

I

The objective limits of objectivism

SECTION I: ANALYSES

The practical privilege in which all scientific activity arises never more subtly governs that activity (insofar as science presupposes not only an epistemological break but also a *social* separation) than when, unrecognised as privilege, it leads to an implicit theory of practice which is the corollary of neglect of the social conditions in which science is possible. The anthropologist's particular relation to the object of his study contains the makings of a theoretical distortion inasmuch as his situation as an observer, excluded from the real play of social activities by the fact that he has no place (except by choice or by way of a game) in the system observed and has no need to make a place for himself there, inclines him to a hermeneutic representation of practices, leading him to reduce all social relations to communicative relations and, more precisely, to decoding operations. Charles Bally remarked that linguistic research takes different directions according to whether it deals with the researcher's mother tongue or with a foreign language, emphasizing in particular the tendency to *intellectualism* implied in observing language from the standpoint of the listening subject rather than that of the speaking subject, that is, as a "means of action and expression": "the listener is on the side of the language, it is with the language that he interprets speech".¹ And exaltation of the virtues of the distance secured by externality simply transmutes into an epistemological choice the anthropologist's objective situation, that of the "impartial spectator", as Husserl puts it, condemned to see all practice as a spectacle.

It is instructive to glance at the case of art history, which, never having really broken with the tradition of the *amateur*, gives free rein to celebratory contemplation and finds in the sacred character of its object every pretext for a hagiographic hermeneutics superbly indifferent to the question of the social conditions in which works are produced and circulate. Panofsky, for example, writing on Abbot Suger and the "invention" of Gothic architecture, only exceptionally and almost accidentally abandons the point of view of the interpreter who, more concerned with the *opus operatum* than the *modus operandi*, represses the question of artistic production under the concept of the "objective intention" of the work and reduces immediate comprehension to a decoding that is unaware that it is a decoding. To treat a work of plastic art as a discourse intended to be interpreted, decoded, by reference to a transcendent code analogous to the Saussurian "*langue*" is to forget that artistic production is always *also* – to different degrees depending on the art and on the historically variable styles

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of practising it – the product of an “art”, “pure practice without theory”, as Durkheim says,² or to put it another way, a *mimesis*, a sort of symbolic gymnastics, like the rite or the dance; and it is also to forget that the work of art always contains something *ineffable*, not by excess, as hagiography would have it, but by default, something which communicates, so to speak, from body to body, i.e. on the hither side of words or concepts, and which pleases (or displeases) without concepts.

So long as he remains unaware of the limits inherent in his point of view on the object, the anthropologist is condemned to adopt unwittingly for his own use the representation of action which is forced on agents or groups when they lack practical mastery of a highly valued competence and have to provide themselves with an explicit and at least semi-formalized substitute for it in the form of a *repertoire of rules*, or of what sociologists consider, at best, as a “rôle”, i.e. a predetermined set of discourses and actions appropriate to a particular “stage-part”.³ It is significant that “culture” is sometimes described as a *map*; it is the analogy which occurs to an outsider who has to find his way around in a foreign landscape and who compensates for his lack of practical mastery, the prerogative of the native, by the use of a model of all possible routes. The gulf between this potential, abstract space, devoid of landmarks or any privileged centre – like genealogies, in which the ego is as unreal as the starting-point in a Cartesian space – and the practical space of journeys actually made, or rather of journeys actually being made, can be seen from the difficulty we have in recognizing familiar routes on a map or town-plan until we are able to bring together the axes of the field of potentialities and the “system of axes linked unalterably to our bodies, and carried about with us wherever we go”, as Poincaré puts it, which structures practical space into right and left, up and down, in front and behind.

Hence it is not sufficient for anthropology to break with native experience and the native representation of that experience: it has to make a second break and question the presuppositions inherent in the position of an outside observer, who, in his preoccupation with *interpreting* practices, is inclined to introduce into the object the principles of his relation to the object, as is attested by the special importance he assigns to communicative functions (whether in language, myth, or marriage). Knowledge does not merely depend, as an elementary relativism teaches, on the particular standpoint an observer “situated in space and time” takes up on the object. The “knowing subject”, as the idealist tradition rightly calls him, inflicts on practice a much more fundamental and pernicious alteration which, being a constituent condition of the cognitive operation, is bound to pass unnoticed: in taking up a point of view on the action, withdrawing from it in order to observe it from above and from a distance, he constitutes practical activity as an *object of observation and analysis*, a *representation*.

From the mechanics of the model to the dialectic of strategies

The social world may be the object of three modes of theoretical knowledge, each of which implies a set of (usually tacit) anthropological theses. Although these modes of knowledge are strictly speaking in no way exclusive, and may be described as moments in a dialectical advance towards adequate knowledge, they have only one thing in common, the fact that they are opposed to practical knowledge. The knowledge we shall call *phenomenological* (or, to speak in terms of currently active schools, “ethnomethodological”) sets out to make explicit the truth of primary experience of the social world, i.e. all that is inscribed in the relationship of *familiarity* with the familiar environment, the unquestioning apprehension of the social world which, by definition, does not reflect on itself and excludes the question of the conditions of its own possibility. The knowledge we shall term *objectivist* (of which structuralist hermeneutics is a particular case) constructs the objective relations (e.g. economic or linguistic) which structure practice and representations of practice, i.e., in particular, primary knowledge, practical and tacit, of the familiar world. This construction presupposes a break with primary knowledge, whose tacitly assumed presuppositions give the social world its self-evident, natural character.⁴ It is only on condition that it poses the question which the *doxic* experience of the social world excludes by definition – the question of the (particular) conditions making that experience possible – that objectivist knowledge can establish both the structures of the social world and the objective truth of primary experience as experience denied *explicit* knowledge of those structures.

Finally, it is only by means of a second break, which is needed in order to grasp the limits of objectivist knowledge – an inevitable moment in scientific knowledge – and to bring to light the theory of theory and the theory of practice inscribed (in its practical state) in this mode of knowledge, that we can integrate the gains from it into an adequate science of practices. The critical break with objectivist abstraction ensuing from inquiry into the conditions of possibility, and thereby, into the limits of the objective and objectifying standpoint which grasps practices from outside, as a *fait accompli*, instead of constructing their generative principle by situating itself within the very movement of their accomplishment, has no other aim than to make possible a science of the *dialectical* relations between the objective structures to which the objectivist mode of knowledge gives access and the structured dispositions within which those structures are actualized and which tend to reproduce them.

This questioning of objectivism is liable to be understood at first as a rehabilitation of subjectivism and to be merged with the critique that naive

humanism levels at scientific objectification in the name of “lived experience” and the rights of “subjectivity”. In reality, the theory of practice and of the practical mode of knowledge inherent in all practice which is the precondition for a rigorous science of practices carries out a new reversal of the problematic which objectivism has to construct in order to constitute the social world as a system of objective relations independent of individual consciousnesses and wills. Just as objectivist knowledge poses the question of the conditions of the possibility of primary experience, thereby revealing that this experience (or the phenomenological analysis of it) is fundamentally defined as *not* posing this question, so the theory of practice puts objectivist knowledge back on its feet by posing the question of the (theoretical and also social) conditions which make such knowledge possible. Because it produces its science of the social world against the implicit presuppositions of practical knowledge of the social world, objectivist knowledge is diverted from construction of the theory of practical knowledge of the social world, of which it at least produces the lack.

Objective analysis of practical apprehension of the familiar world is not a new form of sacrificial offering to the mysteries of subjectivity, but a means of exploring the limits of all objective exploration. It teaches us that we shall escape from the ritual either/or choice between objectivism and subjectivism in which the social sciences have so far allowed themselves to be trapped only if we are prepared to inquire into the mode of production and functioning of the practical mastery which makes possible both an objectively intelligible practice and also an objectively enchanted experience of that practice; more precisely, that we shall do so only if we subordinate all operations of scientific practice to a theory of practice and of practical knowledge (which has nothing to do with phenomenological reconstitution of lived experience), and inseparably from this, to a theory of the theoretical and social conditions of the possibility of objective apprehension – and thereby to a theory of the limits of this mode of knowledge.

A single example will suffice to show how this sort of third-order knowledge does not cancel out the gains from objectivist knowledge but conserves and transcends them by integrating the truth of practical experience and of the practical mode of knowledge which this learned knowledge had to be constructed against, that is to say, inseparably, the truth of all learned knowledge. It will be remembered that Lévi-Strauss, criticizing Mauss’s “phenomenological” approach to gift exchange, makes a complete break with native experience and the native theory of that experience, positing that it is the exchange as a constructed object which “constitutes the primary phenomenon, and not the individual operations into which social life breaks it down”,⁵ or, in other words, that the “mechanical laws” of the cycle of

From the mechanics of the model to the dialectic of strategies 5

reciprocity are the unconscious principle of the obligation to give, the obligation to give in return, and the obligation to receive.⁶ “Phenomenological” analysis and objectivist analysis bring to light two antagonistic principles of gift exchange: the gift as experienced, or, at least, meant to be experienced, and the gift as seen from outside. To stop short at the “objective” truth of the gift, i.e. the model, is to set aside the question of the relationship between so-called objective truth, i.e. that of the observer, and the truth that can scarcely be called subjective, since it represents the official definition of the subjective experience of the exchange; it is to ignore the fact that the agents practise as irreversible a sequence of actions that the observer constitutes as reversible. The observer’s totalizing apprehension substitutes an objective structure fundamentally defined by its *reversibility* for an equally objectively *irreversible* succession of gifts which are not mechanically linked to the gifts they respond to or insistently call for: any really objective analysis of the exchange of gifts, words, challenges, or even women must allow for the fact that each of these inaugural acts may misfire, and that it receives its meaning, in any case, from the response it triggers off, even if the response is a failure to reply that retrospectively removes its intended meaning. To say that the meaning the gift has for the donor is recognized and consecrated only when the counter-gift has been made does not amount to restoring the structure of the cycle of reciprocity in different words. It means that even if reversibility is the objective truth of the discrete acts which ordinary experience knows in discrete form and calls gift exchanges, it is not the whole truth of a practice which could not exist if it were consciously perceived in accordance with the model. The temporal structure of gift exchange, which objectivism ignores, is what makes possible the coexistence of two opposing truths, which defines the full truth of the gift.

In every society it may be observed that, if it is not to constitute an insult, the counter-gift must be *deferred* and *different*, because the immediate return of an exactly identical object clearly amounts to a refusal (i.e. the return of the same object). Thus gift exchange is opposed on the one hand to *swapping*, which, like the theoretical model of the cycle of reciprocity, telescopes gift and counter-gift into the same instant, and on the other hand, to *lending*, in which the return of the loan is explicitly guaranteed by a juridical act and is thus *already accomplished* at the very moment of the drawing up of a contract capable of ensuring that the acts it prescribes are predictable and calculable. The difference and delay which the monothetic model obliterates must be brought into the model not, as Lévi-Strauss suggests, out of a “phenomenological” desire to restore the subjective experience of the practice of the exchange, but because the operation of gift exchange presupposes (individual and collective) misrecognition (*méconnaissance*) of the reality of

the objective “mechanism” of the exchange, a reality which an immediate response brutally exposes: the *interval* between gift and counter-gift is what allows a pattern of exchange that is always liable to strike the observer and also the participants as *reversible*, i.e. both forced and interested, to be experienced as irreversible. “Overmuch eagerness to discharge one’s obligations is a form of ingratitude”, said La Rochefoucauld. To betray one’s haste to be free of an obligation one has incurred, and thus to reveal too overtly one’s desire to pay off services rendered or gifts received, so as to be quits, is to denounce the initial gift retrospectively as motivated by the intention of obliging one. It is all a question of style, which means in this case timing and choice of occasion, for the same act – giving, giving in return, offering one’s services, paying a visit, etc. – can have completely different meanings at different times, coming as it may at the right or the wrong moment, while almost all important exchanges – gifts to the mother of a new-born child, or on the occasion of a wedding, etc. – have their own particular moments; the reason is that the lapse of time *separating* the gift from the counter-gift is what authorizes the deliberate oversight, the collectively maintained and approved self-deception without which symbolic exchange, a fake circulation of fake coin, could not operate. If the system is to work, the agents must not be entirely unaware of the truth of their exchanges, which is made explicit in the anthropologist’s model, while at the same time they must refuse to know and above all to recognize it.⁷ In short, everything takes place as if agents’ practice, and in particular their manipulation of *time*, were organized exclusively with a view to concealing from themselves and from others the truth of their practice, which the anthropologist and his models bring to light simply by substituting the timeless model for a scheme which works itself out only in and through time.

To abolish the interval is also to abolish strategy. The period interposed, which must be neither too short (as is clearly seen in gift exchange) nor too long (especially in the exchange of revenge-murders), is quite the opposite of the inert gap of time, the time-lag which the objectivist model makes of it. Until he has given in return, the receiver is “*obliged*”, expected to show his gratitude towards his benefactor, or, at least, to have regard for him, to refrain from using against him all the weapons he otherwise might, to pull his punches, lest he be accused of ingratitude and stand condemned by “what people say”, which is what gives his actions their social meaning. The man who has not avenged a murder, not bought back his land from a rival family, not married off his daughters in time, sees his capital diminished from day to day by passing time – unless he is capable of transforming forced delay into strategic deferment, the space of time into deliberate spacing out: putting off revenge or the return of a gift can be a way of keeping one’s partner-opponent

From the mechanics of the model to the dialectic of strategies 7

in the dark about one's intentions; the moment for the comeback becomes impossible to pinpoint, like the really evil moment in the ill-omened periods of the ritual calendar, just before the upturn. After a certain point lack of response ceases to be an oversight and becomes disdainful refusal. Delay is also a way of exacting from him the deferential conduct that is required as long as relations are not broken off. It is understandable within this logic that a man whose daughter is asked for in marriage should feel he has to reply as soon as possible if the answer is no, lest he seem to be taking advantage of the situation, and offend the suitor, whereas if he intends to say yes, he may put off the reply for as long as he likes, so as to make the most of the temporary advantage of his position, which he will lose as soon as he gives his consent. Everything takes place as if the ritualization of interactions had the paradoxical effect of giving time its full social efficacy, never more potent than when nothing *but* time is going on. "Time", we say, "is on his side"; time can also work against one. In other words, time derives its efficacy from the state of the structure of relations within which it comes into play; which does not imply that the model of that structure can leave it out of account. When the unfolding of the action is heavily ritualized, as in the dialectic of offence and vengeance, there is still room for strategies which consist of playing on the time, or rather the *tempo*, of the action, by delaying revenge so as to prolong the threat of revenge. And this is true, *a fortiori*, of all the less strictly regulated occasions which offer unlimited scope for strategies exploiting the possibilities offered by manipulation of the tempo of the action – holding back or putting off, maintaining suspense or expectation, or on the other hand, hurrying, hustling, surprising, and stealing a march, not to mention the art of ostentatiously giving time ("devoting one's time to someone") or withholding it ("no time to spare"). We know, for example, how much advantage the holder of a transmissible power can derive from the art of delaying transmission and keeping others in the dark as to his ultimate intentions. Then there are all the strategies intended simply to neutralize the action of time and ensure the continuity of interpersonal relations, drawing the continuous out of the discontinuous, as mathematicians do, through infinite multiplication of the infinitely small, in the form, for example, of the "little presents" said to "keep friendship going" ("O present – *thunticht* – you won't make me rich but you are the bond of friendship").

Little presents, which are halfway between "gratuitous" gifts (*elma'tar*, unreturned gift, "like a mother's milk", or *thikchi*, a thing given without recompense) and the most rigorously "forced" gifts, must be of modest value and hence easy to give and easy to match; but they must be *frequent*, and in a sense continuous, which implies that they must function within the logic of "surprises" or "kind thoughts" rather than according to the mechanisms of ritual. These presents intended to maintain the everyday order of social intercourse almost always consist of a dish of cooked food,

couscous (with a piece of cheese, when they mark a cow's first milk) and follow the course of minor family celebrations – the third or seventh day after a birth, a baby's first tooth or first steps, a boy's first haircut, first visit to the market, or first fast; linked to events in the life-cycle of men or the earth, they involve those wishing to *impart* their joy, and those invited to *take part* in that joy, in what is nothing less than a fertility rite: when the dish which contained the present is taken back, it always contains, "for good luck" (*el fal*), what is sometimes called *thiririth* (from *er*, to give back), that is to say, a little corn, a little semolina (never barley, a female plant and symbol of fragility), or, preferably, some dried vegetables, chick peas, lentils, etc., called *ajedjig* "flower", given "so that the boy [the reason for the exchange] will flourish", so that he will grow tall and be fruitful. These ordinary gifts (which include some of those they call *tharzeft*, which are visiting-presents) are sharply opposed to extraordinary gifts, *lkhir* or *lehna*, given for the major festivals called *thimeghriwin* (sing. *thameghra*) – weddings, births, and circumcisions – and *a fortiori* to *lw'ada*, the obligatory gift to a saint. And indeed, the little gifts between relatives and friends are opposed to the present of money and eggs which is given by affines remote both in space and in the genealogy, and also in time – since they are seen only intermittently, on the "great occasions" – and whose importance and solemnity make them a sort of controlled challenge in the same way that marriages within the lineage or neighbourhood, so frequent and so closely woven into the fabric of ordinary exchanges that they pass unnoticed, are opposed to the more prestigious but infinitely more hazardous extraordinary marriages between different villages or tribes, sometimes intended to set the seal on alliances or reconciliations and always marked by solemn ceremonies.

This takes us a long way from the objectivist model of the mechanical interlocking of prerogated actions that is commonly associated with the notion of ritual: only a virtuoso with a perfect command of his "art of living" can play on all the resources inherent in the ambiguities and uncertainties of behaviour and situation in order to produce the actions appropriate to each case, to do that of which people will say "There was nothing else to be done", and do it the right way. We are a long way, too, from norms and rules: doubtless there are slips, mistakes, and moments of clumsiness to be observed here as elsewhere; and also grammarians of decorum able to state (and elegantly, too) what it is right to do and say, but never presuming to encompass in a catalogue of recurrent situations and appropriate conduct, still less in a fatalistic model, the "art" of the *necessary improvisation* which defines excellence.

To restore to practice its practical truth, we must therefore reintroduce time into the theoretical representation of a practice which, being temporally structured, is intrinsically defined by its *tempo*. The generative, organizing scheme which gives a discussion its unity or an improvised speech its "argument", and attains conscious expression in order to work itself out, is an often imprecise but systematic principle of selection and realization, tending, through steadily directed adjustments and corrections, to eliminate accidents when they can be put to use, and to conserve even fortuitous successes. It is therefore practice, in its most specific aspect, which is annihilated when

From the mechanics of the model to the dialectic of strategies 9

the scheme is identified with the model: retrospective necessity becomes prospective necessity, the product a project; and things which have happened, and can no longer not happen, become the irresistible future of the acts which made them happen. This amounts to positing, with Diodorus, that if it is true to say of a thing that it will be, then it must one day be true to say that it is, or, in the words of another paradox, that "Today is tomorrow, because yesterday tomorrow was today."⁸ All experience of practice contradicts these paradoxes, and affirms that cycles of reciprocity are not the irresistible gearing of obligatory practices found only in ancient tragedy: a gift may remain unrequited, if it meets with ingratitude; it may be spurned as an insult.⁹ Once the possibility is admitted that the "mechanical law" of the "cycle of reciprocity" may not apply, the whole logic of practice is transformed. Even in cases in which the agents' habitus are perfectly harmonized and the interlocking of actions and reactions is totally predictable *from outside*, uncertainty remains as to the outcome of the interaction as long as the sequence has not been completed: the passage from the highest probability to absolute certainty is a qualitative leap which is not proportionate to the numerical gap. This uncertainty, which finds its objective basis in the probabilist logic of social laws, is sufficient to modify not only the experience of practice (which phenomenological analysis describes, being more attentive than objectivism to the temporality of action) but practice itself, in giving an objective foundation to strategies aimed at avoiding the most probable outcome.

To substitute *strategy* for the *rule* is to reintroduce time, with its rhythm, its orientation, its irreversibility. Science has a time which is not that of practice. For the analyst, time no longer counts: not only because – as has often been repeated since Max Weber – arriving *post festum*, he cannot be in any uncertainty as to what may happen, but also because he has the time to totalize, i.e. to overcome the effects of time. Scientific practice is so "detemporalized" that it tends to exclude even the idea of what it excludes: because science is possible only in a relation to time which is opposed to that of practice, it tends to ignore time and, in doing so, to reify practices. (Which is to say, once again, that epistemological reflection is constitutive of scientific practice itself: in order to understand what practice is – and in particular the properties it owes to the fact that it unfolds in time – it is therefore necessary to know what science is – and in particular what is implied in the specific temporality of scientific practice.) The detemporalizing effect (visible in the synoptic apprehension that diagrams make possible) that science produces when it forgets the transformation it imposes on practices inscribed in the current of time, i.e. detotalized, simply by totalizing them, is never more pernicious than when exerted on practices defined by the fact that their temporal structure, direction, and rhythm are *constitutive* of their meaning.

From the "rules" of honour to the sense of honour

There are ways of avoiding ethnocentrism which are perhaps no more than so many devices for keeping one's distance and, at all events, for making a virtue out of necessity by converting a *de facto* exclusion into a choice of method. Thus, there would be less danger of locking the exchange of honour or the seemingly most ritualized gift exchange in reified, reifying models, if one were able to procure a theoretical mastery of social practices of the same class as those of which one may have a practical mastery. There is nothing, for example, more likely to inspire in an outside observer the illusion of mechanical necessity than "*forced*" conversation, which, to perpetuate itself, must endlessly create and recreate, often *ex nihilo*, the relationship between the interlocutors, moving them apart and bringing them together, constraining them to seek out points of agreement and disagreement, with the same earnestness at once sincere and feigned, making them by turns triumph and retreat, arousing mock quarrels that are always on the verge of becoming real ones, but quickly settled by a compromise or a return to the safe ground of shared convictions. But, by a radical change in point of view, one can equally apprehend this mechanical sequence of gestures and words "from a subjective point of view", as the Marx of the *Theses on Feuerbach* somewhat rashly puts it, or, preferably, from the standpoint of an adequate theory of practice: the unceasing vigilance one needs to exert so as to be "carried along" by the game, without being "carried away" *beyond* the game, as happens when a mock fight gets the better of the fighters, is evidence that practices as visibly constrained as these rest on the same principle as conduct more likely to give an equally misleading impression of free improvisation, such as *bluff* or *seduction*, which play on the equivocations, innuendos, and unspoken implications of verbal or gestural symbolism to produce ambiguous conduct that can be disowned at the slightest sign of withdrawal or refusal, and to maintain uncertainty about intentions that always hesitate between playfulness and seriousness, abandon and reserve, eagerness and indifference.

The language of rules and models, which seems tolerable when applied to "alien" practices, ceases to convince as soon as one considers the practical mastery of the symbolism of social interaction – tact, dexterity, or *savoir-faire* – presupposed by the most everyday games of sociability and accompanied by the application of a spontaneous semiology, i.e. a mass of precepts, formulae, and codified cues. This practical knowledge, based on the continuous decoding of the perceived – but not consciously noticed – indices of the welcome given to actions already accomplished, continuously carries out the checks and corrections intended to ensure the adjustment of practices and expressions to the reactions and expectations of the other agents. It functions