

Labour, religion and game: Or, why is art relevant for social science?

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abstract

This article argues that social sciences established their paradigm through privileging two particular social phenomena – division of labour and religion. In trying to think the two in connection gave birth to modern social inquiry. But there were other decisive moments more often overlooked, such as in the work of Pascal and Marcel Mauss. I argue that art is a social phenomenon that combines the essential moments of constituting the social world under the condition that we analyse it also in a ‘secularised’ manner precisely from the point of view of division of labour, belief, game with occulted rules and symbolic exchange. Art reveals itself as a particularly dense social phenomenon that can shed a light on other social fields.

If one would like to trace back to the beginnings of social sciences he or she should search for the objects or phenomena which first allowed these disciplines to anchor their initial concepts and guide their empirical research. For such phenomena serve both as objects of inquiry in their own right and as openings to investigations reaching far beyond the initial domain. Such phenomena were (which is quite uncontroversial) the division of labour and religion. Certainly the pre-modern and early modern social philosophy looked elsewhere – it derived the *social* from the human nature (like in Aristotle), it tried to ground it in virtue (like Plato) or even grasp it from the point of view of politics (like Machiavelli). But social science (let us maintain for a while this somewhat arbitrary distinction between social science and social philosophy) took, consciously or not, a very different path: it didn’t seek to originate nor to ground its object but rather to describe it. Instead of seeking for the essence of the social being it gradually

exposed its relational and largely contingent character. In this sense Marx, Durkheim and Weber paved the way towards Foucault-style anti-essentialist social science. The question of power no doubt remained the major issue but it was no longer identified nor reduced to political power. Political power tends to be perceived as a specific form of power rather than role model for all forms of power.

As we stated, the privileged phenomena for the social science were (and perhaps remain) division of labour on the one hand and religion on the other. It seems clear that the two are heterogeneous and heteromorphic enough to provide for two different paradigms. To some extent such paradigms were born in the opening of a gap between ‘theological’ (Eliade, Schmitt) and ‘materialistic’ (esp. functionalistic and economical) accounts of the social world. But great sociology, the one of Durkheim and Weber but also the one of Marx, always sought to reintegrate the question of the division of labour and the question of religion within one, more complex, paradigm. Of course this is possible only if we operate a certain ‘secularisation’ of the religious phenomena. Still, religion for Emile Durkheim is a genuine revelation, not in the spiritual sense however but in theoretical and methodological. He testified about the moment when he ‘achieved a clear view of the essential role played by religion in social life. It was in that year that, for the first time, I found the means of talking about the study of religion sociologically. This was a revelation to me. That course of 1895 marked a dividing line in the development of my thought...’ (Lukes, 1973: 271). Robert Alun Jones rightly states that ‘Durkheim insisted that religious experience and practice were far more important than ideas and doctrines, for the reality on which religion depends is not the result of metaphysical speculation but concrete social action’ (Jones, 2005: 94). It is important to note 1895 is precisely the year when *Les Règles de la méthode sociologique* were published. *De la division du travail social* was published two years earlier and *Le suicide* exactly two years afterwards. The ‘religious revelation’ seems to culminate the elaboration of sociologies’ specific method. The ‘revelation’ which some years later lets him formulate the definition of religion that necessitates no transcendence nor deity – ‘A religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, i.e., things set apart and forbidden – beliefs and practices which unite in one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them’ (Durkheim, 1995: 44). Religion literally becomes the proper ‘social fact considered as a thing’, the social fact consisting in making ‘sacred objects’, building solidarities and producing sets of non-utilitarian, symbolic practices and beliefs.

But the core issue here is that any set of practices and beliefs cannot be isolated from the realm of economics, production and labour. According to Weber:

For when asceticism was carried out of monastic cells into everyday life, and began to dominate worldly morality, it did its part in building the tremendous cosmos of the modern economic order. This order is now bound to the technical and economic conditions of machine production which determine the lives of all the individuals who are born into this mechanism, not only those directly concerned with economic acquisition, with irresistible force. Perhaps it will so determine them until the last ton of fossilized coal is burnt. (Weber, 2005: 123)

Whether his illustrious account of religious ground of capitalism is accurate or farfetched it is another issue. But there is no question that capitalism is not only about ethics understood as self-reflexive moral conduct but that it is also about the aesthetics of the social hierarchy:

The emphasis on the ascetic importance of a fixed calling provided an ethical justification of the modern specialized division of labour. In a similar way the providential interpretation of profit making justified the activities of the businessman. The superior indulgence of the seigneur and the parvenu ostentation of the nouveau riche are equally detestable to asceticism. But, on the other hand, it has the highest ethical appreciation of the sober, middle-class, self-made man. (Weber, 2005: 109)

The moral economy of the bourgeoisie is therefore based on the vocational character of work that coincides both with accumulation and the efficient exercise of social domination (material and symbolic) over subordinated social classes.

The position of Marx on the issue is somewhat ambiguous. On the one hand it seems that it would be the form of the division of labour (the social relations of production), which determines the form of religious life (as ideology) and that this determination is one sided and univocal. After all, both class and capital are produced and reproduced by certain forms of division of labour. But then there are reasons to think that that Marxian analysis of commodity fetishism is something more than a mere metaphor. ‘A commodity appears, at first sight, a very trivial thing, and easily understood. Its analysis shows that it is, in reality, a very queer thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties’ – states one of the most famous of Marx’s quotations. Obviously ‘*theology*’ doesn’t stand here for a refined and speculative ideology of the free market but it refers to the character of the very relations that the social subjects are involved in. The commodity form, which is the glue of the entire structure of capitalistic production, is itself socially constituted. ‘This Fetishism of commodities has its origin [...], in the peculiar social character of the labour that produces them’. What is this ‘peculiar social character’ of labour other than the set of practices and beliefs that constitute the social relations? In any case the division of labour and religion cannot be separated and juxtaposed as basis and superstructure in Marxist-Leninist metaphysics.

Why and how the division of labour is constitutive of the social structure is less of a mystery. The novelty of Marx's approach consists not so much in arguing that division of labour creates inequality between people but precisely in demonstrating that this recurrent inequality is rooted in the capital – the mysteriously growing social resource which is at the same time the social relation of such nature that it structurally deprives and dispossesses...

But perhaps such a conceptual synthesis between the world of belief and ritual on one side and the one of the division of labour on the other has been already successfully carried out. It happened in identifying and describing famous symbolic exchange. In his pivotal text from 1925 Marcel Mauss pointed precisely at the series of phenomena which integrate coherently belief, ritual and the division of labour into the economy of symbolic exchange or 'dangerous gift economy, encumbered by personal considerations, incompatible with the development of the market, trade and productivity – *which was in a word uneconomic*' (Mauss, 1966: 52). No wonder the perspective of this new economy – freed from the market and the capital – seduced many thinkers from Georges Bataille to Guy Debord with its implicit promises of emancipation. But today we ought to be far more cautious. There are two major problems with the Maussian approach when applied to artistic venture. First, we know today that some (perhaps all) symbolic economies vigorously engender both markets and capitals. Second, symbolic economies as 'total phenomena' have their rules explicit and sanctified. The issue with contemporary art is quite opposite however – the rules are mostly implicit, they are constantly shifting and fluctuating and their sanctification is euphemised and problematic.

Perhaps there is one more trace in genealogy of social sciences, which would let us approach art and art-like phenomena more adequately. In his homage book to Blaise Pascal, Pierre Bourdieu points to the mathematician's remarkable intuition – the one that the social world is essentially a game, set of rules which are at the same time binding, arbitrary and self-evident:

The original investment has no origin, because it always precedes itself and, when we deliberate on entry into the game, the die is already more or less cast. "We are embarked", as Pascal puts it. To speak of a decision to 'commit oneself' to scientific or artistic life (as in any other of the fundamental investments of life - vocation, passion, devotion) is, as Pascal himself was well aware, almost as absurd as evoking a decision to believe, as he does, with few illusions, in the argument of the wager. (Bourdieu, 1997: 11)

The social game is governed by law that is no other than custom, but this 'custom' is very remote from what David Hume has understood as 'custom or habit' – the innocent practicality which only gains with time a formally enhanced legitimacy. It also clearly distinguishes itself from the Maussian 'total

phenomenon' which is congruently and explicitly ritual, mythological, economic, morphological and juridical (Mauss, 1966: 37). The rules of social game are rather about the masked violence producing the universal consent. So it is impossible to grasp the interest of any individual in the game since it is precisely *the game* that decides what is of interest. And even if the game has a legend of its noble origins it is not really nobility that is at stake but spontaneous, immediate and unquestioned binding of its rules.

Custom creates the whole of equity, for the simple reason that it is accepted. It is the mystical foundation of its authority; whoever carries it back to first principles destroys it. Nothing is so faulty as those laws which correct faults. He who obeys them because they are just obeys a justice which is imaginary and not the essence of law, it is quite self-contained, it is law and nothing more. [...] [The people] must not see the fact of usurpation, law was once introduced without reason, and has become reasonable. We must make it regarded as authoritative, eternal and conceal its origin, if we do not wish that it should soon come to an end. (Bourdieu, 1997: 94)

So let us move to art as a privileged object for social science. At this point we can already see why studying and investigating art may be epistemologically central even if we agree that art as such does not occupy a central position in the social world (we remember many from Heidegger to Rancière have claimed it actually did). Art can provide a paradigm for social theory because it is at the same time a system of division of labour, a system of practices and beliefs and a system specific symbolic exchange played as a social game. One could object that these are components of any social field. It may be so, but rarely if ever we can grasp the mechanisms of social construction, exploitation, domination, real subsumption but also of production, cooperation and hypothetically 'collective creativity' in one relatively small and isolated social field and in such intensity and complexity. Hence the rules of art can be seen precisely as a '*law and nothing more, law which has been introduced without reason and has become reasonable*'. There is a great deal of labour being done within the art field in order to make it regarded as authoritative – it is specifically the labour of reproduction of the field. More importantly, just like in the Pascal's game-example where the game explicitly distinguishes between winners and losers, art is explicitly dealing with different distinctions: between sublime and ordinary, high and low, visible and invisible. But while producing these distinctions explicitly game and art both simultaneously yet implicitly make social hierarchies, divisions of labour and distributions of capital among the players or art workers. This tacit and implicit process should be most carefully examined.

But in order to fully benefit from this social laboratory we must resist the temptation of succumbing to the charm of art as workshop of semantic production, of biopolitics or immaterial labour, we must disenchant its idols –

deliberately ignore what art says, shows or sounds. In other words, we have to remain faithful to the instruction of Walter Benjamin concerning the literary production:

[...] instead of asking: what is the relationship of a work of art to the relationships of production of the time? Is it in accord with them, is it reactionary or does it strive to overthrow them, is it revolutionary? – in place of this question, or in any case before asking this question, I would like to propose another. Before I ask: how does a literary work stand in relation to the relationships of production of a period, I would like to ask: how does it stand in them? This question aims directly at the function that the work has within the literary relationships of production of a period. (Benjamin, 1970: 230)

The question about how art stands within the relations of production requires situating artistic production in the context of larger political economy but it also requires uncovering of its own specific political economy. Then we can further inquire about the relation between art's 'external' and 'internal' political economy.

- 1) Art is a form of disenchanted religion insofar as it operates the social transubstantiation of the ordinary objects into the objects of art deprived of worldly utility. Two important clarifications: as art has erased the formal necessity of producing objects at all (like in performance or some conceptual art) it confirmed the sanctification it operates can be independent from any material substrate just as divine grace can fill the soul of the believer without any worldly mediation. Or in other words – art has proven to be more powerful than an artwork. If we say art is free from utility it is so in a relative way – of course it is a socially useful to lack utility just as it has been useful to the nobility to deny the utilitarian value of labour or trade. So we can speak here of a useful uselessness (a reversal of Kantian disinterested interest of aesthetic judgement). Not only does art have its ministers, temples, shrines and chapels, it also discretely builds aesthetic community (thus the community of desire) just as 'asceticism was (once) carried out of political cells into everyday life, and began to dominate worldly morality'. And it seems art cannot function without a substantial amount of vocational labour, the unpaid and invisible toil of its 'dark matter' (to use Gregory Sholette's expression). In this sense art has also this rare and magical ability that it shares with religion – the one of building the community of the unequal where the strength of a community bond is proportional to the imbalance between its members.
- 2) Art is a tremendous arrangement of the division of labour. *Tremendous*, because often the nature of this division is entirely concealed. First there is hardly a specialisation in artistic production. There is of course a whole highly specialized proletariat of artistic infrastructure with quite ambiguous status, like

actors or musicians. So rather we should say there is no particular craft necessary for doing art as such – there only remains a peculiar specialisation in art itself and in its awkward rules, standings and stakes. If indeed there is a specifically artistic specialisation it concerns the mastering of the changing rules of artistic legitimacy. As for authors, it comes all to the same thing - they *create* artworks. There is nothing astonishing about sociodicy of the division of labour and its fruits (by virtue, talent, general utility etc.). But authorship is literally masking the fact the division exists. To put it in Bourdieu's terms – authorship legitimates a relationship of domination by embedding it in terms of creative quality that is itself a naturalized social construction. Consequentially there is an artistic specificity of capital and its accumulation. Creativity of *some* still imagined (despite repeated denials) as *creatio ex-nihilo* effectively conceals the labour of *all* those who contribute and expense their labour in the complex social process of valorisation: curators, dealers, art writers, lecturers, gallery workers, editors, assistants and consultants (even if sometimes some of them participate in the splendour of creation). We don't suggest that the author disposes of a magical power to crate artistic value – to the contrary, it has been shown how valorisation is social, complex and collective venture. The problem is that collective creativity is still not a socially valid pattern of redistribution of social resources neither in terms of money nor prestige. Such effective pattern of redistribution steel needs to be invented. This symbolic resource (always held by individuals never by artworks) in the process of (necessarily exploitative) growth is effectively concealing the social relation that constitutes this very resource – namely the attribution.

3) Art is both about the game and the rules of the game. As we saw according to Pascal the social game in order to be efficient must have rules that are either implicit or sanctified. What is interesting about art game is that visibly it has the two at the same time. What is even more peculiar is that the rules of the artistic game imply changing the rules while playing according to the rules. It is characteristic of the late modern art not to emulate the ideal of art but to contest it. In other words there is constant strife for the legitimacy of the rules of the art game but this strife only brings the solidification of the meta-rules, and reinforces the game as a whole.

It is obvious that none of these features can be exclusively ascribed to the field of art. They are present in other social fields. But the combination and the intensity of the three in the field of art make it more than a study of a particular social practice. It allows for us to use it as the place where essential cognitive categories can be worked out. It shines light on other social facts, notably the relations of labour and class. And this statement remains valid regardless of whether artistic mode of production stands in the core of immaterial labour and at the frontline

of political struggle. This potential has remained almost entirely unexploited at least until Bourdieu's *Distinction* in 1979. But it could still be moved further and certainly also transversally or beyond Bourdieu's own categories. The good news is that authors including Hans Abbing, Dietrich Diedrichsen, Pascal Gielen or Stevphen Shukaitis – each in their own way – are doing research going in Benjaminian direction. Yet, the attempts to extend such approaches to other social facts still remain limited.

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