

BOOK REVIEW

Sketch for a Self-Analysis

Pierre Bourdieu

Chicago: The University of Chicago Press. 2007, 113 Pages.

Reviewed by Gary Barron, University of Calgary

HAVING SPENT ONE'S LIFE FULLY IMMERSSED in researching social life and developing the theoretical tools by which to understand it, what is left to do upon approaching the end of one's life? It seems only fitting to apply those theoretical tools to oneself. In his *Sketch for a Self-Analysis* Bourdieu uses the theoretical concepts he devised over his career in an analysis of himself. He illustrates the intellectual field that lay before him as a young intellectual and describes the formation of the dispositions that ultimately lead him to sociology despite a variety of other possible careers. Bourdieu explains that his analysis is done with the hope that his readers will, through a glimpse at his own experiences, acquire "some means of doing what they do, and living what they live, a little bit better" (p. 113).

He begins, "To understand is first to understand the field with which and against which one has been formed" (p. 4). As he reflects on the intellectual field of the 1950s, particularly philosophy, he demonstrates his distaste for the pomp of the "total intellectual" championed by Jean-Paul Sartre. As a young man Bourdieu's father told him to always "respect humble folk" (p. 86), advice that stayed with him through his life and oriented his work. Bourdieu makes it clear that the total intellectual did anything but respect humble folk; as such, he could not be a total intellectual, not on the terms set by the intellectual field of the time. Further, his humble upbringing had formed in him dispositions (*habitus*) that made such a role uncomfortable for him. Bourdieu's career through the *École Normale Supérieure*, and beyond, was defined by becoming a total intellectual in his own way.

Bourdieu also tells of the various "possibles" for anyone choosing to reject Sartre's existentialism. At the time, Bourdieu had not considered sociology, and the choice to reject Sartre left him with two options for his study: a history of philosophy, or an epistemology and history of the sciences. Bourdieu opted for the latter, his academic and scientific career to be modeled on Georges Canguilhem's. It is no accident that Bourdieu discusses Canguilhem's own difficulty adjusting to the intellectual field at the *École Normale* and in the *College de France*. Bourdieu shows his similarity with Canguilhem in their mutual refusal to take seriously the intellectual game and as related to their humble origins. Bourdieu writes of Canguilhem with a respect and reverence similar to how he writes of his father. The parallels of the three lives are hard to ignore. For example, all three struggled with the discomfort of a cleft *habitus*, feeling the simultaneous aching pull to return to a life they had left behind and the irritating push into a world in which none of them ever quite fit.

Bourdieu continues by sketching the state of sociology at the time. Sociology was fractured and viewed as the lowliest of disciplines, dominated and looked down upon by the "hard sciences" as well as by the university at large, particularly philosophy. Before moving toward sociology, Bourdieu was

enlisted in the Algerian war for independence. Bourdieu also recognized the stakes of moving into sociology; such a change would constitute a major loss in prestige. Bourdieu explains he only planned to dabble briefly in sociology “in order to be of some use, and perhaps to stave off the guilty conscience of the helpless witness of an abominable war” (p. 40). The results of his dabbling led him to a career defined by sociological study.

For the applied sociologist, *Sketch* does not introduce a new perspective or attempt to change established knowledge. Rather, Bourdieu demonstrates his theory of practice in its application to everyday life, showcasing how one might plan strategically and move comfortably through life rather than passively drifting through it. *Sketch* offers the sociologist a template for strategic planning that might be used in a variety of settings. It is easy to imagine a community action project wherein community members engage in reflection similar to Bourdieu’s, locate where they find themselves in the present relative to others, and estimate where they might like to be in the future. A further application of *Sketch* is in developing as a sociologist. Bourdieu’s self-analysis might also be provided to students in introductory sociology courses as a guide for students to conduct their own self-analysis. In doing a similar self-analysis, new university students could think more critically about their location in the university, their social world more broadly, and plan their education strategically.

Although on a superficial level it is an easy read, to fully appreciate *Sketch for a Self-Analysis*, one should be familiar with Bourdieu’s work and, at least, knowledge of his key theoretical concepts. The text is written with regard to habitus, interest, field, symbolic violence, and other concepts, and it requires the reader to be aware that the stories he chooses to tell are not accidental. Indeed, he notes that the details he discloses are those “necessary for sociological explanation and understanding, and only those” (p. 1). The details he does disclose are of use to any sociologist interested in taking seriously Bourdieu’s call for reflexivity in that they partly demonstrate how to take oneself as an object of study. Bourdieu’s project is to show that by first locating oneself in a field, the university field or otherwise, one is able to discover one’s dispositions, and as such, to find comfort in uncomfortable locations, to seize upon the possibilities that come into view. In doing so, he hopes one might live a little bit better. However, the book is not an instruction manual. A sketch in the truest sense, it tasks the reader to decide how to finish the analysis by utilizing the theoretical concepts Bourdieu has left as his legacy.