdieu, reflexivity does not refer so much to personal, idiosyncratic moments of introspection but, rather, the organisational and mental structures that shape the work of researchers (Swartz, 1997). This conceptualisation led him to constantly question how the position of the scholar in the academic field shapes their range of potential position-stances at any given moment (Bourdieu, 1990a).

There are two main enquiries that spring from this idea. First, institutional reflexivity means developing awareness for how academics, like other cultural interpreters, owe something to their position in a social space 'where all define themselves in part in relational terms, by their distance and difference from certain others with whom they compete' (Wacquant, 1992, p. 39). It is well acknowledged that scholars struggle in multiple ways for attention, praise, and objective titles. But Bourdieu was keen to expose those moments when this constant jockeying for recognition could cloud and distort the research process, leading to a public motivation (such as aspiring for social or political change) that was disconnected from a potentially more important private motivation (increased status and power in the field). Since the former motivation has greater legitimacy according to the principles of the field, he argued that scholars have a stake in denying any pursuit of the latter motivation. In short, they have 'an interest in disinterestedness' (Bourdieu, 1990b, p. 110). Second, the method of institutional reflexivity brings attention to how the academy is situated in relation to other institutions or structures of power. This represents another difficult, multi-faceted problem to investigate. One could argue that the academy often appears to be intimately embedded in the political at every level (structural, institutional, and personal), but the depth and quality of this embeddedness clearly varies and requires careful delineating. Nevertheless, it was one of Bourdieu's (1996) major arguments that the education system in France had become the most efficient mechanism for (re)producing social hierarchies and ensuring that a 'state nobility' was perpetuated across generations. The challenge in this context was to explain how such an arbitrary organisation of social affairs was conducted and, in particular, came to acquire a considerable degree of legitimacy.

In terms of the study of IR, debates on the 'proper' relationship between the academy and the policy world have a long history and, for some scholars, necessitate close investigation. In 2007, for instance, under the leadership of Ann Tickner, the International Studies Association Convention was given the theme 'Politics, Policy and Responsible Scholarship'. In her keynote address, Tickner (2006, p. 392) argued that interdependent power relations should always be scrutinised, including the advisory services many IR analysts have provided to modern princes. In this light, all scholars bear 'responsibility for being critically reflective about how the knowledge we teach to our students has been constructed historically and the research traditions to which we subscribe are formulated.' The relationship between research funding bodies, frequently associated with the state, and academic agendas is but one complicated problem in this context. What social and political problems merit the economic and symbolic capital that funding provides? How are these problems constructed and who has greater control over the levers of supply and demand in the intellectual market? What concerns get marginalised, trivialised, or even forgotten because they cannot be easily squared with the definition of 'policy relevance' (which



often passes under-examined, not least by those who utter it so frequently)? There is not the space here to explore all these connections that tie the state and the academy, only to note some questions of social scientific relevance that could be tackled with an explicit reflexive technique. Tickner's intervention is a valuable starting point, but a number of other IR writers, representing different theoretical perspectives, have also discussed the ways in which 'being useful' to the policy world should be examined for the purpose of understanding the co-constitutive relationship between knowledge production and power (for instance, see Smith, 2004; Walt, 2005; and Büger and Villumsen, 2007). Thus, we can take from these studies that some of the concerns on institutional reflexivity raised by Bourdieu have certainly been acknowledged by a number of IR theorists.

But how are these broader debates on the academy pertinent to studying the politics of international trade? There are a number of potential applications and leads that one could suggest. To begin, it is important to exercise institutional reflexivity for the purpose of understanding what forms of knowledge (and thus position-stances that one could select or adapt) become part of the accepted orthodoxy. Monitoring how these complicated processes operate – within institutions such as the World Bank, academic journals like *The World Economy*, conferences such as the annual WTO Public Forum, or media outlets like *The Financial Times* – is not easy. It would certainly be wrong to make blanket or conspiratorial assertions, such as claiming that all forms of knowledge, including 'heretical' propositions on the trading order, are somehow 'co-opted by the system'. For instance, if one examines the connections between a number of prominent trade scholars and the WTO Secretariat, there often appears to be a more circular, complex relationship that does not necessarily result in a weakening of critique. Lawyers like Joost Pauwelyn and Thomas Cottier have gained valuable experience working within or close to the Appellate Body, before returning to teach in universities. In other examples, the Secretariat increasingly conducts various training courses in WTO law in Southern countries, often targeting education establishments. Yet observing these *direct* relationships is only the first step towards mapping the boundaries of the discursive universe and attempting to assess, among other enquiries, how certain ideas and interests may be privileged, either deliberately or unintentionally.

The more challenging analytical task is to trace how outcomes in the trading system are (re)produced through agents that are *at a distance* from each other, either spatially, temporally, or both. In particular, this involves searching for the arbitrary particularisms in what passes for the 'universal' viewpoint. For example, as I have argued elsewhere (Eagleton-Pierce, 2008), a country such as the United States cannot obtain its goals in the trading regime simply through repeating its own interested, particular opinions. In order to legitimise its personality, it has to appeal to and, ideally, disguise its own interests under the banner of the 'universal' (using frames such

as 'global competitiveness'). One major way in which the US can accomplish this is to draw upon the work of different 'impersonal technicians' (or 'experts' in the common language) who, armed with the tools of Ricardian science, present themselves as 'removed' from 'arbitrary politics'. The Columbia economist Jagdish Bhagwati could be highlighted as an example. Bhagwati has worked tirelessly across four decades to monitor, defend, and refine orthodox theories, classifications, and histories on international trade (for instance, see Bhagwati, 2003; and Bhagwati, Panagariya and Srinivasan, 1998). He intervenes in media debates and has consulted for numerous international organisations, including the WTO and its predecessor, the GATT. But can we trace any chain of legitimation, or even a link in a chain, connecting Bhagwati's ideas to the political objectives of the Office of the US Trade Representative (USTR)? It would be very difficult, although not impossible. This is because, to apply one of Bourdieu's (1996) arguments, the symbolic efficacy of any legitimation process is generally enhanced the more the chief consecrator – the US in this case – does not appear too closely tied to the acts of consecration. For sure, a USTR spokesperson may publically praise a Bhagwati commentary in *The Wall Street Journal* and use it for evidence that, say, protectionism should be avoided at all costs. But it is not in Bhagwati's interest to claim that he is *too close* to the praiser, that he has lost independence from power in the classic conceptualisation, since that could invite charges of partisanship and political bias. Rather, if the question was ever explicitly raised in these terms, his work would probably be put into a 'global' context, where all could potentially benefit (of which substantial evidence could be marshalled), thus taking the direct spotlight away from any type of relationship between the hegemon and himself.

In sum, one must be careful about examining how the academy is implicated in different forms of power in international trade politics. The method of institutional reflexivity can help to draw attention to these webs of interdependencies and, through an expanded conception of interest, the motivations of academics. But the academy also exists to foster intellectual critique and to challenge the constitution of power. In Bourdieu's view, this leads to a third and related type of reflexivity, one that he personally pursued and advocated.

### **Collective reflexivity**

From the 1980s, Bourdieu became increasingly visible both in France and elsewhere as a contributor to various causes of the 'political left' (although, in a somewhat humorous manner, he often said that he was located on *la gauche de la gauche*, the left of the left). He made a range of interventions, including opposing the Russian suppression of Solidarity in Poland in 1981, supporting the strikes in France in 1995 and, by the turn of the century, backing various 'alter-globalisation' groups (see

Swartz, 2003; and Poupeau and Discepolo, 2004 for a more detailed history). In part, these actions were an outcome of his continuous thinking on the relationship between reflexivity and public intellectuals. As one of his closest colleagues Loïc Wacquant (1992) expressed it, the call for 'scholarship with commitment' (Bourdieu, 2003b, 2008) can be linked to Bourdieu's most ambitious reading of reflexivity: to encourage critical theorists to engage in practical problem-solving in the political world beyond the Ivory Tower.

However, Bourdieu understood that generating such activity was not straight-forward. He often struggled with the question of why there were relatively few activist intellectuals who sought to mobilise others, or submitted themselves to a process of mobilisation. At a deeper level, he argued that this pattern could be partly explained by examining how the scholastic vision of the world contains presumptions and privileges which tend to work against direct, political activism. What does this entail? As understood by Wacquant in conversation with Bourdieu (1992, p. 39, original italics): 'The *intellectualist bias* which entices us to construe the world as a *spectacle*, as a set of significations to be interpreted rather than as concrete problems to be solved practically, is more profound and more distorting than those rooted in the social origins or location of the analyst in the academic field, because it can lead us to miss entirely the *differentia specifica* of the logic of practice'. In other words, the scholastic gaze was a central problem for Bourdieu for two reasons. First, it is an orientation that necessitates the theorist separating themselves from practice in order to obtain an 'external' and supposed 'superior point of view'. But the danger of this is that the scholar starts to conflate and confuse practical knowledge with theoretical knowledge (to take the things of logic for the logic of things, as Marx put it). Second, to recall an earlier point, Bourdieu argued that intellectuals tended to be 'blinded by their own professional ideology' (Swartz, 1997, p. 274), as with appeals to universality or neutrality, rather than probing how their own career trajectories were often strongly shaped by the self-interested accumulation of honours and distinctions (and, in relation, trying to prevent rivals from doing the same).

For these reasons, Bourdieu was somewhat pessimistic on the chances of developing what I have called here collective reflexivity; that is, a large-scale mobilisation of activist intellectuals. It is true that he did have some notable successes, such as *The Weight of the World* (1999) project where a team of researchers investigated the everyday lives of workers in the context of neoliberalism. When published, this massive sociology volume eventually sold over 100,000 copies and triggered a substantial debate on social policy in France. But other grander ideas, including a proposal for an 'International of Intellectuals' to break free from dominant institutional frameworks, failed to lift off the page. When one turns to the example of the trade field again, I would suggest that there is relatively little evidence of a sense of collective reflexivity marked by heterodox characteristics. Most efforts continue to be

individual and sporadic. For instance, scholars such as Robert Howse and Walden Bello, respecting different intellectual backgrounds, have offered legal pro bono work and negotiating advice to under-resourced delegations in Geneva. Other scholars have called for an increase in this type of direct policy engagement in order to assist Southern countries. Gregory Shaffer (2006, p. 193), for example, has argued that 'by working with developing countries on international trade cases, academics would better learn how the WTO process works in practice. They could write contextualized analyses of WTO jurisprudence that are more informed by a developing country perspective'. One can, however, point to groups such as the Canadian-based International Lawyers and Economists Against Poverty (ILEAP), a network of more than 60 prominent trade experts, who aim to improve the technical skills and capacities of Southern countries. Yet, once again, one can debate the organisational strength of this type of collective and, indeed, the extent to which they are offering a critical perspective that is substantially different from the norm.

## **Conclusion**

When viewed through a Bourdieusian lens, one can see in conclusion that reflexivity is more complex and adaptable than might initially appear. I have argued that the concept matters for conducting good research and strengthening objectivity. As a methodological notion, it stems from a phenomenological questioning of knowledge creation, asking the analyst to conduct mutual and self-criticism. In the process of uncovering the deeper motivations involved in the production of research, reflexivity offers for Bourdieu an almost 'therapeutic function insofar as increasing awareness of the social determinants of behaviour increases the possibility for freedom from the unknown' (Swartz, 1992, p. 277). However, such benefits are in many ways only truly realised when the attention is shifted away from the individual *per se* to a field analysis of the practice of science. In using the concept, this is perhaps where empirical studies of international affairs, including the politics of the trading system, should begin. The game-like logic of the academy is mirrored in the game-like logic of politics: both are founded on a relational struggle for recognition and, ultimately, forms of power. In these fields, every viewpoint, for Bourdieu, is a view taken from a particular point in space and time. As I have argued here, it is hoped that the idea of reflexivity can be treated as an 'horizon' or 'guiding principle' (Deer, 2008, p. 212) to aim at in order to better unravel this positioning game played by agents, including all their interested stakes.

## Notes

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