



## City Research Online

### City, University of London Institutional Repository

---

**Citation:** Bourdieu, P., Schultheis, F. and Pfeuffer, A. (2011). With Weber against Weber: In Conversation with Pierre Bourdieu. Translated by Simon Susen. In: Susen, S. and Turner, B. S. (Eds.), *The Legacy of Pierre Bourdieu: Critical Essays*. (pp. 111-124). London, UK: Anthem Press. ISBN 9780857287687

This is the accepted version of the paper.

This version of the publication may differ from the final published version.

---

**Permanent repository link:** <https://openaccess.city.ac.uk/id/eprint/18955/>

**Link to published version:**

**Copyright and reuse:** City Research Online aims to make research outputs of City, University of London available to a wider audience. Copyright and Moral Rights remain with the author(s) and/or copyright holders. URLs from City Research Online may be freely distributed and linked to.

---

City Research Online:

<http://openaccess.city.ac.uk/>

[publications@city.ac.uk](mailto:publications@city.ac.uk)

---

# With Weber against Weber: In Conversation with Pierre Bourdieu<sup>1</sup>

*Pierre Bourdieu, Franz Schultheis, and Andreas Pfeuffer*

*Translated by Simon Susen<sup>2</sup>*

**Question:** When did you start to familiarise yourself with the work of Max Weber? If I understand you correctly, this happened during your time in Algeria. What sort of texts were you reading at that time?

**Pierre Bourdieu:** I began with *Die protestantische Ethik*. During that time, I was working on a book which was intended to summarise my research on Algeria. In *Die protestantische Ethik* there was an abundance of things on the traditional, pre-capitalist ‘spirit’, and on economic behaviour – wonderful descriptions which were very useful and indeed quite impressive. I drew on Weber’s work in order to understand the *M’zab*, a stretch of land in the Arabic desert, inhabited mainly by Kharijites, who are Muslims with a very ascetic – and almost ‘Puritan’ – lifestyle and whom we might want to call ‘the Protestants of Islam’, a religious current. This was really mind-boggling; this austerity with regard to sexual morals and self-discipline. At the same time, these are really prosperous and forward-looking traders; in fact, a lot of the small businesses in North Africa belong to them. I was astounded by the typically Weberian connection between religious asceticism and this very smooth adjustment to new conditions. By the way, similar to the Calvinist Puritans, these people are highly educated: they read a lot, they read the *Qur’an*, almost all of the children go to school, and most of them are bilingual in Arabic and French. Then, in *Travail et travailleurs en Algérie*, I described the typical Algerian merchant; the Moabites were the role model.

**Question:** Where did you get hold of a copy of *Die protestantische Ethik*? I mean, at that time, translations of Weber’s work did not exist in France.

**Pierre Bourdieu:** There were no translations at all. You could not even find the German editions in the libraries. A friend of mine sent me the book, and I started reading it very thoroughly; I learned German and translated entire sections. I did not find the French translations, which were published later, particularly helpful; it seemed to me that the German text was much richer, more precise; the first available translations, especially the one of *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Wissenschaftslehre*, conveyed a rather distorted view of Weber's work.

**Question:** How did you come across Weber's work?

**Pierre Bourdieu:** That was through Merleau-Ponty's *Les aventures de la dialectique*, which I found really impressive. This book had a strong impact on me in my youth, and I remember there being a brief chapter in which he talked about Weber. I think this was the first time I had heard about Weber.

**Question:** And then, what happened after Algeria? You became an assistant to Raymond Aron, who made Weber famous in France, in his own way...

**Pierre Bourdieu:** First, I went to Lille, where I gave this strange kind of course on the history of sociological thought: Marx, Durkheim, Weber, Pareto – outrageous, an insane job! Then I met Aron; that's correct. And this appreciation of Weber's work was something we had in common, until I realised that the Weber with whom I was concerned was very different from the Weber in whom Aron was interested. I then began to deal with Weber's writings on science at the Sorbonne.

**Question:** Was this Weber's *Politik als Beruf* or his *Wissenschaftslehre*?

**Pierre Bourdieu:** It was his *Wissenschaftslehre*. This was him, Aron's 'neo-Kantian' Weber, preoccupied with the conditions of possibility of 'understanding', and all that kind of stuff. Aron's entire oeuvre goes into this aspect in great detail; but, in those days, this was quite natural, given the omnipresence of the rationalist tradition in French philosophy and given that Aron was one of Brunschvicg's students; this was *his* Weber. He hardly knew Weber's *Religionssoziologie* or his *Wirtschaftsethik der Weltreligionen*. I had already studied, and partly translated, these writings during my time at Lille: the introduction to *Die protestantische Ethik*, some sections of the *Wissenschaftslehre*, and also a few sections from Weber's *Religionssoziologie*. In any case, it soon became clear to me that Aron and I had very different ways of looking at things: my Weber was opposed to Aron's Weber. It is staggering that Aron was hardly familiar at all with Weber's *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*.

**Question:** As a foreign observer, one sometimes gets the impression that there were two ‘Webers’, two logics of reception: one conservative Weber, who had already been introduced by Aron; perhaps this is a bit exaggerated, but a Weber ‘against’ Durkheim. Anyhow, Weber seems to have made more of an impression than Durkheim. How was it possible that Durkheim had been so easily eclipsed by this interpretation of Weber?

**Pierre Bourdieu:** It is not easy to explain this, at least not if one forgets the struggles that were taking place in the French intellectual field at the time. With regard to Durkheim, I am under the impression that behind Weber one senses the full weight of German philosophy: Kant and others. Weber, in this respect, appears to be much more ‘aristocratic’ than Durkheim, who has always been stigmatised as a ‘positivist’. Weber was much more attractive. In Weber there is ‘charisma’, there is a ‘difference’; Durkheim is about ‘ethnology’, ‘the primitive’. Weber wrote about ‘world religions’, ‘advanced civilisations’, ‘charisma’, and ‘*manna*’ – a contrast which may have contributed to the fact that Weber is the more inspiring thinker. Weber is less ‘schoolmasterly’, less ‘prosaic’.

And then we must not forget that, after the Second World War, existentialism and phenomenology began to develop a tremendous power: Sartre, and everything that came after him; a return to ‘authenticity’, which was opposed to – rationally inspired – scholastic philosophy and which at the same time brought, with Sartre, a model of the intellectual into play which has had, and continues to have, an effect until the present day; a certain *radical chic* that coincided with the rediscovery of Hegel and Marx and, hence, with a spectacular expansion of Marxism.

If Weber used to be stigmatised as a ‘conservative’, then in the sense of a thinker whose work was referred to by the orthodoxy at the time: the ‘methodological individualist’, the ‘bourgeois philosophy’. Their complete ignorance of his oeuvre never prevented French intellectuals from condemning Weber. In support of Marx, one saw in Weber – who says somewhere that whenever he deals with the primacy of ‘the economic’ he considers himself a Marxist – the advocate of a *spiritualist* philosophy of history. Of course, this interpretation was based on a simplistic reading of *Die protestantische Ethik*. If the orthodoxy referred exclusively to his *Wissenschaftslehre*, then what was left of Weber?

For the philosophers of ‘existence’, he was ‘only’ a sociologist. It was clear that amongst Marxists, and many believed to be Marxist at the time, Weber was completely impossible. I remember having conversations – in the early and mid 1960s – in which I often said that it would be barely possible to do sociology without any knowledge of Weber; although this would then be recognised on every occasion – ‘yes, sure; Weber is tremendously

important' –, when one would try to discuss Weber in a more serious manner, it would soon become apparent that people hardly knew anything about his work. Even Althusser confirmed this when acknowledging that Weber was not taken seriously by Marxists and when confessing that he himself had not read Weber's work. Weber was perceived as 'right-wing'. Obviously, because it was Aron who had made him famous in France, not because of the things that Weber had said himself. That made me mad, given that it had been precisely his marvellous observations that had enchanted me. I said to myself: 'I am not right-wing; Weber is simply good!'

**Question:** Time and again, the struggles that took place in the intellectual field during that period – between the academic, the traditionally rationalist orthodoxy, on the one hand, and the 'existentialist', intellectual avant-garde, on the other – sought to provoke people into political confessions.

**Pierre Bourdieu:** And yet, these were utterly artificial oppositions. I believe it is possible to think *with* a thinker and to think, at the same time, *against* him or her. This means that, in a radical way, we have to challenge the classificatory, and hence political, logic in which – almost everywhere – relations with the thoughts of the past are established. 'For Marx', as Althusser wanted it to be, or 'against Marx'. I am convinced that it is possible to think with Marx against Marx, or with Durkheim against Durkheim; and surely also with Marx and Durkheim against Weber, and vice versa. It is not because I have a proclivity for the paradoxical that I want to suggest that Weber accomplished Marxist purposes where Marx was unable to redeem them. This is particularly true with regard to the sociology of religion, which is certainly *not* one of Marx's strengths. Weber, in this respect, develops a genuine 'Political Economy of Religion', an astonishingly materialist view of the phenomenon, but without wanting to deprive it of its curious symbolic nature. When he says, for instance, that the Church presents itself as the 'monopoly' of legitimate distribution of 'sacred goods', he provides us with extraordinarily valuable insights which go far beyond a reductive economistic imaginary.

**Question:** And the 'right-wing' orthodoxy...?

**Pierre Bourdieu:** When I wrote my first article on Weber's sociology of religion for the *Archives européennes de sociologie*, I encountered a few difficulties. It was closely related to the *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaften und Sozialpolitik*, and there was a sort of fetishism about the 'great' thinker Weber. The editorial board consisted of eminent people like Aron, Crozier, and Dahrendorf, but I was not

a member. It was quite a conservative journal. And I had my article; Aron, however, said to me: 'There is no way you can publish it like this. I really do not agree with it.' In fact, he said I would convert Weber into a 'lefty'. I replied that when I talk about 'the theodicy of privilege' it is not me but Weber who is talking and that everything which appears in inverted commas is Weber's, rather than my, voice. All I had done was to call things, which people refused to take into account, by their real names! Eventually, Aron let the article pass; and some time after its publication I received a long and enthusiastic letter from Randall Collins, in which he wrote that I had wrenched Weber from the conservatives, that I had presented a much more genuine Weber, and that this was extremely important for sociology. By the way, Aron allowed me to teach – primarily – Durkheim, but never Weber, when I would have preferred to give lectures on Weber...!

**Question:** ...subsuming Weber under the title 'sociology of domination', in the broadest sense...

**Pierre Bourdieu:** ...yes, that's exactly right...

**Question:** ...you identify with this notion.

**Pierre Bourdieu:** Yes, of course. Why shouldn't I? Back then, in Lille, I gave this course on 'From Marx to Durkheim, Pareto, and Weber'; again and again in relation to Marx. Without wanting to overemphasise this point here, it seems to me that the foundational call for all these thinkers came from Marx.

**Question:** If we take Durkheim and Weber, who deliberately ignored one another: there is no doubt that there are a lot of commonalities between them; in both cases, for example, *religion* was a primary concern. How do you see this key role which the *sociology of religion* plays with regard to the birth of sociology in general? The social sciences come into existence when the 'disenchantment' of the world becomes evident...

**Pierre Bourdieu:** There are a lot of connections here, but let me reiterate this point; there is something which, at least in Weber, one can see very clearly – and this is what has impressed me the most: the reference to Marx. Weber seeks to close one of the gaps in Marxism. In *Die protestantische Ethik* he asserts, roughly speaking, that he does not claim that his work explains everything, but that it is only aimed at rectifying a picture which Marxism had painted in a somewhat reductive fashion. In essence, Weber is concerned with retrieving *the symbolic dimension* of social life – not as the primary and ultimate

dimension, but as a dimension which deserves its legitimate place in history. Not least because of this, religion plays such a pivotal role: religion as ‘the symbolic’ *par excellence*. Weber explores ‘the symbolic’; in fact, he has a try at a materialist theory of ‘the symbolic’.

**Question:** It seems to me that we have now reached a point where you can maybe explain a bit further what lies at the heart of your own works in the *sociology of religion*. Obviously, Weber is of huge importance in this respect; and the article that you wrote for the *Archives européennes de sociologie* focused on Weber’s sociology of religion. In your second work on religion you used the concept of ‘field’, in some detail, for the first time. Was Weber some kind of ‘stepping stone’ for this project?

**Pierre Bourdieu:** I got to know Weber’s work in Algeria. I found many things in *Die protestantische Ethik* which helped me to understand such traditional societies. When I returned from Algeria, Weber was somebody who had already caught my attention; and then I started to teach Weber’s sociology of religion based on his *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*. I remember that, during the course, everything just fell into place when covering and comparing different religious ‘occupations’: the priest, the prophet, the sorcerer, and the laity. I then drew a diagram on the blackboard and tried to capture the relations between them. What does the priest do with the sorcerer and with the prophet? He excommunicates them. What does the prophet do with the priest? He threatens him with the power of ‘extraordinariness’. Quickly this became a model of interactions, which seemed very plausible: it was the *relations* between them which defined the respective ‘types’.

In a way, Weber had certainly been the main source of inspiration for this whole scheme. Previously, I had run a seminar at the *École Normale*, which focused on the literary field. At that time, I had already used the concept of ‘field’, which allowed me to get a grip on some of the difficulties. What came out of this seminar was my article *Champ littéraire et projet créateur*, which was published in *Temps modernes* in a number on structuralism, although – ultimately – this article had not really been ‘structuralist’ at all. It was not until later that, during my course on Weber’s sociology of religion, the scales fell from my eyes: we cannot make sense of this in interactionist terms, because we are dealing with *objective relations* – that is, objective structures – which form the base line for the ‘typical’ behaviour of the participants. After this, when I read Weber’s *Das antike Judentum*, everything became more obvious. During that period, I developed my first work on the sociology of religion; it was a certain rupture, an improvement compared to the first attempt, which I had made in *Champ littéraire*.

**Question:** Did the concept of ‘habitus’ play a decisive role in this process?

**Pierre Bourdieu:** Not really; the concept already exists in the works of all the great sociologists: in Durkheim, in Mauss...fair enough, in Weber, the concept is not particularly well developed, but on the other hand in his work you can find immensely powerful descriptions, especially with regard to traditional economic attitudes. For my study of Algeria, this was a real treasure chest.

**Question:** But was Weber your source of inspiration for the development of the concept of ‘field’?

**Pierre Bourdieu:** Not quite. Starting *from* Weber, the concept of ‘field’ had to be turned *against* – and indeed go *beyond* – Weber, in order to cope with the difficulty of explaining ‘typical’ – mutually related – forms of behaviour, which can consolidate themselves *without* real ‘interactions’. In Weber, this concept does not really exist; what does exist in his work, however, are these insightful ‘personality and life order studies’; and at the end of every section in his *Religionssoziologie* you can find an outline of the relations between ‘occupations’, not in a ‘structuralist’ way, but...

**Question:** ...an inspiration...

**Pierre Bourdieu:** ...without any doubt. I have always found Weber inspiring and important. Yet, my work has, from the start, dealt with all sorts of different ‘sources’. When I am asked about the development of my work, I cannot overemphasise this point. It is very common to reduce ‘Bourdieuian thought’ to a few key terms, and usually even just a few book titles, and this then leads to a kind of closure: ‘reproduction’, ‘distinction’, ‘capital’, and ‘habitus’ –all of these terms are often used in misleading ways, without really understanding what they stand for, and hence they become *slogans*. In reality, however, these concepts – these frameworks – are only *principles* for scientific work, which is usually of mere practical nature; they are *synthetic* or *synoptic* notions, which serve to provide research programmes with scientific *orientations*.

At the end of the day, the important thing is the research itself, that is, the research on the subject matter itself. To be sure, one does have to treat these things carefully; but, when dealing with these concepts, one cannot make any progress without a respectful sense of freedom. *I constantly try to improve my work*. Often, this is perceived as a form of endless repetition; for me, by contrast, these are often tremendously important changes, no matter how insignificant they may appear at first sight.



As far as the ‘sources’ are concerned, people may be surprised by this, but I really proceed eclectically in this regard: *I am engaged in reflexive eclecticism*. For me, it is not necessarily a contradiction to ‘borrow’ stuff from everywhere: from Marx to Durkheim via Weber, as long as all this leads to a certain theoretical coherence, which nowadays is castigated as ‘totalitarian’ by the postmodernists. Besides, this ‘eclecticism’ is not tantamount to randomness. If, for example, we look at Norbert Elias, it seems to me that he is subject to excessive interpretation by a number of people, precisely because it is not sufficiently clear how much this thinker owes to other thinkers, in particular to Weber. In fact, a lot in Elias is simply a commentary on Weber, and nevertheless this all remains very stimulating.

There is hardly any study by myself that does not owe something, in one way or another, to others; but of course this does not mean that, consequently, nothing has been accomplished. One of the merits for which I really give myself credit is the attempt to shed light on the extent to which these theoretical debates, which often lead to a regrettable barrenness in science, are based on socially ‘constructed’ oppositions. In this regard, Bachelard used to talk about ‘epistemological pairs’, which cannot exist independently from one another, but which at the same time impede genuine scientific progress. The opposition between Marx and Weber, for example, is usually a rather artificial one, and there is no reason why their respective contributions should not be subject to cross-fertilisation. The same applies to Durkheim and Weber. We need this conceptual integration, which every forward-looking science is capable of producing.

**Question:** Let’s continue with these three figures: Marx, Durkheim, and Weber. Where do you see their main contributions that have allowed you to make progress in your sociology of religion and, based on it, your conception of ‘the field’?

**Pierre Bourdieu:** As I have already mentioned, religion is certainly not the *forte* of the Marxian oeuvre, and generally of the materialist approach, with which Weber took issue. In Weber, the line of attack is in another direction. Here, religion is the realm in which – more than in any other realm – both the approach and the aspiration of sociology can be illustrated, where what is seemingly most widely separated can be brought together, ‘the material’ and ‘the symbolic’, the correspondence of social and mental structures, collective representations – and, eventually, in Weber. In *Die protestantische Ethik*, Weber is primarily concerned with salvaging ‘the symbolic’ for a materialist conception of history; and his *Religionssoziologie* is an exemplary way of bringing the

concrete forms of ‘religious labour’ together. At some points, they are even a bit too concrete, but precisely the juxtaposition between these ‘types’ demonstrates very vividly what we are actually dealing with: *the stakes in the struggles over the monopoly of the legitimate power over the sacred goods*. To be clear about this: it is precisely Weber’s concrete, sometimes brutal, materialism – that is, his break with the *illusio* – which is so incredibly insightful.

**Question:** Thus, Durkheim and Weber uncover – each in their own way, in the realm of ideas, which seems to be so ‘removed’ from the world – the ‘worldly’ conditionality of our thoughts and actions. Does the religious field lend itself so well to sociology also because it constitutes a realm in which the leap from ‘the material’ to ‘the symbolic’ – to a ‘theodicy of the conditions of existence’ – occurs in such a pure, original form?

**Pierre Bourdieu:** Of course, in this sense it is very useful. What one sees here is the primitive form of capital accumulation or, if you like, of the accumulation of symbolic capital. I think this is the way in which capital begins to accumulate, initially in its symbolic form, and eventually in order to be converted into other ‘types’ of capital. This is also the start of the conflicts which then become essential to a given field...

**Question:** ...and which consequently absorb other relations of domination. If one conceives of ‘the sacred’ and ‘the profane’ in terms of an opposition, it seems that this ‘classical’ antagonism crops up again and again in your works on particular fields of cultural production...a continuous semantics...

**Pierre Bourdieu:** It is true that the religious field provides us with the heuristic model *par excellence* to make sense of these relations – as a kind of realised ‘ideal type’ of the field. I remember that, during my studies on Weber, I stumbled across a book at some friends’ place. They possessed an old library, where I saw this book: a ‘guide’ through Paris, composed of texts by famous French authors, introduced by Hugo. There was a chapter in it by Sainte-Beuve about the academies; and it said that the academies are like the Church and the prophets, a metaphor, people spontaneously use these metaphors. It talked about the ‘incrustation’ of these things, of ‘everydayness’. This contrast is very powerful, in the struggles of art, politics; and, although it is not always elaborated, it is omnipresent.

**Question:** Does this also mean that in religion we are confronted with a substantive paradigm? To be exact, how do you conceive of the ‘subject matter’ religion? Where does religion originate? Is there such a thing as a

religious need, about which Schleiermacher used to talk? Is there such a thing as a ‘will to faith’, some sort of anthropological predisposition?

**Pierre Bourdieu:** I wrote something about this in my second contribution to the religious field. This is obviously not a simple issue, but the question is whether or not an answer to this problem is actually of any significance. What came first? The need, or the world which – after all, in its own way and in its own order – implants this need in us? I am satisfied with the Weberian definition: religion is a systematic answer to the question of life and death. Actually, this is a beautiful definition. To be sure, there are ‘existential’ questions that oblige us to reflect upon the ‘transcendental’ – and, hence, the collective – conditions of the transcendental: questions about life and death; the death of people whom we love; ‘ultimate’ questions; illness, human suffering. These are all questions that people never manage to answer on their own. Religion gives systematic answers to these questions – or rather quasi-systematic answers, because they are not systematic as, for example, in logic. Religion gives coherence to the ‘discontinuous’ events of our life; it bestows abstract contingency with concrete coherence; in this respect, it resembles philosophy, a ‘total’ explanation of the world...

**Question:** ...which is smashed to pieces under the ‘dull compulsion’ as we know it today...in this regard, Weber is more radical than Marx...

**Pierre Bourdieu:** ...and he is right! In Algeria this became very clear to me: people who lived in a religious universe, and who were unexpectedly confronted with an economic universe; all of a sudden they had to resolve ineluctably difficult questions, questions to which religion provided ready answers. ‘Should I wear a tie?’ ‘And, if I wear one, do I subjugate myself to the colonisers?’ Or the haircut: ‘If I choose the imported haircut, do I then look like somebody “from yesterday”?’ In this respect, the Turkish haircut was a solution; since Atatürk, the Turks belonged to the ‘modern people’; and, at the same time, it was in accordance with Islamic tradition – although, at the end of the day, in such a historical setting everything causes difficulties, everything becomes a problem...

**Question:** ...the contact with a foreign culture...

**Pierre Bourdieu:** ...exactly. Everything seems to indicate that the great philosophical revolutions emerged out of such situations; in the Greek societies, the big controversies over what is determined by nature or law; this comes to the surface when people – ultimately, tribes, which have different

laws – encounter one another. If some do certain things in one way, and others do these things in another way, then you start having doubts: it does not *have to be* – that is, it is not *necessarily* – like this or like that. I have seen societies in which all of the behavioural patterns were consecrated by the power of truth; and suddenly others arrive who do it not only differently, but who do not even have an idea of how ‘true’ this is. Traditional societies have no idea of other traditions.

**Question:** Like us...

**Pierre Bourdieu:** Like us; there are things that hardly change. Yet, when you suddenly encounter people whose behaviour and ‘self-ordering’ are different, then the philosophers emerge: there are those who say ‘no, it must remain as it was’ and others who say ‘no, this is true’. This is the origin of philosophy. In these situations, religions are very important, because they tell you what needs to be done and how it needs to be done: a selective practice that permeates even the smallest things, which then acquire an overriding importance. If you do not wear a head covering, you run the risk of being beaten to death, and this is not an anecdote...

**Question:** ...because one facilitates the cultivation of a kind of ‘sociological awareness’. One drags religious symbols, which have an abstract nature, into the light of social relations and thereby makes sense of them within a ‘sociological’ framework.

**Pierre Bourdieu:** Exactly. Maybe this definition is a bit reductive, but I have described religion as relations of *feelings*, which have to be experienced, and of *meanings*, which do have meaning. In Algeria this was better than living with the agony of having to be ‘experienced’...

**Question:** ...a theodicy of ‘the negatively privileged’. It is even more astonishing that this dimension of domination, which is omnipresent in Weber’s work, has hardly contributed to a ‘left-wing’ – i.e. a critical – reading of Weber.

**Pierre Bourdieu:** Perhaps this is because, as a ‘foreigner’, I had fewer reservations. The dance of the autochthons for their great ancestors is performed with much more doggedness, but I am not an exegete. I did not want to say what ‘the truth’ is about Weber. This is not my job; I conceive of myself as a researcher; I search for ‘food for thought’, for research ‘tools’. Weber may well have said a few stupidities, but what I read of him was rather insightful. Or, for example, Simmel, who is perhaps not a ‘great’ thinker, but

there are some thrilling and powerful elements in his work, some reflexive devices; I gladly accept such propositions...as long as the person was not a monster. I have been told that Weber was a conservative; this, however, has not particularly impressed me. What I read by him – for instance, his work on the East Elbian peasants – had been written in a context which might have given rise to a ‘conservative’ reading of his work. Yet, against the background of political history, it seemed rather progressive. I was not very familiar with these things at the time; this was not my history. Had I been German, this might have been different: I would have been in a better position to judge Weber’s role in the academic world and in the political world. But never mind, this gave me a sense of freedom to which many German sociologists were not entitled. In addition, when – after a few years – I returned from Algeria, I was even a bit of a stranger myself in France: the classificatory fervour, with which the struggles within the intellectual field were fought there, this was – after everything I had experienced – incomprehensible.

Another aspect which has always impressed me about Weber is the fact that he granted himself incredible liberties in relation to the scholarly world. In *Wissenschaft als Beruf*, Max Weber said some extraordinary things of an almost brutal sincerity. When I was selected by the CNRS to be honoured for my work, I quoted a few sentences from Weber in my speech – sentences which were quite fierce. After this event, some people told me: ‘What you have just poured out there is unbelievable. You cannot say this sort of thing in the presence of all the dignitaries, of the ministers, of the director of the *École Normale*, of the *Collège de France*’ – in the presence of all of my colleagues! Phrases of such ruthless and brutal candour! It is mindboggling that Weber really said these things at the time. The scholarly world is full of people who behave like *revolutionaries* when they deal with things that do not concern them directly and like *conservatives* when they have a personal stake in the matter. In any case, I was fully invested in these lectures, and I delivered them with passion. In former times, I was not very familiar with the cultural background. It was not until I started to engage with the work of Heidegger that a lot of these things became clear to me. It was easier for me to understand what it actually meant to say these things at the time, and I admire Weber more and more for that reason, as he was really very courageous.

**Question:** Weber used to say a lot of things against his own ‘status group’...

**Pierre Bourdieu:** ...tremendously radical. Often one is called ‘right-wing’ when one says the truth about the ‘left’. I have already suggested some time ago that intellectuals are the dominated stratum amongst the dominant groups; but this was inconceivable, because intellectuals were regarded as ‘out

of the game', 'sublime', 'free', 'disinterested', 'creative' – anything you want. Maybe this explains the label of the 'right-winger'. Weber says things about intellectuals...but what is 'conservative' in his writings?

**Question:** The 'context' played a much less significant role in the reception of Nietzsche in France; quite the opposite...

**Pierre Bourdieu:** What applies to Durkheim in relation to Weber also applies to the perception of the relation between Weber and Nietzsche. The latter is much more suitable for grandiose philosophical platitudes than the former. If the epistemological meta-discourse, which has also been forced upon Weber, has for a long time – maybe up to the present day – obscured scientific practice (such as Weber's extraordinary effort to provide an outline of a historical sociology or sociological history of religion, the economy, and law), then Weber's 'charisma', this 'miracle' of the German University, stands behind the philosophical autodidact Nietzsche. Nietzsche is engulfed by the *radical chic* – by the way, in France even more so than in Germany itself. Weber, who has been – not only for me – a sort of intellectual shock, has had such a tremendous impact because what lingers behind his fundamental questions is a whole universe of worldwide knowledge about all kinds of cultures. Weber is the incarnation of comparative method, with all its array of social premises. In any case, Weber refers to reflexive scientific practice – an exercise with which French post-war philosophy refused to engage. You could draw on Hegel's *Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts* or on Nietzsche's *Genealogie der Moral*, but on Weber? And all this despite the fact that, in more than one respect, Weber goes far beyond these works...

**Question:** ...maybe this is yet another issue concerning the relationship between Weber and Nietzsche. Recently, there have been a number of studies which have presented Weber much more definitely against this background, against this 'mood of the time', which was not least shaped by Hegel. The impression that Nietzsche made on Weber seems rather essential in this respect.

**Pierre Bourdieu:** Weber and Nietzsche share a number of views and opinions. Of course, there are also some objective connections. What I have in mind, for instance, is Nietzsche's philosophy of resentment – which is, by the way, itself nourished by resentment – but also the way in which Weber describes the religions of redemption: all those things about 'the feeling of dignity', 'the way of life', most likely perhaps the whole vocabulary about power, of struggle, 'the heroic'. Yet, one should not allow oneself to be

deceived by all this, by the commonality of ‘attitude’. In Weber, this is all much more thought out, more organised, more saturated. In Nietzsche, by contrast, the concept of power is so shapeless and vague. In Weber’s *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* there is a section in which, when putting forward his concept of ‘domination’, he discards the concept of power, which – as he sees it – is of no use for a sharp sociological concept formation...

**Question:** ...as a ‘spontaneous sociologist’, however, Nietzsche is quite remarkable...

**Pierre Bourdieu:** ...and yet, this is precisely what has never really impressed the Nietzscheans – at least not in France. I remember a conversation with Foucault in which he tried to identify the main sources of his own intellectual passions – in his search for a way out of the cul-de-sac of traditional philosophy. For him, the great shock was caused by Nietzsche’s *Genealogie der Moral*. In my case, this was not the same: I had different inclinations, which were derived from Weber and Durkheim. To be sure, it is possible to read Nietzsche in a ‘positivist’ way, as a moral sociology, but to me this seemed to be too limited, very intuitive. This sort of thing had much more of an ‘impact’ on the philosophers; Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, Heidegger. There were not many philosophers who remained unimpressed by this. I found Merleau-Ponty more inspiring; and, in his work, Weber was not presented as an ‘epistemologist’ or as an ‘interpretive’ sociologist. The whole phenomenological obscurantism; Sartre and existentialism; the heroic aesthetics in Nietzsche; the salvation of a philosophy of the subject – I have always found all of this quite dumb. I have never really been on this *trip*. For me, Weber is about science, and in the best sense of the term!

## Notes

- 1 Original Publication: Pierre Bourdieu, ‘Mit Weber gegen Weber: Pierre Bourdieu im Gespräch’, in Pierre Bourdieu, *Das religiöse Feld. Texte zur Ökonomie des Heilsgeschehens* (herausgegeben von Franz Schultheis, Andreas Pfeuffer und Stephan Egger, übersetzt von Stephan Egger, Konstanz: Universitätsverlag Konstanz, 2000), pp. 111–129. The interview was conducted by Franz Schultheis and Andreas Pfeuffer and took place in a café on Boulevard Saint-Germain in Paris in the spring of 1999.
- 2 I am grateful to Bryan S. Turner and Loïc Wacquant for their detailed comments on this translation. I would also like to thank William Outhwaite for making many useful suggestions. I am deeply indebted to Stephan Egger for providing me with the original (French) audio version of this interview.