

# Mysteries and the Apostate. Bourdieu and Winkin's Reading of Cicourel and the Reception of Ethnomethodology in France

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## ABSTRACT

*In this talk, I'll discuss the reading of Aaron V. Cicourel's work set forth by Pierre Bourdieu and Yves Winkin in the early 2000s, placing it in the broader context of the reception of ethnomethodology in France. I'll first review the milestones of this reception from the 1970s to the 1990s, with particular emphasis on the place granted to Cicourel, before turning to Bourdieu and Winkin's position.*

« Doublement hérétique, par rapport à l'orthodoxie dans ses premiers travaux, comme aujourd'hui par rapport à l'hérésie fashionable, dont il s'est séparé, fermement mais sans éclats, Aaron Cicourel occupe une place unique dans le champ de la sociologie [...]. » Bourdieu and Winkin (2002, p. 19) on Cicourel

August 2002. Pierre Bourdieu died just a few months earlier. In a tribute to his mentor published by the French journal *Hermès*, Yves Winkin recalls the writing of what was to be Bourdieu's last published text before he passed away: their joint preface to *Le raisonnement médical*, a collection of translated essays by Aaron V. Cicourel (Bourdieu and Winkin, 2002). Winkin recounts the "laughs" he shared with Bourdieu over a text "riddled with little allusions that delighted [him]" and which more generally made him "very happy" (Winkin, 2002, p. 578). Bourdieu and Winkin's preface does indeed come across as highly allusive, and it therefore calls for some knowledge of the French sociological scene -- and, perhaps, of French academic ways. With hints and innuendoes

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that rely on the reader's familiarity with this background, it is in part a coded text displaying -- as Winkin again points out -- a particular kind of "*méchanceté*" (*ibid.*). Thus, only those in the know can be expected to figure out who, among the French ethnomethodologists, finds himself sardonically brought back by the authors to his "theological" training (Bourdieu and Winkin, 2002, p. 13).

Nevertheless, despite its derisive overtones, Bourdieu and Winkin's text raises some serious questions about the reception of ethnomethodology in France and Cicourel's place within it. For sure, Bourdieu and Winkin praise the work of the US sociologist for itself, enshrining him as a representative of "the most demanding" and "most rigorous [...] face of sociology" (Bourdieu and Winkin, 2002, p. 9). But it is first and foremost in contrast to ethnomethodological research that Cicourel seems to acquire his value and importance in the eyes of the authors. In their account, ethnomethodology stands as a foil to Cicourel's work -- or, conversely, Cicourel's work provides the basis for an acid criticism of ethnomethodology, which is basically characterized as *everything that Cicourel's approach is not*. Indeed, Bourdieu and Winkin define it primarily by its distance "from the theoretical glosses and ostentatiously radical postures of orthodox ethnomethodologists", and by its refusal to "position itself by opposing sociology", in the manner of Garfinkel (Bourdieu and Winkin, 2002, p. 12).

I will discuss the issues involved in this reading of Cicourel's work, placing it in the broader context of the reception of ethnomethodology in France (or, more generally, in French-speaking Europe). I'll first review the milestones of this reception from the 1970s to the 1990s, with particular emphasis on the place granted to Cicourel, before turning to Bourdieu and Winkin's position. I'll especially consider one aspect of their argument: the status of "heretic" or "apostate" assigned to Cicourel -- *i.e.*, that of a former insider presumably knowing all about the "mysteries" of ethnomethodology -- and the kind of criticism it enables them to formulate.

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