

Narrative Identity against Biographical Illusion

The Shift in Sociology from Bourdieu to Ricœur

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Abstract

Since the publication of *Oneself as Another*, many sociologists have referred to the work of Paul Ricœur, some of them considering his notion of narrative identity to be a useful means of analyzing some aspects individual identity left unresolved by Bourdieu's notion of *habitus*. Bourdieu had, however, already discredited the sociological relevance of the notion of narrative in his 1986 article "The Biographical Illusion." Through a careful re-reading of both texts, this article will determine to what extent the sociological use of Ricœur's notions can escape the confines of Bourdieu's analysis and, moreover, the different conceptions of the human being and of ethics underlying the two distinct frameworks of analysis.

Keywords: *Personal Identity, Narrative Identity, Biographical Illusion, Pierre Bourdieu, Sociology*

Résumé

Depuis la parution de *Soi-même comme un autre*, de nombreux sociologues ont fait référence à Paul Ricœur, certains voyant dans la notion d'identité narrative un moyen de considérer certaines dimensions de l'identité personnelle laissées dans l'ombre par la notion bourdieusienne d'*habitus*. Bourdieu avait néanmoins discrédité par avance la pertinence sociologique du récit biographique, dans son texte de 1986, "L'illusion biographique." Cet article propose une relecture attentive de ces deux textes de référence, en vue de déterminer dans quelle mesure l'usage sociologique des concepts de Ricœur permet effectivement d'échapper aux limites de l'analyse bourdieusienne et quelles sont les conceptions anthropologiques et éthiques sous-jacentes à ces deux cadres d'analyse.

Mots-clés : *Identité personnelle, Identité narrative, Illusion biographique, Pierre Bourdieu, Sociologie*

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The Shift in Sociology from Bourdieu to Ricœur

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Paul Ricœur was certainly not a sociologist.¹ However, many applications of Ricœur's philosophy can be found in contemporary French sociology. The insertion of philosophical concepts into the realm of sociology represents a generational phenomenon affecting all of the human sciences. During the Seventies, a period triumphantly attached to Structuralism, "independently of the fact that philosophy was considered to be the plague, it would have occurred to no one to use Ricœur as a source."² Ever since the Eighties, however, the field of comprehensive sociology has been going through a rebirth and Ricœur's philosophical thought has become a shared point of reference for the so-called "*nouvelles sociologies*."³

As a result, some thinkers went from studying Bourdieu – whose works signaled the first breaking away from Lévi-Strauss' structuralism, inasmuch as he introduced an opening for individual "strategy"⁴ (particularly detectable in his early writings about the French province of Béarn and Kabylia)⁵ – to studying Ricœur. For example, Luc Boltanski explicitly acknowledges this influence:

Our approach may, from this perspective, be compared to a larger movement that affected the social sciences in their totality, often correlated to the "linguistic turn", which one could characterize in the field of sociology [...] through the shift from a "sociology of the agent" to a "sociology of translation" [...] (which) shows how actors elaborate discourses about action or, to go back to Paul Ricœur's terminology, accomplish the "emplotment" activity connected to their actions.⁶

Such a "shift" moves away from a critical sociology, in order to deal with a sociology of criticism,⁷ that is, a sociology that credits actors with the legitimate ability to account for their actions by giving them a meaning. The "linguistic turn" corresponds, from this perspective, to a "narrative turn": one stops thinking, in a derogatory sense, that actors "tell themselves stories" – these corresponding to deceptive rationalisations of the reasons behind their behaviours – in order to highlight the heuristic virtues of "*mise en récit*" (narrativization) as well as of "*mise en intrigue*"⁸ (emplotment) of their actions.

The reference to Ricœur thus seems to have produced both an epistemological and a methodological turn, which is characterized by a recuperation of biographical methods⁹ and by a repositioning of a variety of works within the perspective of a psycho-sociology. According to some, this evolution originated from a certain dissatisfaction with Bourdieu's notion of *habitus* and its conception of individual identity. For example, Philippe Corcuff once recounted his research path as follows:

Our analysis of the notion of *habitus* within the framework of Pierre Bourdieu's sociology allowed us to approach the issue of a sociological treatment of individual singularity. Through a series of shifts between philosophy and sociology, we have thus identified

three representations of the “I” that have been taken as starting points of this research: the *idem*-identity, the *ipse*-identity and the moments of subjectivation.¹⁰

The notions of *idem*-identity and *ipse*-identity both refer to Ricœur’s *Oneself as Another*,¹¹ a work that has become, since then, a central point of reference for the advocates of these new comprehensive sociologies. The philosopher explains that “sameness” (*idem*-identity) presumes a permanence in time, as opposed to the different, the changing, and the variable; in contrast, “selfhood” (*ipse*-identity) does not imply anything of that kind, as it allows for other modalities of non-identical identity. If, on the one hand, it might be possible to assimilate sameness to social identity, on the other hand, selfhood refers to an aspect of individual identity which cannot be reduced to a mere social identity. According to Ricœur, biographical narrative is precisely supposed to articulate the interplay between these two types of identity: “it is within the framework of narrative theory that the concrete dialectic of selfhood and sameness [...] attains its fullest development.”¹²

The notion of narrative identity first appeared in Ricœur’s work in the third volume of his *Time and Narrative*, in 1985, following the observations of Alasdair MacIntyre who, in 1981, earlier evoked “the narrative unity of a human life.”¹³ By contrast, Pierre Bourdieu took up in 1986 a position denouncing the “biographical illusion.”¹⁴ He sought to show that beyond the increased use of biographical methods in the sociological sphere (the topic of the issue of *Actes de la Recherche en Sciences Sociales* that opened with his article), there was the urgency of the existing epistemological turn (since, for instance, at that time, someone such as Luc Boltanski had already “broken up” with him). While Ricœur defines narrative identity as a “double gaze, looking backward in the direction of the practical field and ahead in the direction of the ethical field,”¹⁵ Bourdieu strives to identify “the inherent logic, both for the past and for the future,” which corresponds to an inclination, through the use of autobiographical narratives:

... towards making oneself the ideologist of one’s own life, through the selection of a few significant events with a view to elucidating an overall purpose, and through the creation of causal or final links between them which will make them coherent.¹⁶

According to Bourdieu, narration leads to an “artificial creation of meaning,” while denying narration the legitimacy to create any sort of identity, Bourdieu can only see it as a dangerous sacrifice on the altar of a sheer “rhetorical illusion.”¹⁷

In order to explore the relationship between identity and narrative, the aim of this article, then, will be to provide a closer look at Bourdieu’s essay “The Biographical Illusion” in contrast with Ricœur’s *Oneself as Another*. The objective here will be to highlight the implications of this “shift”¹⁸ in contemporary French sociology from Bourdieu to Ricœur. This involves two important questions: First, to what extent can narrative identity still be denounced as an illusory identity? And, to what extent might the current sociological uses of narrative identity result in an impoverishment of the notion itself? Our answers to these questions will help sociologists to think about the extent to which narrative should be used in sociology.

From biographical illusion to narrative competence

Ricœur's contribution in *Oneself as Another* consists, first of all, in the distinction between *ipse* and *idem*, as well as in the adoption of narrative identity as a mediator between these two aspects of personal identity. The question of identity pertains to a person's permanence in time. Ricœur distinguishes between two models of permanence, corresponding to the two poles of identity: character and the kept word. *Idem* corresponds to the permanence of character only, i.e. sameness, meanwhile selfhood, as expressed in the form of a kept word, of a self-constancy, refers to *ipse*. The narrative plays precisely the role of a mediator between these two poles, as it represents the oscillator whose movement gives birth to identity. Character, which gives its content to sameness, represents an acquired disposition "to which we must consent";¹⁹ more specifically, it "designates the set of lasting dispositions by which a person is recognized."²⁰ This definition inevitably makes us think of Bourdieu's definition of *habitudes* as "systems of durable, transposable dispositions."²¹ This similarity should come as no surprise, for Ricœur observes that "the first notion related to that of disposition is habit, with its twofold valence of habit as it is [...], being formed and of habit already acquired."²² According to Ricœur, habit produces a sedimentation, which constitutes the history of one's character and ensures one's permanence in time. He interprets this as the overlapping of selfhood by sameness:

Each habit formed in this way, acquired and become a lasting disposition, constitutes a *trait* – a character trait, a distinctive sign by which a person is recognized,²³ because the person is recognized in these dispositions.²⁴

Despite the fact that this use of the term *habit* does not exactly correspond to Bourdieu's notion of *habitus*,²⁵ there is a close proximity between what he calls *habitus* and Ricœur's sameness.²⁶ Philippe Corcuff reinforces this hypothesis:

As it is made out of a person's objectifiable features, sameness equals, in a way, the objective part of individual identity. This notion represents a familiar field which sociology deals with, especially when it refers to the notion of *habitus*.²⁷

In order to fully understand the kinship between character and habit, sameness and *habitus*, we have to make a brief detour via Aristotle, as Ricœur himself explicitly points out:

Aristotle was the first one to have tied character to habit by means of the quasi-homonymy between *êthos* (character) and *êthos* (habit, custom). From the term *ethos* he passes to *hexis*, an acquired disposition.²⁸

From the term *hexis*, Bourdieu gets to *habitus* via a translation in Latin, as François Héran has noted.²⁹ Before attempting an appreciation of the peculiar meaning he attaches to this translation, it is useful, however, to re-read carefully Bourdieu's early writings about Kabylia and the province of Béarn, as he was initially employed the terms *ethos*, *hexis* and *habitus* with distinct meanings. In short, *hexis* specifically refers to the bodily *habitus*, that is, to incorporated dispositions; *ethos* is used within a Weberian perspective to qualify a set of spiritual and ethical dispositions; finally, *habitus* gradually imposes itself as an intermediate term, as a generative principle embracing two other systems of dispositions, i.e. the psychical and the physical. Then, in his later works, *habitus* ends up being considered a seminal concept.³⁰

For Bourdieu, *habitus* came to be the *only* possible foundation of individual identity. *Habitus* is the active principle behind the “unification of practices and representations” within what he described as “practical identity.”³¹ The issue arising here, as elsewhere throughout Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of practice, pertains to the (re)cognition of this practical identity. *Ratio essendi*, identity cannot be anything but practical, produced by *habitus*; *ratio cognoscendi*, “this practical identity reveals itself to intuition only in the inexhaustible series of its successive manifestations.”³² Here originates the need to gather the multiplicity of every single behavior within the unity of a totalizing life narrative; nonetheless, this identity-based unity does not result in anything but an illusory knowledge. It is only the result of a rhetorical illusion, a false and therefore a *fictional* identity. Within sociology, as Bourdieu conceived it, only one of the two poles of identity is admissible: the sameness of *idem*-identity. According to Bourdieu, only a kind of *anamnesis* understood as a specifically sociological work of self-revelation of its own social determinations, of self-understanding of its own *habitus*, can lead to a genuine awareness of identity. There is no biography, intended as a theoretical identity based upon a rhetorical illusion, which can account for practical, real identity.

Selfhood and Illusion

Nevertheless, as another sociological tradition has pointed out at least since Simmel, human beings cannot be reduced to their social essence. Personal identity is not exactly the same as social identity or *habitus*. In Ricœur’s words, even if sameness can overlap with selfhood sometimes, “this overlapping of *ipse* by *idem* is not such that it makes us give up all attempts to distinguish between them.”³³ A part of selfhood always shows a resistance. Goffman’s notion of “distance from the role,” for instance, can be interpreted as one sociological attempt to describe this part of selfhood which resists sameness.³⁴ Selfhood corresponds to the individual’s uniqueness, and it remains irreducible to the objective features of one’s own character that sustain the individual’s social recognition. Selfhood represents another mode of identity, as well as another model of permanence in time, as Ricœur states it:

The perseverance of character is one thing, the perseverance of faithfulness to a word that has been given is something else again, [...] (because) keeping one’s word expresses a *self-constancy* which cannot be inscribed, as character was, within the dimension of something in general but solely within the dimension of *who*?³⁵

And *who* someone is, for Ricœur, can never be totally predicted from *what* one is, that is, from one’s character or *habitus*.

The problem is thus completely reversed in comparison to Bourdieu: since selfhood cannot be reduced to sameness, practical identity does not correspond to the whole individual, and narrative identity is far from being the source of a biographical illusion. It becomes the indispensable mediator of an individual’s identity. By the use of a life narrative, each individual can attempt to reunite sameness and selfhood, to combine being in society with being apart from it, to locate one’s own identity within a happy medium between two identity poles. A happy medium, yet not *the* happy medium: Ricœur’s position is far more perspectival than Bourdieu’s. While for Bourdieu the practical identity based on *habitus* is the only true (ie. non-illusory) identity, for Ricœur, every narrative identity proposes *one* individual identity, that is, only one interpretation of the self among many other possible ones. Life narratives can thus be built, dismantled and rebuilt by starting from different beginnings, different points of departure, and

different perspectives. Whereas Bourdieu denounces a global intention and the profitable investigation of some artificial coherence, Ricœur sees only the human need of making oneself intelligible to oneself, which ultimately equals composing one's "own" life:

[S]elf-understanding is an interpretation; interpretation of the self, in turn, finds in the narrative, among other signs and symbols, a privileged form of mediation; the latter borrows from history as well as from fiction, making a life story a fictional history or, if one prefers, a historical fiction.³⁶

Personal identity thus is founded upon a positive, therefore a necessary, fiction. It is necessary because, except for a few extreme cases (such as the limit case where *ipse* disappears behind the *idem*), *ipse* is never completely reducible to *idem*, so that practical identity does not represent individual identity's *ultima ratio*. There is always something more than that, something that escapes, the denial of which would be harmful. Insofar as something more is introduced by a temporal break in the modality of permanence of identity, the act of narration is perceived by Ricœur as the only resource capable of articulating to the practical dimension of individual identity (*habitus*-sameness) this peculiar portion of selfhood which is no less constituent of the individual. Mediation is also related to a time-based order: being a historical fiction, the narrative provides an alternative, fictional temporality, in which the character's permanence in time, as well as the kept word's challenge against time, can meet each other and find a reciprocal harmony. Furthermore, the narrative allows to make identity more dynamic and accounts for the subjective stabilisations of the sedimentation process engendering the character; in other words, it enhances our understanding of the way selfhood can lead to a modification of sameness, how *habitus* can modify according to a sort of endogenous mode: "in narrativizing character, the narrative returns to it the movement abolished in acquired dispositions, in the sediment of identifications-with."³⁷

This conception of narrative identity inevitably clashes with Bourdieu's notions of individual identity and the formation of *habitus* as a mental structure arranged by social structures, a pure product of socialization that is in no case produced by the sedimentation of "moments of subjectivation."³⁸ We would be mistaken, nevertheless, in only considering these conceptions as alternative and adversary, since they have every reason to be complementary. It is within such perspective that Corcuff attempts to set the foundations of a sociology of selfhood that is a focus on the limitations of pertinence of *habitus*, as well as an investigation of the marginal areas in which selfhood prevails over sameness. In Bourdieu's view, the only true knowledge of individual identity can be a sociological self-knowledge of *habitus*, while it cannot be in any case a fictional interpretation of the relationship between this *habitus* and a supposedly existing selfhood. For Corcuff, in this case there is "a limited way of dealing with selfhood, one that reduces it to a horizon of self-analysis, rather than making it an active dimension of everyday experience,"³⁹ i.e. a social as well as a psychic event. Hence, a sociology of selfhood defines itself as:

the study of the stabilization of an *ordinary meaning attached to its own authenticity* or to its *own singularity*, which is not reduced, unlike in Bourdieu's theorization, to an "illusion", yet is comprehended as one of the realities connected to a socially constructed individual identity.⁴⁰

Since “the couple formed by social unconscious and subjective illusions [...] here seems too careless towards the singularity defined by Ricœur as selfhood,”⁴¹ it is imperative to detach from it.

Agent, Author or Hero

There is a common point between the perspectives of Bourdieu and Ricœur, a shared pre-assumption that makes dialogue possible: the agent is never, in any case, the *author* of his own action. They would both undoubtedly accept the following statement formulated by Hannah Arendt in *The Human Condition*:

Nobody is the author or producer of his own life story. In other words, the stories, the results of action and speech, reveal an agent, but this agent is not an author or producer. [...] [I]n any series of events that together form a story with a unique meaning we can at best isolate the agent who set the whole process into motion; and although this agent frequently remains the subject, the “hero” of the story, we never can point unequivocally to him as the author of its eventual outcome.⁴²

Since the agent is not the author of the action, the agent can never access the totality of the meaning lying behind it.

This consequence is perfectly clear in the works of Bourdieu, who bases his key theories upon the distinction between a practical sense, which is ascribed to the agent involved in a given action, and a theoretical sense, which comes from the author’s point of view. Besides, the term “agent” suits Bourdieu better than “actor,” because the agent is being acted upon as much as, if not more than, he acts: in a way, what acts within him is *habitus*, an entire socially incorporated structure that expresses and reveals itself as the author. From that perspective, the true (objective) sense of an action ultimately becomes accessible only to the sociologist, who can access the point of view of the author through his or her understanding of the *habitus*, as well as of the social determinations guiding the action via the presence of an agent. Bourdieu soon reached the following belief: sociology takes on the task of restoring “the meaning of human actions” as he concludes in his famous 1962 article “Célibat et condition paysanne.”⁴³ Bourdieu’s sociological model can thus be summarized as follows: the agent, the one who carries out the action, is not the author, *ergo* he does not have any access to the objective meaning of his own action, even if he endows it with a subjective sense, i.e. a practical sense. On the other hand, the sociologist can understand the factors affecting a given action situated within a social environment and thus can access the perspective of the author by restoring *the* truly objective sense of the action.

On the contrary, according to Ricœur, no one has access to the objective sense of the author. The agent, who seeks to make sense of his own existence and to make his own actions intelligible, can only use interpretations. Here Ricœur is close to Arendt’s perspective: we cannot infallibly identify the agent as being the author of an action precisely and primarily because all actions unfurl within human plurality. Since the process initiated by an action can have repercussions over the whole network of human relationships, it can be said that this process is infinite. Without a conclusion, its objective sense can never be attained. The only solution, therefore, is to be found in “emplotment” which, by providing the “end of the story,” can set a beginning and end to the action. Ricœur writes: “By narrating a life of which I am not the author as to existence, I make myself its coauthor as to its meaning.”⁴⁴ If one cannot be the author of

one's own life, it does not follow that the only chance would reside in one's capacity, as Bourdieu argues, of being a sociologist, instead it dwells one's ability to be a narrator. All in all, the gap between Bourdieu and Ricœur can be reduced to a few elements: whereas, for Bourdieu, whose conclusion shows his conformity to Durkheim, "Society is God" (and it is not surprising that he provides this conclusion in his last great theory book, *Pascalian Meditations*)⁴⁵, therefore the sociologist will be able to reach the ultimate objective sense of the actions of which society itself is definitely the only true author; for Ricœur, an objective sense of human actions is impossible to reach, since no one can fully embrace human plurality.

From a sociological perspective, what distinguishes Bourdieu from Ricœur, in their own time, resembles the earlier difference between Durkheim and Simmel: for Bourdieu, as for Durkheim, the human being can be reduced to a social being and this position suggests, at the same time, an overlapping of *ipse* by *idem*. It ultimately means that *habitus* becomes the foundational principle of human identity, thus reduced to a practical identity. If we refuse to include divine transcendence within the sphere of social immanence, the acknowledgment of a hiatus between the agent and the author of a given action cannot be solved any longer with a "simple" knowledge of the sociological determinations of action itself. On the contrary, such hiatus necessarily implies the fact that the agent appropriates both his own action and its consequences by means of an narrativization that preserves selfhood, which is the portion of transcendence revealed by the action: "Who somebody is or was we can know only by knowing the story of which he is himself the hero – his *biography*, in other words," writes Hannah Arendt.⁴⁶

Far from the "rhetorical illusion" denounced by Bourdieu, here we discover the virtues of narration: since the agent is capable of becoming a narrator, the agent may ultimately be more than a mere agent acted upon by the author, as the agent can become a character: the hero of the story.⁴⁷ Furthermore, it is by being a *character* of the story of one's own life that one constructs oneself as an *individual*, endowed with a specifically individual, not a merely social, identity. "Understood in narrative terms, identity can be called, by linguistic convention, the identity of the *character*."⁴⁸ The character's sameness and the unexpected selfhood revealed through the action are reunited by this fictional identity, at the same time as it resolves "the competition between a demand for concordance and the admission of discordances which, up to the close of the story, threaten his identity."⁴⁹ Once the narrative reaches a conclusion, once the story has been told, the identity of the character features within the unity of the narrative that has been carried out; as a result, such narrative "saves" the identity of the individual, formerly threatened in the "thick of the action" by the insurrection of sameness calling into question selfhood.

Instead of criticizing biography as a mere "illusion" as Bourdieu does, we can follow Ricœur's approach and consider biography as a "fiction," either by referring to it as a "biographical tale," as proposed by Jean-Claude Kaufmann,⁵⁰ or by talking about a "biographical justification," following Luc Boltanski's suggestion.⁵¹ This "shift" to narrative will also be shown to have consequences from the perspective of a sociology of action, in what follows.

From a sociology of practice to a sociology of promise

Even though, so far, we have bypassed the question of the subject, this does not result in bringing up the articulation between action and identity without taking a stand on such issue. If the agent does not correspond to the author of his own action, is he necessarily the subject of it? At the end of his article about biographical illusion, Bourdieu defines "personality" as follows:

the collections of positions simultaneously occupied at a given moment of time by a biological individual socially instituted, acting as a *support* to a collection of attributes suitable for allowing him to intervene *as* an efficient agent in different fields.⁵²

Obviously, personality does not correspond to the person, nor does it equal the character, in the sense proposed by Ricœur. It is not by chance that, about somebody who “has got character,” it is also said that he or she “has got personality.” Personality pertains to the sphere of sameness, it does not leave any room for narrativity and would not be able to be connected with any constitution of the subject by means of a narrative. Nevertheless, personality does not constitute a subject more in practice than inside the narrative: it is nothing but a support of *habitus*, and it is precisely for this reason that personality is neither an actor nor a subject, at best it acts “as agent.” At the very most Bourdieu admits that sociology “offers perhaps the only means of contributing, if only through awareness of determinations, to the construction, otherwise abandoned to the forces of the world, of *something like a subject*.”⁵³ Since, in his article about biographical illusion, Bourdieu uses the term “subject” exclusively with inverted commas, we can detect a certain reticence toward the use of this term.

If the agent does not correspond to the true subject of the action as long as he has not become aware of social determinations of which he is the support – these determinations accomplishing the action through him – can we therefore state that, since the agent is being acted upon by them rather than acting, it is precisely social determinations that constitute the subject? And yet, not even *habitus* can be said to correspond to a subject: in being but a notion without a real existence of its own, Bourdieu’s *habitus* is an abstract entity identified within the interval between a bodily and a spiritual dimension, one that refuses to become a substance. Henceforth, Bourdieu rejects any attempt to assign an action to an autonomous individuality, be that a person or a subject,⁵⁴ thus running the risk to maintain the inconvenience of a badly guaranteed interval: “I have tried to say that the ‘subject’ of social actions – I use this term with inverted commas, is not a subject.”⁵⁵

However, Bourdieu did not only denounce *in abstracto* the biographical illusion; he also needed to link the (written) act with the word, to invent a kind of life narrative *without a subject*, in order to reveal *the* meaning of his own existence as a sociologist. He had to show how one can access the objective meaning of his own actions thanks to sociological knowledge rather than to a familiarity with narrative fiction. Thus he initially suggested the existence of “impersonal confessions,”⁵⁶ while later, as he came closer to death, he proposed a “sketch for a self-analysis”⁵⁷ that opens with a warning, which bizarrely reminds of Magritte: “This is not an autobiography.”⁵⁸ According to Nicole Lapierre, whereas Bourdieu’s self-socio-analysis provides an admirable attempt at objectification, it is mainly a personal history, a series of memories ordered according to a biographical illusion that is (not completely) like the others, as the prevailing global intention is, in this case, a socio-logical one, i.e. a rationalization of retrospective thoughts. Ultimately, this attempt reveals Bourdieu’s “contradiction which always seems to tear him between being and not being a subject.”⁵⁹

On the contrary, Ricœur frees his readership from any contradiction, as the main goal of *Oneself as Another* is precisely one of providing a renovated theory of the subject. His primary intention, as he himself states in this book, is to “indicate the primacy of reflective meditation over the immediate position of the subject, as this is expressed in the first person singular”⁶⁰: the existing gap between selfhood and sameness allows him to clarify the gap between the “self” and

the “I”, as narrativity represents the vector of a reflexive meditation leading towards the acknowledgment of *soi-même* (oneself) within the *je-ipse* (I-selfhood). From this perspective, Ricœur leans back on the notion of human action provided by Arendt: if selfhood answers to the question “Who?”, and if the answer provided cannot be understood or integrated into individual identity – except through a retrospective narrative – this is primarily due to the fact that any action corresponds to a distinctive event through which contingency and unexpectedness occur.⁶¹ Any action reveals a subject *who* is the agent (discordance), beyond his character *by which* the subject is recognized (concordance). “With the question *Who?* [...] the self returns just when the same slips away.”⁶²

In other words, the subject reveals itself where sameness, *habitus*, tends to disappear. This represents a rigorous corollary to Bourdieu’s standpoint: precisely where *habitus* is, the subject cannot occur. Yet according to Bourdieu, this “disclosure” of the agent in action is, in fact, an illusion by itself, while the question asking “who” acts cannot receive any sociologically relevant answer. There cannot be any narrativization with Bourdieu, simply because there is nothing to narrate. As many commentators have observed, one of the main difficulties connected to Bourdieu’s thought is indeed the capacity to imagine the unexpected, the surprising, and yet the fact that selfhood tears itself away from sameness as nothing but a mere and simple “miracle.” This is primarily due to a difference of standpoints, fully understandable if one goes back to Arendt once again: “[A]ction, seen from the viewpoint of the automatic processes which seem to determine the course of the world, looks like a miracle.”⁶³

Not only does the divergence between Bourdieu and Ricœur affect the role that we must assign to the category of birth-singularity associated to action; their divergence also affects the destiny of one fundamental condition of action as conceived by Arendt, i.e. plurality. It is essentially human plurality what turns narrativity into a necessity in order to make human actions intelligible and to make individual identity stable, against all the unsettling effects of action. Human plurality is embodied by the network of human interdependencies in which occurs the chain of action’s unforeseeable and irreversible consequences; hence, plurality stands as a principle of limitlessness that correlatively requires narrative. The latter provides a principle of finiteness to the course of action, which would otherwise be unintelligible. Following Arendt, Ricœur emphasizes:

the story of a life is a kind of compromise resulting from the encounter between events that have been initiated by men as agents of action *and* the game of circumstances induced by the network of human relationships.⁶⁴

And, as this compromise embraces human plurality and copes with the consequences of action – unpredictable and disproportionate as they may eventually be – it implies necessarily the constitution of a responsible subject.⁶⁵

On the other hand, if we observe, as Bourdieu does, that creating a narrative about action does not mean being able to provide (the) reason of it, and that to provide its reason indeed entails a restitution of its social determinations, then, in this case it is necessary to find another way of dealing with plurality; from that moment on, this would primarily correspond to the plurality of all determinations at stake. Here the notion of a “field” allows for a certain (de)limitation. The possibility of a “true” and non-illusory biography relies entirely on the epistemological postulate that it is possible to delineate a socially homogeneous and relatively

autonomous space, called a “field”, in which all of the positions and social trajectories, as well as actions interpreted as practices and their chain reactions within the field, may compose a balanced game. According to Bourdieu, one can understand the history of an individual life as a social trajectory:

only on condition of having previously constructed the successive states of the field through which the trajectory has progressed. Thus the collection of objective relations link the agent considered [...] to the collection of other agents engaged in the same field and facing the same realm of possibilities.⁶⁶

That is the conclusion reached by Pierre Bourdieu: the restitution of the (unique) meaning of the actions accomplished by a single agent requires an exhaustive sociological account of the field. Yet this account may itself be a futile, even an *illusory*, one. A field is never completely closed and independent, and the space of positions is never entirely fixed. To think that one possesses *the* meaning of a given action within a given field, once an exhaustive study of the latter has been conducted, amounts to being mistaken about the consequences that this action possesses beyond this specific field, as these consequences are no less than the others participating in the production of the meaning of the action.

The main problem can be identified in the risk of substantializing the notion of a field (in the same way as there was a risk that threatened the notion of *habitus* vis-à-vis the question of the subject); the field is an explanatory tool aimed at delineating the space of social determinations that have to be considered in order to motivate a practice created within an actual social reality. As a matter of course, Bourdieu’s theory of fields refers to a concrete reality characterised by social differentiation as well as by a continuous fragmentation of different spheres of activity, as analyzed by Durkheim and Weber. Nonetheless, this theoretical perspective seems to move one step further, in a way it problematically stands for “a regional theory with a universal claim.”⁶⁷ It starts from a will to comprehend the social differentiation of activities but leads towards a reduction of society within an enclosed space or spaces which are limited and enclosed. As one is confronted with this pitfall, it is opportune to “wonder whether the notions of both a differentiation and an empowerment of fields sometimes result in the illusion of a clear-cut separation between different activities”⁶⁸, since the illusion of another genre would conceal what is at stake between the fields and the margins, where plurality precisely manifests itself.

Bourdieu himself highlights the fact that the autonomy of fields is always relative and that, if the struggles occurring within it obey to a kind of internal logic, their result always depends on the field’s external forces affecting the relationships between internal forces. Nonetheless, as the conclusion of “The Biographical Illusion” demonstrates, he remains convinced that, in spite of the relative nature of the autonomy of a given field, the meaning of different actions, standpoints, and of each individual trajectory, is entirely contained in the general economy of standpoints and in the reciprocal relationships between them. The consequences of actions within other fields have a marginal role in the conception of their objective meaning. Plurality does not really matter. Henceforth, the attempt to restore *the* meaning of action reveals itself as an illusion, as a refusal to acknowledge the fact that *this* meaning is nothing but one possibility among a plurality of many other ones.

Considering the promise

The denunciation of biographical illusion involves a denial of selfhood in favor of sameness (*habitus*), which is linked to a reduction of human plurality within the limited space of a field. On the contrary, an acknowledgment of the heuristic virtues of narrative identity takes root within the recognition of irreducible selfhood, as well as of plurality allowing its disclosure. Narrative disillusion obliges sociologists to confront a kind of transcendence that goes over the borders of the purely social, as it is embodied in plurality, singularity, selfhood, and so many other modalities of human existence. As they find themselves confronted with selfhood, sociologists feel they are in some way obliged to locate “the place of disorder” inside individual identity:

Emplotment allows us to integrate with permanence in time what seems to be its contrary in the domain of sameness-identity, namely diversity, variability, discontinuity, and instability.⁶⁹

As the sociologist confronts, at once, the irreducibility of selfhood and plurality, this double divergence requires a change of epistemological position. In a way, every sociologist is obliged to clarify the notion of the human implied by his or sociological presumptions, in addition to the genuinely ethical issues connected to such notions, an engagement which Pierre Bourdieu hardly ever felt inclined to fulfill. Indeed, the temporal permanence of the self, because it corresponds to the kept word, to the *promise*, has ethical implications. Since its function is one of articulating the promise with the character, a narrative is never ethically neutral, and the construction of a narrative identity represents a “laboratory of moral judgment.”⁷⁰

Whereas, according to MacIntyre, the need to create a unified narrative initially answers to the ethical need to assign responsibility, for Ricœur the ethical problem rather provides a closure to the analysis: it is the prospective dimension possessed by a biographical gaze that indeed opens up towards the dimension of ethics. Ricœur, who concludes his Sixth study with a subsection about “The Ethical Implications of Narrative”, and dedicates the next one to the relationship between “The Self and the Ethical Aim”, has followed the teachings of Arendt, whose chapter on action in *The Human Condition* draws a fairly similar conclusion. Indeed, Arendt also suggests some further developments about the faculty of promising and its power of stabilization. The following sentence assumes its full significance, if we keep Ricœur in mind while reading it: “Without being bound to the fulfilment of promises, we would never be able to keep our identities.”⁷¹ Accordingly, Ricœur extends this reflection by observing that self-constancy, a mode of permanence in time, is distinct from the perpetuation of the same because it is “for each person that manner of conducting himself or herself so that others can *count on* that person.”⁷² The act of promising stabilizes the plurality of experiences which make identity burst: “ ‘I can try anything’, to be sure, but: ‘Here is where I stand!’ ”⁷³

Not only does the sociological “shift” from Bourdieu to Ricœur lead from a sociology of *habitus* to a “psychological sociology” of plural individual singularities⁷⁴ but also it leads from a critical sociology to a sociology of critics, that is, a moral and a political sociology.⁷⁵ Moreover, this “shift” calls for a sociology of the promise. And if a sociology of the promise aims at following Ricœur’s standpoint, it must forge itself according to the approach of a “praxeological hermeneutics.”⁷⁶ It may find an inspiration, for instance, from Mohamed Nachi who seeks to “extract the mechanisms of action through the prism of the notion of promise,” while claiming

the ambition “of scrutinizing the bond between the enunciation of a promise and the possibility of its application and concretisation through action.”⁷⁷ From this perspective, sociology necessarily requires a series of empirical activities. What especially matters is to know to what extent the keeping of a promise is questionable, from a Bourdieusian viewpoint, as an illusion. This entails an interrogation of the different means that agents possess for keeping their promises, as well as of their interests in making them.⁷⁸

Conclusion

Bourdieu’s criticism, which was expressed in the last resort against the ethical value of selfhood, calls for a more radical criticism of Ricœur’s notion of identity, one characterized by the distinction between sameness and selfhood. This article has shown that all denunciation of biographical illusion works on the assumption of a necessity to deny any sociological relevance to the notion of selfhood. In contrast, we have demonstrated that Ricœur’s main contribution consists in providing a conception of identity that integrates everything that would stand as its absolute opposite in the domain of sameness: diversity, variability, discontinuity, instability. Selfhood is thus enriched with those components that, from the perspective of sameness, would jeopardize its existence.⁷⁹ In the end, it is still possible to criticize the result of a process leading towards this alliance between opposites (i.e. biographical narrative) rather than the process itself, and to suggest that the use of the term “identity” within the domain of social sciences, in order to designate something which is not “identical” throughout time, is eventually inappropriate. With Rogers Brubaker, one can move from a criticism of biographical illusion towards a radical criticism of the semantic illusion attached to identity-selfhood as it is.⁸⁰

However, Ricœur’s main contribution is one that teaches us not to mistake identity for the identical. For those who are able to draw all the consequences of this teaching, Brubaker’s criticism borders on absurdity. From selfhood, it is indeed sameness that may appear as a mere illusion. The point here is not to reactivate the old empiricist quarrel over identity (and to which Bourdieu and Ricœur both refer); it is rather about unveiling, strictly speaking, the illusion around the notion of the identical. Though there may be *similar* characters, two people – even two twins – who possess the same *habitus* will never be entirely identical to one another. The relationship to human plurality and creativity thus should be at the core of sociological thought, and it should disclose the identical to be an illusion constructed upon mere “feelings” of closeness or similarity, aimed at confining human plurality behind artificial social borders.⁸¹

- ¹ This paper has been translated from French by Serena Todesco. It is a revised version of a work previously published in Gérôme Truc, "Une désillusion narrative? De Bourdieu à Ricœur en sociologie," *Tracés* 8 (2005): 47-67. I want to express my gratitude to Johann Michel for his encouragement to publish this new version in English.
- ² Michel Callon, quoted by François Dosse, *Empire of Meaning: The Humanization of the Social Sciences*, trans. Hassan Melehy (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 145.
- ³ Philippe Corcuff, *Les nouvelles sociologies* (Paris: Nathan, 1995).
- ⁴ In relation to the ambiguity of this term used throughout Bourdieu's work, refer to Paul Costey, "Pierre Bourdieu, penseur de la pratique," *Tracés* 7 (2004): 11-25.
- ⁵ Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977); Pierre Bourdieu, *The Bachelors' Ball*, trans. Richard Nice (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2007).
- ⁶ Luc Boltanski, *L'amour et la justice comme compétences* (Paris: Métailié, 1990), 56.
- ⁷ Luc Boltanski, "Sociologie critique et sociologie de la critique," *Politix* 10-11 (1990): 124-134. See also Thomas Bénatouil, "A Tale of Two Sociologies: The Critical and the Pragmatic Stance in Contemporary French Sociology," *European Journal of Social Theory* 2-3 (1999): 379-396.
- ⁸ Paul Ricœur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. I, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1984).
- ⁹ Jean Péneff, *La méthode biographique* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1990).
- ¹⁰ Excerpt from October 2005 of Philippe Corcuff's biographical introduction published on the "Centre de Recherche sur les Liens Sociaux" website: www.cerlis.fr/pagesperso/permanents/corcuffphilippe.htm.
- ¹¹ Paul Ricœur, *Oneself As Another*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1992).
- ¹² Ricœur, *Oneself As Another*, 114. It is particularly in both the Fifth and the Sixth studies that Ricœur develops his idea of existing relationships between individual and narrative identities, as he defines the specificity of selfhood. It is therefore primarily upon these studies that this article will be based.
- ¹³ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981). In *Oneself as Another*, Ricœur takes an explicit position within the framework of the lively debate initiated by MacIntyre's book, as he discusses the latter's idea about a narrative identity.
- ¹⁴ Pierre Bourdieu, "L'illusion biographique," *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales* 62-63 (1986): 69-72; "The Biographical Illusion," trans. Yves Winkin and Wendy Leeds-Hurwitz, in *Identity: A Reader*, ed. Paul Du Gay, Jessica Evans, and Peter Redman (London: Sage Publications, 2004), 297-303.
- ¹⁵ Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, 115.
- ¹⁶ Bourdieu, "The Biographical Illusion," 298.
- ¹⁷ Bourdieu, "The Biographical Illusion," 300. Starting from the same movement, he also rejects the ethical perspective attached to the idea of narrative identity: identity is understood as "the constancy

to oneself of a responsible being" and it is connected to a matter of social order, thus becoming a pre-
 notion deprived of any sociological relevance: even more than in the case of biography, individual
 responsibility is an illusion (therefore, it is not accident that Bourdieu considers judiciary or police
 inquiries as limit cases of biographical narratives).

- ¹⁸ The term "shift" (just like the term "turn") refers to the citation of Luc Boltanski, which is used as a
 starting point of our analysis. In spite of this casual usage, it is necessary to maintain a cautious
 approach vis-à-vis any teleological perspective, which would see the notion of "shift" as being global,
 necessary and irremediable. On the contrary, this "shift" must be analyzed as an argumentative
 attempt as well as a research strategy. One must, above all, address the central issue of this article,
 i.e. whether it is possible in fact to identify a complementarity between the two perspectives. That is
 why this article will use the term "shift" in inverted commas.
- ¹⁹ Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, 119.
- ²⁰ Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, 121.
- ²¹ Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990), 53.
- ²² Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, 121.
- ²³ Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, 121.
- ²⁴ Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, 122.
- ²⁵ Pierre Bourdieu states: "I said *habitus* so as not to say habit," in Pierre Bourdieu, and Loïc J. D.
 Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press,
 1992), 122. For a comparison of the implications of the two terms, see Jean-Claude Kaufmann, *Ego:
 Pour une sociologie de l'individu* (Paris: Nathan, 2001), 131-153.
- ²⁶ According to Johann Michel, even if there is an effective compatibility between the sociology of Bourdieu
 and the most "structuralist-influenced" part of the work of Ricœur, one cannot completely identify the
 notion of *habitus* with the *idem*-identity of Ricœur. The principal difference between them remains
 that *idem*-identity allows more reflexivity. See Johann Michel, "L'anthropologie fondamentale de Paul
 Ricœur dans le miroir des sciences sociales," *Social Sciences Information* 47 (1) (2008): 31-54.
- ²⁷ Philippe Corcuff, "Le collectif au défi du singulier: en partant de l'*habitus*," in *Le travail sociologique de
 Pierre Bourdieu*, ed. Bernard Lahire (Paris: La Découverte, 2001), 95-120.
- ²⁸ Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, 121 (n.1).
- ²⁹ François Héran, "La seconde nature de l'*habitus*: Tradition philosophique et sens commun dans le
 langage sociologique," *Revue française de sociologie* 28 (1987): 385-416.
- ³⁰ G r me Truc, "B arn 60: En passant par l'Alg rie," *Id es* 129 (2002): 79-86.
- ³¹ Bourdieu, "The Biographical Illusion," 299.
- ³² Bourdieu, "The Biographical Illusion," 299.

- ³³ Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, 122.
- ³⁴ Corcuff, "Le collectif au défi du singulier: en partant de l'habitus," 98.
- ³⁵ Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, 123.
- ³⁶ Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, 114 (n.1).
- ³⁷ Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, 165-166.
- ³⁸ Jocelyn Benoist, "La subjectivité," in *Notions de philosophie II*, ed. Denis Kambouchner (Paris: Gallimard, 1995), 546.
- ³⁹ Corcuff, "Le collectif au défi du singulier: en partant de l'habitus," 109.
- ⁴⁰ Corcuff, "Le collectif au défi du singulier: en partant de l'habitus," 112.
- ⁴¹ Corcuff, "Le collectif au défi du singulier: en partant de l'habitus," 114.
- ⁴² Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1958), 184-185.
- ⁴³ Pierre Bourdieu, "Célibat et condition paysanne," *études rurales* 5-6 (1962): 32-135, reprinted in *The Bachelors' Ball*.
- ⁴⁴ Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, 162.
- ⁴⁵ Pierre Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*, trans. Richard Nice (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2000), 245. A few lines before he also writes that "sociology thus leads us to a kind of theology of the last instance." On the relations between sociology and theology, see Gérôme Truc, "Esquisse d'une sociologie de la théologie," *Archives de sciences sociales des religions* 150 (2010): 155-173. We must recall here that the work of Paul Ricœur is also marked by theological influences. The studies that constitute the body of *Oneself as Another* are taken from the series of Gifford Lectures given by the author at the University of Edinburgh in 1986; Paul Ricœur observes at the end of his introduction, the series of lectures ended with two twin contributions, both dedicated to the hermeneutics of the Bible. Even though these texts were not included in *Oneself as Another*, the reflections contained in the book have nonetheless been influenced by them; besides, the same reflections recur in an extended form in another work of Ricœur, characterized by a more openly theological form: André LaCocque and Paul Ricœur, *Thinking Biblically: Exegetical and Hermeneutical Studies*, trans. David Pellauer (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1998).
- ⁴⁶ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 186.
- ⁴⁷ For a further analysis of sociological consequences related to Arendt's perspective over the notion of "hero"; see also Boltanski, *L'amour et la justice comme compétences*, 104.
- ⁴⁸ Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, 141.
- ⁴⁹ Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, 141.
- ⁵⁰ Kaufmann, *Ego*, 220.

- ⁵¹ Boltanski, *L'amour et la justice comme compétences*, 129.
- ⁵² Bourdieu, "The Biographical Illusion," 302 (my emphasis).
- ⁵³ Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, 21 (my emphasis).
- ⁵⁴ Costey, "Pierre Bourdieu, penseur de la pratique," 22.
- ⁵⁵ Pierre Bourdieu, "*Si le monde social m'est supportable, c'est parce que je peux m'indigner*": Entretien avec Antoine Spire (La Tour d'Aigues: éditions de l'Aube, 2002), 17.
- ⁵⁶ Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*, 33-43.
- ⁵⁷ Pierre Bourdieu, *Esquisse pour une auto-analyse* (Paris: Raisons d'agir, 2004).
- ⁵⁸ Bernard Lahire highlights the ambiguity of Bourdieu's allusion in the introduction to "Sociologie et autobiographie" [Sociology and autobiography], which constitutes Chapter 8 of his book *L'esprit sociologique* (Paris: La Découverte, 2005); the same chapter features an interesting comparison between the notion of self-social analysis according to Bourdieu's perspective and the autobiographical genre, along with a consideration of the writings of Richard Hoggart.
- ⁵⁹ Nicole Lapierre, *Pensons ailleurs* (Paris: Stock, 2004), 142.
- ⁶⁰ Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, 1.
- ⁶¹ See Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 175-247.
- ⁶² Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, 128.
- ⁶³ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 246.
- ⁶⁴ Paul Ricœur, "Préface" to Hannah Arendt, *La condition de l'homme moderne*, trans. Georges Fradier (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1994), 25.
- ⁶⁵ Gêrôme Truc, *Assumer l'humanité. Hannah Arendt: la responsabilité face à la pluralité* (Bruxelles: éditions de l'Université de Bruxelles, 2008).
- ⁶⁶ Bourdieu, "The Biographical Illusion," 302.
- ⁶⁷ Bernard Lahire, "Champ, hors-champ, contrechamp," in *Le travail sociologique de Pierre Bourdieu*, 23-57.
- ⁶⁸ Lahire, "Champ, hors-champ, contrechamp," 31.
- ⁶⁹ Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, 140.
- ⁷⁰ Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, 140.
- ⁷¹ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 237.
- ⁷² Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, 165.
- ⁷³ Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, 168.

- ⁷⁴ See Bernard Lahire, "De la théorie de l'habitus à une sociologie psychologique," in *Le travail sociologique de Pierre Bourdieu*, 121-152; Bernard Lahire, *The Plural Actor*, trans. David Fernbach (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011).
- ⁷⁵ Thus it should be no surprise that the laboratory of sociology founded by Luc Boltanski at the EHESS, as he detached himself from Pierre Bourdieu (and in which Philippe Corcuff took part), is called "Groupe de Sociologie Politique et Morale" (Group of Political and Moral Sociology).
- ⁷⁶ Louis Quéré, "Agir dans l'espace public: L'intentionnalité des actions comme phénomène social," in *Les formes de l'action: Sémantique et sociologie*, ed. Patrick Pharo and Louis Quéré (Paris: éditions de l'EHESS, 1990), 85-112.
- ⁷⁷ Mohamed Nachi, *Ethique de la promesse: L'agir responsable* (Paris: PUF, 2003), 6-8.
- ⁷⁸ See also Michel, "L'anthropologie fondamentale de Paul Ricoeur dans le miroir des sciences sociales," 50-51.
- ⁷⁹ For a similar conclusion starting from Mead rather than Ricoeur, see Mitchell Aboulafia, *The Cosmopolitan Self: Gorge Herbert Mead and Continental Philosophy* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001).
- ⁸⁰ Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper, "Beyond 'Identity,'" *Theory and Society* 29 (2000): 1-47.
- ⁸¹ For further developments on this point, see Truc, *Assumer l'humanité*.