**Philosophy and the social sciences: Bourdieu, Merleau-Ponty and Husserl.**

**Introduction.**

Jean-Claude Passeron articulated his defence of an historical approach to the analysis of social science concepts in *Le raisonnement sociologique* in direct opposition to the position announced by R.K. Merton:

“C’est le role heuristique du passé théorique, présent directement ou allusivement dans les parties les plus vivantes du lexique sociologique, qui rend inopérante la distinction mertonienne entre ‘théorie sociologique valable actuellement’ et ‘histoire des théories’ » (Passeron, 2006, 107)

Much has been written about the rediscovery of Hegelian philosophy in France in the 1930s and 1940s, focusing on the work of Kojève, Koyré, and, most importantly, Hyppolite. This has led to interest in Althusser’s argument against the academicisation of Hegelianism (in “Le retour à Hegel. Dernier mot du révisionnisme universitaire”, 1950, Althusser 1994, 251-268) and in his attempt to interpret the relationship between the thought of Marx and Hegel in such a way as to ground Marxism as science rather than philosophy and to deploy this science as the foundation for the political agenda of the Parti Communiste Français. His position as caïman at the Ecole Normale Supérieure from 1949 enabled him to keep these questions on the agenda for the new generation of entrants to the Ecole at the beginning of the 1950s, including Foucault, Derrida, and Bourdieu. Relatively less has been written about the reception in the same period in France of the work of Edmund Husserl, and this has led to some misunderstanding of the subsequent development of relations between philosophy and sociology. The purpose of this article is to follow Passeron’s cue by seeking to situate historically, rather than abstractly, the development of Bourdieu’s thought and practice in relation to the legacy of Husserlian phenomenology. In doing so, it will suggest that Bourdieu’s outlook on politics, which Wacquant has characterised as ‘sociologically political’ (Wacquant, 2005, 1) and which advocated ‘socio-analytic encounter’ and engagement with new social movements, should be understood as one which is grounded in ‘inter-subjectivity’ as advanced in the phenomenological approach to philosophical practice rather more than in reflexively empirical ‘sociology’.

Bourdieu never wrote explicitly about the influence of the work of Husserl on his thinking. However, he did offer a few suggestive hints. He was most explicit in the one page response which he wrote at the end of 2001, shortly before his death, to Throop and Murphy’s “Bourdieu and phenomenology”, which was published at the end of their ‘critical assessment’ (Throop & Murphy, 2002). Responding to what he took to be the accusation that he was a ‘quasi-plagiarist dissimulating his borrowings’, Bourdieu insisted that he had ‘often declared my indebtedness to phenomenology, which I practiced[[1]](#footnote-1) for some time in my youth’ (Bourdieu, 2002, 209). He proceeded to assert that he had never sought either to ‘*rephrase*’ or to ‘*refute*’ ‘Husserl, Schutz and a few more’ and that, rather, ‘It is my aim to *integrate* phenomenological analysis into a global approach of which it is one phase (the first, subjective phase), the second being the objectivist analysis. This integration is in no way an eclectic compilation since the effect is to pass beyond the limits (which I recall in my critique) inherent in each approach, while retaining their essential contributions.’ (Bourdieu, 2002, 209). Bourdieu concluded his response by charitably supposing that the authors had misread his ideas because they had failed to acknowledge that his ideas ‘are designed to guide empirical research and to solve specific problems of anthropology and sociology’(Bourdieu, 2002, 209) – because, in other words, they had responded philosophically to work which deliberately regarded philosophy as instrumental in pursuing problems of empirical research.

Throop & Murphy found Bourdieu’s ‘critique of phenomenology’ wanting as a result of their own disinclination to accept that there have been many changing varieties of phenomenological thought[[2]](#footnote-2). They argued as if there were a fixed definition of ‘phenomenology’ whereas there were different nuances in each of Husserl’s own continual attempts to characterise it definitively and there were variations introduced as a result of the interpretations of his followers. My intention is to ground my discussion in consideration of what Bourdieu would have taken phenomenology to be in the 1950s and 1960s and the suggestion that the interpretation of Husserl with which he was most likely to have been familiar is found in the work of Merleau-Ponty leads me to offer an explanation of the understanding of the nature and function of sociology which guided Bourdieu’s work for the following half century.

**Background.**

To carry out this outline of an argument, two sets of basic facts have to be kept in mind. We have, firstly, to hold on to the facts of Bourdieu’s career:

After his secondary education at the lycée in Pau from 1941 to 1947, Bourdieu took his *classes préparatoires* at the Lycée Louis-le-Grand, Paris, before entering the Ecole Normale Supérieure in 1951. He gained his *agrégation* in Philosophy in 1954, and then taught in the lycée in Moulins before he was conscripted to serve in the French army in Algeria in 1956. His first book – *Sociologie de l’Algérie* – was written whilst he was employed from 1958 to 1960 at the University of Algiers and was published in the PUF ‘Que Sais-je?’ series in 1958.

Secondly, I reiterate that it is not possible to discuss the influence of Husserl on Bourdieu as if ‘Husserl’s thought’ remained static and clearly defined through his life and in the posthumous representations of it offered by disciples and subsequent commentators. Indeed, the rationale for my attempted historical analysis is that the work on Husserl in France in the 1950s crucially began to benefit from the discovery of hitherto unpublished texts found in the archive at Louvain such that it began to perceive what recent scholarship has variously wanted to call either ‘the new Husserl’[[3]](#footnote-3) or ‘the other Husserl’[[4]](#footnote-4). This is not the place to try to characterise the range of interpretations of Husserl which were current in France in the early 1950s. Suffice it to say that Levinas, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, Berger, and Monnerot had all contributed significantly to the interpretation of Husserl in France in the 1940s and that the years from 1950 to 1953 saw the publication of Ricoeur’s translation, glossary and notes on Husserl’s *Ideen I* (1950); Jeanson’s, *La phénoménologie* and Tran-Duc-Thao’s, *Phénoménologie et matérialisme dialectique* (1951); Dufrenne’s, *Phénoménologie de l’expérience esthétique* and Waehlens’s, *Phénoménologie et vérité*, (1953), as well as many articles. Lyotard’s introduction to phenomenology was first published as *La Phénoménologie* in the PUF ‘Que-Sais-je?’ series in 1954. In relation to this complex situation, my intention is solely to concentrate on the influence on Bourdieu of Merleau-Ponty’s mediation of Husserl.

I begin with a summary of Merleau-Ponty’s position at the time when it can be assumed that he was influential on Bourdieu’s thought. I then explore, somewhat speculatively, the ways in which Bourdieu’s work developed in the decade or so after his return from Algeria with a view to suggesting that Bourdieu’s sociological practice had an affinity with the programme for philosophy advanced by Merleau-Ponty, such that Bourdieu can be said to have been his ‘best defender’[[5]](#footnote-5) in pursuing sociologically, as ‘negative philosophy’[[6]](#footnote-6), the extension of Husserlian phenomenology mapped out by his predecessor.

**The mediation of Merleau-Ponty.**

We know from the publication in 1996 of a text which Merleau-Ponty wrote in 1934 (at the age of 26) to secure research funding – “La Nature de la Perception” – that his earliest interest was in the use of Husserl’s phenomenology in facilitating a dialogue between philosophy and Gestalt psychology. Apparently basing his understanding of Husserl only on his reading of *Ideen I*, Merleau-Ponty wrote:

“On entend dire que Husserl se désintéresse de la psychologie. La vérité est qu’il maintient ses critiques anciennes du ‘Psychologisme’ et insiste toujours sur la ‘réduction’ par laquelle on passe de l’attitude naturelle, qui est celle de la psychologie comme de toutes les sciences positives, à l’attitude transcendantale, qui est celle de la philosophie phénoménologique. » (Merleau-Ponty, 1996, 21-2)

Merleau-Ponty pursued this research interest for the following decade and beyond. His *La structure du comportement[[7]](#footnote-7)* was published in 1942 and his *Phénoménologie de Perception* in 1945. As well as *Ideen I*, this cited other early works of Husserl; late published works such as *Erfahrung und Urteil* (1939) and Part I of *Die Krisis der europäischen Wissenschaften und die transzendentale Phänomenologie* (1936); and unpublished works, including Parts II and III of *Die Krisis* which had been consulted at Louvain[[8]](#footnote-8). Following the publication of *Phénoménologie de Perception*, Merleau-Ponty gave a paper in November, 1946 before the Société française de Philosophie, entitled “Le primat de la perception et ses conséquences philosophiques ». In the summary of his argument, Merleau-Ponty made it clear that he was becoming less concerned to produce a phenomenological critique of gestalt psychology and, instead, more concerned to argue phenomenologically that perception is the foundation of rational activity, including philosophical thought:

“Le monde perçu serait le fond toujours présupposé par toute rationalité, toute valeur et toute existence. Une conception de ce genre ne détruit ni la rationalité, ni l’absolu. Elle cherche à les faire descendre sur la terre. » (Merleau-Ponty, 1996, 43).

Merleau-Ponty tried to advance this position in his paper and he tried to offer his criticism of anticipated objections, but these were still articulated in the discussion which followed. Emile Bréhier was most vociferous. He was willing to admit that Merleau-Ponty had made interesting observations about the psychology of perception, but he would not accept that these could transfer to be of philosophical relevance. As he put it:

“M. Merleau-Ponty change, invertit le sens ordinaire de ce que nous appelons la philosophie”. (Merleau-Ponty, 1996, 73).

In denying the autonomy of philosophical reflection from lived experience, Bréhier contended that Merleau-Ponty was surrendering the accumulated tradition of rational thought, both philosophical and scientific.

Still relatively unestablished academically, Merleau-Ponty had been careful to make his argument without explicit reference to Husserl, making his case rather by reference to Descartes, Malebranche, and Bergson. He was teaching philosophy in Lyon between 1945 and 1948, and his 1946 paper reflects the interest which he was developing in his courses there, in particular in *Ame et corps chez Malebranche, Maine de Biran, Bergson*. Although he was appointed to the chair of Psychology and Pedagogy at the Sorbonne in 1949, it was becoming clear that Bréhier was correct in supposing that Merleau-Ponty was intent on practising philosophy in a transformed way. Van Breda quotes from a letter which Merleau-Ponty wrote to the management of UNESCO on September 18th, 1949, in support of the value of the Husserl archive. There Merleau-Ponty showed that he was aware of the tightrope he was walking in following Husserl’s work. He wrote of Husserl that

“... les philosophes contemporains sont probablement d’accord pour penser que sa tentative philosophique mérite dès maintenant le nom de classique, parce qu’elle a voulu situer en son juste lieu tout ce que l’histoire, la psychologie, la sociologie nous ont appris sur l’homme, sans laisser entamer par cette multitude de déterminations extérieures la fonction propre du jugement philosophique et de la raison »

And he concluded that Husserl had sought « à fonder à nouveau la raison sans ignorer ce que l’expérience enseigne. » (Van Breda, 1962, 429-30).

This was the prelude to Merleau-Ponty’s sustained exploration of the relationship between phenomenology and the human and social sciences, and the relationship of all both to the practice of philosophy and to political engagement. His course of general psychology at the Sorbonne in 1950/1 was on *Les sciences de l’homme et la phénoménologie*, reissued in 1962. In April, 1951, he gave a paper entitled “Sur la phénoménologie du langage” to the first international colloque of phenomenology which was published in 1952 in *Problèmes actuels de la phénoménologie* and subsequently reprinted in his *Signes* in 1960. In July, 1951, the Cahiers internationaux de sociologie published his “Le philosophe et la sociologie”, which was also reprinted in *Signes*. The paper which Merleau-Ponty wrote in 1952 for his candidature for appointment to a chair at the Collège de France indicates clearly the direction of his thinking in its summary of the progression from his earlier work to the research which he was then planning. The inaugural lecture which he gave at the Collège de France in January, 1953, and published the same year as *Eloge de la philosophie* confirms that his interest in the social sciences was subordinate to his overriding dedication to the pursuit of a new kind of philosophising.

It is only possible to sketch briefly the development of Merleau-Ponty’s thinking during these few years when Bourdieu was a student in Paris. In “Sur la phénoménologie du langage”, Merleau-Ponty made the important distinction between ‘early’ and ‘late’ Husserl, suggesting that in the former period Husserl had regarded ‘les langues empiriques comme des réalisations ‘brouillées’ du langage essentiel’ (Merleau-Ponty, 1960, 137), whereas in the late period, language was represented by Husserl ‘comme une manière originale de viser certains objets, comme le corps de la pensée ... ou même comme l’opération par laquelle des pensées qui, sans lui, resteraient phénomènes privés, acquièrent valeur intersubjective et finalement existence idéale … » (Merleau-Ponty, 1960, 137). Adopting the position of the late Husserl, Merleau-Ponty was driven to reflect on the status of the language traditionally deployed in philosophy. Husserl had tended to see his phenomenological analyses as ‘preparatory’ to a philosophical position which would ‘crown’ them, but Merleau-Ponty concluded, in a section on the consequences of his discussion of language in relation to phenomenological philosophy, that this separation was not possible. As he put it:

“Si le retour au Lebenswelt, et en particulier le retour du langage objectivé à la parole, est considéré comme absolument nécessaire, c’est que la philosophie doit réfléchir sur le mode de présence de l’objet au sujet, la conception de l’objet et la conception du sujet tels qu’ils apparaissent à la révélation phénoménologique au lieu de leur substituer le rapport de l’objet au sujet tel qu’il est conçu dans une philosophie idéaliste de la réflexion totale. » (Merleau-Ponty, 1960, 150-1).

It is because philosophy is constructed from the totality of experiences articulated in language, both historically and contemporaneously that Merleau-Ponty finds it possible to understand Husserl’s’enigmatic proposition’ that : « La subjectivité transcendantale est intersubjectivité” (Merleau-Ponty, 1960, 157).

Philosophy is constructed inter-subjectively in language exchange, but Merleau-Ponty’s discussion of the relationship between philosophy and sociology did not allow him to consider that inter-subjectivity might be synonymous with social construction and that sociology might usurp the function which he was recommending for philosophy. In “Le philosophe et la sociologie” he had recourse to the Husserlian notion of ‘intentionality’ to justify the separate discourse domains. Husserl was exemplary in that he believed that

“... toutes les formes de pensée sont d’une certain manière solidaires, qu’il n’y pas à ruiner les sciences de l’homme pour fonder la philosophie, ni à ruiner la philosophie pour fonder les sciences de l’homme, que toute science secrète une ontologie et que toute ontologie anticipe un savoir et qu’enfin c’est à nous de nous en arranger et de faire en sorte que la philosophie et la science soient toutes deux possibles … » (Merleau-Ponty, 1960, 159).

Merleau-Ponty proceeded to argue that the opposition between philosophy and sociology was based on a false characterisation of each. Philosophising involves direct involvement with experience rather than preoccupation with arid debates whilst sociology necessitates the constant correction of statistical abstractions by reference to the lived experience of both the observed and their observers. In short, Merleau-Ponty argued that dialogue between the discourses becomes possible as soon as both are defined phenomenologically. He clarified his position by quoting from and explicating a letter written by Husserl to Lévy-Bruhl in 1935, concluding that “Il y aurait une autonomie de la philosophie après le savoir positif, non avant” (Merleau-Ponty, 1960, 176). Philosophy is not a discourse which competes with social science for legitimacy. Rather it is a discourse which appropriates the explanatory discourses of the sciences so as to identify the underlying assumptions on which those sciences are founded. Philosophy absorbs or ‘envelopes’ the meanings of scientific discourses as articulated in the present, absorbing, in other words, all historical meanings which remain current in the present. All knowledge is our knowledge within the world which we ground in shared experience within communities. For Merleau-Ponty, science and sociology objectivise the way in which such participatory communication occurs, but he calls ‘philosophy’ “la conscience qu’il nous faut garder de la communauté ouverte et successive des *alter ego* vivant, parlant, et pensant, l’un en présence de l’autre et tous en rapport avec la nature, … » (Merleau-Ponty, 1960, 178-9). Following Husserl, Merleau-Ponty dismissed the autonomous discourse of philosophy but retained the impulse to found transcendentalism on inter-subjectivity.

The intention was that inter-subjectivity should operate trans-historically and trans-culturally, but Merleau-Ponty proceeded to presuppose the content of the desired exchanges, or prejudge the concerns of inter-subjective dialogue. Where might the ‘communauté ouverte’ be actualised? In spite of the desired social openness of conceptual exchange, Merleau-Ponty operated within an institutional context which formally embodied the idealist intellectual separation of which he disapproved. In 1962, Martial Guéroult published the text which Merleau-Ponty had prepared in support of his candidature for the chair of philosophy at the Collège de France. Merleau-Ponty had sketched his future plans in a way which made it clear that his ultimate goal was to return to ‘les questions classiques de la métaphysique’ (Merleau-Ponty, ed. Guéroult, 1962, 408) by a new route and it is therefore no surprise that his inaugural lecture on election to his post at the Collège, delivered on January 15th, 1953, and published the same year, was entitled *Eloge de la philosophie*.

**Bourdieu’s ‘response’ to Husserl/Merleau-Ponty.**

My starting points, for Bourdieu, are his comments in the interview conducted in 1985 with Axel Honneth and others, published as “Fieldwork in Philosophy” in *Choses dites* (Bourdieu, 1987, 13-46)[[9]](#footnote-9),which were confirmed in essentially the same terms in the posthumously published *Esquisse pour une auto-analyse* (Bourdieu, 2004). Honneth et al. asked Bourdieu at the beginning of their interview what the intellectual situation had been like when he was studying at the Ecole. Bourdieu’s response was ambivalent in respect of Husserl. He initially replied:

“Lorsque j’étais étudiant, dans les années 50, la phénoménologie, dans sa variante existentialiste, était à son zénith, et j’avais lu très tôt *L’être et le néant*, puis Merleau-Ponty et Husserl ; le marxisme n’existait pas véritablement comme position dans le champ intellectuel, même si des gens comme Tran-Duc-Tao parvenaient à le faire exister en posant la question de sa relation avec la phénoménologie. » (Bourdieu, 1987, 13).

Reflecting back in 1985, Bourdieu was aware that the version of phenomenology which seemed dominant in the early 1950s was only an ‘existentialist variant’ and he went on to recall that he had attended the lectures of Eric Weil, Alexandre Koyré, and Martial Guéroult. It was thanks to them ‘(et grâce aussi à la lecture de Husserl, encore très peu traduit à l’époque), que j’essayais, avec ceux qui, comme moi, étaient un peu fatigués de l’existentialisme, d’aller au-delà de la lecture des auteurs classiques et de donner un sens à la philosophie’ (Bourdieu, 1987, 14). Remembering still that these were words spoken in 1985 (to German interlocutors), Bourdieu is now implying that he used another variant of phenomenology – that of Husserl as the exponent of philosophy as a rigorous science – to counteract the existentialist tendency which he seems to equate with experientialism. He also implies, perhaps, that he was familiar with Husserl’s texts before they were translated into French, and, importantly, he suggests that the attraction of the non-existentialist variant of phenomenology was that it encouraged direct engagement with social reality rather than with the accumulated philosophical questions posed, answered, and re-posed within the academic philosophical tradition. It was this disposition to oppose the “soft ‘humanism’” of existentialism which gave Bourdieu some common ground with what he calls the ‘structuralist generation’. This comment provoked Honneth et al. to ask if Bourdieu had ever been interested in existentialism. Again, there is a slightly ambivalent reply:

“J’ai lu Heidegger, beaucoup et avec une certain fascination, notamment les analyses de *Sein und Zeit* sur le temps public, l’histoire, etc., qui, avec les analyses de Husserl dans *Ideen II*, m’ont beaucoup aidé- ainsi que Schütz plus tard – dans mes efforts pour analyser l’expérience ordinaire du social ». (Bourdieu, 1987, 15)

Bourdieu singles out the thinking of Heidegger and Husserl in relation to time without distinguishing between them; he specifies the influence of *Ideen II* (first published in German posthumously in 1952) rather than of Paul Ricoeur’s French translation of 1950 of Husserl’s *Ideen I*, first published in 1913; he indicates that the influence of Schutz came later (perhaps on the basis of the English translation, 1967, as *The Phenomenology of the Social World* of Schutz’s German text of 1932 in which he had offered a phenomenological critique of Weber’s interpretive sociology); in relation to time, he does not refer at all to Husserl’s *Vorlesungen zur Phänomenologie des inneren Zeitbewusstseins* of 1928, much cited in Schutz’s 1932 text, but not translated into English until 1964, as *The Phenomenology of Internal Time Consciousness*; and, finally, he suggests that the distinction between objective and subjective time to be found in Bergson as much as Heidegger/Husserl by analogy guided his capacity to understand the relationship between primary and objective knowledge of the social world. Continuing the same answer, Bourdieu implied that he had derived some intellectual benefit from existentialism, so described, but that he had never ‘participé du *mood* existentialiste’. He proceeded to separate Merleau-Ponty from this ‘mood’ in the following way:

“Merleau-Ponty occupait une place à part, au moins à mes yeux. Il s’intéressait aux sciences de l’homme, à la biologie, et il donnait l’idée de ce que peut être une réflexion sur le présent immédiat – avec par exemple ses textes sur l’histoire, sur le parti communiste, sur les procès de Moscou – capable d’échapper aux simplifications sectaires de la discussion politique. Il paraissait représenter une des issues possibles hors de la philosophie bavarde de l’institution scolaire. » (Bourdieu, 1987, 15).

Honneth et al. asked whether the Durkheimian sociologist Georges Davy had dominated philosophy at this time. Bourdieu denied that Davy’s was an intellectual domination but, rather, simply an institutional authority. He insisted that he, and his fellow normaliens, were dismissive of sociology in the 1950s. He was intent on transforming philosophy by converting it whole-heartedly to science. As he puts it: “Je pense qu’à ce moment-là il fallait mettre en jeu le statut de philosophe et tous ses prestiges pour opérer une véritable reconversion scientifique » (Bourdieu, 1987, 16). He distinguishes his endeavour from the contemporary efforts of Foucault, Derrida, and Barthes who, he claims, achieved only a superficial transformation of philosophy by generating the pseudo-scientificity of the ‘-logy effect’ of ‘archaeology, grammatology, and semiology’. By contrast, Bourdieu claimed that he had tried to use structuralism to inject a relational dimension into social scientific methodology without sharing in the vogue for structuralist thought. He argues that he had lectured on Durkheim and Saussure in Algiers in 1958/59 precisely so as to expose the inadequacies of ‘pure theory’ forms of structuralism. Asked whether it was the case that he had first of all become an ethnologist, Bourdieu replied that he had already, before his conscription to serve in the army in Algeria, embarked on “des recherches sur la’phénoménologie de la vie affective’, ou plus exactement sur les structures temporelles de l’expérience affective” (Bourdieu, 1987, 16). This was in 1955/6 and it is clear from a comment in *Esquisse pour une auto-analyse* that, whilst in Algeria, he was struggling to reconcile his interest in the work of Husserl with the research project which he initiated with the publication of his first book. In *Esquisse*, Bourdieu recollects that when writing *Sociologie de l’Algérie* he regarded his commitment to sociology and ethnology as only provisional and thought that he would return to philosophy afterwards. In an aside, he offered as evidence the fact that “pendant tout le temps que j’écrivais *Sociologie de l’Algérie* et que je menais mes premières enquêtes ethnologiques, je continuais à écrire chaque soir sur la structure de l’expérience temporelle selon Husserl » (Bourdieu, 2004, 57)

**Concluding argument.**

Bourdieu’s comments quoted above all offer ex post facto descriptions (of 1985 and 2002) of the early influence of Husserl. They are recollections (from the beginning and the end of his time as Professor of Sociology at the Collège de France). I have no reason to suppose that they distort his formation, but they are post-1972 retrospections. Based on internal evidence from Bourdieu’s texts, I simply want to offer an interpretation of his pre-1972 development to suggest that Bourdieu’s subsequent sociological work can be seen as a prolongation of the agenda established by Merleau-Ponty. I take 1972 to be a crucial turning point in his career as he then began to actualise the approach indicated in *Esquisse d’une théorie de la pratique*.

*Sociologie de l’algérie* (1958) was the first publication related to a research project in which Bourdieu aimed to produce a phenomenological acculturation study. Based on the empirical findings which were to be published as *Travail et travailleurs en Algérie* in 1963, Bourdieu tried to understand the process of cultural adaptation involved for those people who had moved into Algiers from their original tribal situations. The analysis was predicated on the assumption that the understanding which he derived from his reading of secondary material about the social organisation of indigenous tribes corresponded with the taken-for-granted, experiential sets of values which tribespeople modified in adjusting to urban life. Bourdieu’s interest in ‘time’ was only one example of the inherent problems associated with seeking to reconcile ‘objective’ analyses with ‘internal consciousnesses’. In looking at time and work, Bourdieu was deliberately highlighting the clash between the ‘modern’, ‘objective’ labelling of forms of inaction as ‘unemployment’ and the traditional accommodation of identical behaviour as socially valid. This tension in the observed situations correlated importantly with methodological tensions. *Travail et travailleurs en Algérie* is in two parts, setting up a dialogue between ‘subjective’ ethnography and ‘objective’ statistics, and Bourdieu wrote an introduction to the first part – “Statistique et Sociologie” – in which he argued that together both approaches set up a phenomenological dialectic. The text offered detailed information about the procedures adopted by the research team and provided transcripts of interviews which constituted ‘spontaneous sociology’. Bourdieu argued that his team of indigenous research assistants were intervening in their own political situations by virtue of conducting their research. In short, from his very first research project, Bourdieu was eager to suggest that he was not seeking to generate ‘findings’ which ‘represented’ the observed social ‘reality’ but, rather, that the process of research enquiry was performative and that the textual communication of that performance was a rhetorical device to generate an encounter between the cultural assumptions exposed in the research and those of the metropolitan French readership. The discourses of anthropology or sociology which may have informed the writing were of secondary importance in relation to the process which, at all stages, was designed to encourage inter-subjective encounter, either at the level of inter-personal or inter-cultural relations.

On returning to France in 1960 to become secretary to the research group which Aron had founded, my view is that Bourdieu felt constrained to manage research projects which could be recognised to be ‘sociological’. Using Husserlian terminology, Bourdieu’s work appeared to be operating within the ‘natural attitude’ of social scientific discourse. The methodologies employed in the researches were always clearly articulated with the deliberate intent of communicating the degree of ‘representativity’ of findings, of arguments from the particular to the general, but, to use the terminology that Bourdieu deployed in “Champ intellectuel et projet créateur” (1966), his researches were situated within, and found meaning within, the ‘field’ of social sciences. In collaboration with Chamboredon and Passeron, Bourdieu published *Le métier de sociologue* in 1968 as an attempt to recommend sociological research as a process of conceptually creative invention rather than of routinised methodological applications. It appeared that *Le métier de sociologue* was advocating a vigilance founded in the sociology of sociological knowledge as a procedure for legitimating sociological findings. Borrowing Bachelard’s notion of ‘epistemological breaks’ seemed to secure objectivist sociological explanation, both intellectually and institutionally, but Bourdieu wanted to advance ‘fieldwork in philosophy’ rather than to consolidate social science disciplines. In the period between the mid-1960s and the early 1970s, Bourdieu moved from developing a theory which could justify a non-representational view of social science – as outlined in “Structuralism and Theory of Sociological Knowledge” (1968) – towards developing a theory of phenomenological practice which would recognise that the research process is one of encounter between researcher and researched.

*Esquisse d’une théorie de la pratique* contains in embryo the theories of ‘socio-analytic encounter’ and of ‘maeutic’ involvement which Bourdieu was to elaborate in theory in *Réponses. Pour une anthropologie réflexive* (1992) and in practice in *La misère du monde* (1993). Whereas Merleau-Ponty had practised an alternative mode of philosophising but had been unable to escape the constraints of an institutional position committing him to being a philosopher, Bourdieu’s accumulated work in the sociology of education, culminating in the reflexive/objective *Homo academicus* (1984) enabled him to subject his situation as an observer to scrutiny as much as the situation of those he was observing in such a way as to enable his sociological practice to participate in an open community rather than the enclosed surrogate for it with which Merleau-Ponty remained content. It is important to note that Bourdieu’s fulfilment of the logic of the direction in which Husserl’s thinking in the 1930s was tending enabled him to be engaged in politics in a way not achieved by Merleau-Ponty or Sartre. Bourdieu’s early critique – in the introductory essay which he wrote for Part II of *Travail et travailleurs en algérie* - of Michel Leiris’s “L’ethnographe devant le colonialisme”[[10]](#footnote-10) is instructive in this respect. Bourdieu argued against the contention that research undertaken within the colonial situation is ‘affectée d’une impureté *essentielle*’ [my emphasis] (Bourdieu, 1963, 251) and insisted, instead, that research encounters do not occur in a context of existential freedom but, rather in full reflexivity about the socio-historical conditions of both observed and observers. The French ethnographer working in Algeria needed to choose ‘entre le langage de la nécessité ou du destin et le langage de la liberté et de la responsabilité’ (Bourdieu, 1963, 258). He was already tacitly rejecting Sartre’s egological phenomenology, opting for the ‘soft determinism’ which the concept of the habitus was subsequently used to operationalise. As he was later to indicate in “Le mort saisit le vif. Les relations entre l’histoire réifiée et l’histoire incorporée” (1980), we carry out research in present circumstances which embody prior history. Bourdieu’s position was already close to that articulated by Merleau-Ponty in “Sur Madagascar” – an interview which was published in *L’Express* in August, 1958 and republished in *Signes*. Merleau-Ponty argued that Marxist analysis was moribund in respect of the colonial situation. His interviewer supposed that Merleau-Ponty was believing in the superiority of western values over those of under-developed countries, but he retorted:

Non certes à leur valeur morale, et encore moins à leur beauté supérieure, mais, comment dire, à leur valeur *historique*. » (Merleau-Ponty, 1960, 540)

Trans-national and intra-national cultural relations – social and political - both necessitate, in other words, an acceptance of sedimented histories which are exchanged in present encounters. Merleau-Ponty believed in the philosophical value of encounter conducted in terms of social constraints rather than existential freedom, and it was Bourdieu’s achievement to emphasize the function of sociological analysis in securing such encounter. Bourdieu did not see himself as a sociologist *of* social movements. Rather, his engagement with social movements was a realisation of his longstanding phenomenological orientation.

Bourdieu, P. (with A. Honneth, H. Kocyba, B. Schwibs, 1986, “Der Kampf um die symbolische Ordnung”, *Asthetik und Kommunikation*, 16, 61-2, 142-163.

Bourdieu, P. (with H. Woetzel), 1988, “’...ich glaube, ich wäre sein bester Verteidiger’. Ein Gespräch mit Pierre Bourdieu über die Heidegger-Kontroverse”. *Das Argument*. 171, 723-726.

Bourdieu, P., 1997, *Méditations pascaliennes*, Paris, Seuil.

Bourdieu, P., 1987, *Choses dites*, Paris, Minuit.

Bourdieu, P., 2002, « Response to Throop and Murphy », *Anthropological Theory*, 2 (2), 209.

Bourdieu, P., 2004, *Esquisse pour une auto-analyse*, Paris, Editions Raisons d’Agir

Leiris, M, 1950, « L’ethnographe devant le colonialisme », *Temps Modernes*, August.

Merleau-Ponty, M., 1960, *Signes*, Paris, Gallimard.

Merleau-Ponty, M., ed. M. Guéroult, 1962, « Un inédit de Maurice Merleau-Ponty », *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale*, 4, 401-409.

Merleau-Ponty, M., 1996, *Le primat de la perception et ses conséquences philosophiques*, Lagrasse, Verdier.

Passseron, J.-C., 2006, *Le raisonnement sociologique. Un espace non poppérien de l’argumentation*, 2nd edn., Paris, Albin Michel.

Throop, C.J. & K.M. Murphy, 2002, « Bourdieu and phenomenology. A critical assessment”, *Anthropological Theory*, 2 (2), 185-207.

Van Breda, H.L., 1962, “Maurice Merleau-Ponty et les Archives-Husserl Louvain », *Revue de métaphysique et de morale*, 67 (Oct-Dec), 410-30.

Wacquant, L, ed., 2005, *Pierre Bourdieu and Democratic Politics*, Cambridge, Polity Press.

Welton, D., 2000, *The Other Husserl: The Horizons of Transcendental Phenomenology*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press.

Welton, D., ed., 2003, *The New Husserl. A Critical Reader*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press.

1. Note that, importantly, Bourdieu emphasizes that he had ‘practised’ phenomenology, not that he had been committed to it as philosophy. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This is not the place to take issue in detail with the Throop and Murphy article, which is riddled with misrepresentation, misinterpretation, and inconsistency, both of the work of Bourdieu and Husserl. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ed. Welton, 2003. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Welton, 2000. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. To borrow the phrase used by Bourdieu in respect of his relation to Heidegger in an interview only published in German in 1988: “...ich glaube, ich ware sein bester Verteidiger.” (Bourdieu, 1988). Note that the statement is conditional. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. “Je n’avais jamais éprouvé avec une telle intensité l’étrangeté de mon projet, sorte de philosophie négative exposée à paraître autodestructrice. » (Bourdieu, 1997, 15). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Some commentators on Bourdieu suggest that it was from this text that he derived the notions of *habitus* and *hexis*. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. We know from H.L. van Breda’s account, precisely what kind of access Merleau-Ponty had to the Husserl archives which had been moved to Louvain after Husserl’s death in 1938. Merleau-Ponty went to Louvain first in April, 1939 , and retained access to unpublished material all through the 1940s. (see H.L. Van Breda, 1962) [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Published in more extensive form in German in Bourdieu, with A. Honneth, H.Kocyba, B. Schwibs, 1986. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Leiris, 1950. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)