



Those Things That Hold Us Together: Taste and Sociology

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ABSTRACT

The idea of reflexivity has much to offer to the analysis of taste – but reflexivity in its ancient sense, a form neither active nor passive, pointing to an originary state where things, persons, and events have just arrived, with no action, subject or objects yet decided. Objects of taste are not present, inert, available and at our service. They give themselves up, they shy away, they impose themselves. ‘Amateurs’ do not believe things have taste. On the contrary, they make themselves detect them, through a continuous elaboration of procedures that put taste to the test. Understood as reflexive work performed on one’s own attachments, the amateur’s taste is no longer considered (as with so-called ‘critical’ sociology) an arbitrary election which has to be explained by hidden social causes. Rather, it is a collective technique, whose analysis helps us to understand the ways we make ourselves sensitized, to things, to ourselves, to situations and to moments, while simultaneously controlling how those feelings might be shared and discussed with others.

KEY WORDS

amateurs / attachment / pragmatism / reflexivity / sociology / taste

Introduction

The sociology of culture has trained us to have a critical reading of people’s tastes and preferences. Although *amateurs*¹ supposedly feel a natural affinity towards the objects of their passion, sociology has persisted in showing that this relationship is actually socially constructed through the categories employed, the authority of leaders, the imitation of intimates, institutions and frames of appreciation, as well as through the social game of identity making and differentiation.

Such an approach does not content itself with revealing the hidden determinants of a practice that appears natural, spontaneous and individual. Through a critical sociology, preferences are transformed into signs. Direct contact with things, uncertainty of sensations, methods and techniques used to become sensitive to, and to *feel the feeling* of, the object being sought – in the sociology of culture, these moments and gestures of taste are either neglected, or are directly denounced as rituals whose principal function is less to make *amateurs* ‘feel’, than to make them ‘believe’. Gestures are said to produce the collective belief that what is preferable lies within things, when the sociologist knows full well, since Durkheim and Bourdieu, that preferences are but a collective production of this very belief, in and of itself.

In contrast, a reflexive conception of *amateurs*’ activities leads to a view that is respectful both of *amateurs*’ own understandings of their tastes as well as of the practices they undertake to reveal these tastes to themselves. In fact, ‘*amateurs*’ do not *believe* things have taste. To the contrary, they bring themselves to detect the taste of things through a continuous elaboration of procedures that put taste to the test. In testing tastes, *amateurs* rely as much on the properties of objects – which, far from being given, have to be deployed in order to be perceived – as on the abilities and sensibilities one needs to train to perceive them; they rely as much on the individual and collective determinisms of attachment, as on the techniques and devices necessary in a situation for things to be felt. Understood as reflexive work performed on one’s own attachments, the *amateur*’s taste is no longer considered an arbitrary election which has to be explained (as in the so-called ‘critical’ sociology) by hidden social causes. Rather, it is a collective technique, whose analysis helps us to understand the way we make ourselves become sensitized, to things, to ourselves, to situations and to moments, while simultaneously controlling how those feelings might be shared and discussed with others.

‘Taste’ perhaps is too laden a word, so long as it connotes the elaborate connoisseurship of a sophisticated object, like cigars, coffee or opera. We are actually concerned by a much larger range of practices and activities. To begin, let us escape the aporias that are accumulating under our feet by taking a moment to tour a scene unfolding at the bottom of a route for cliff climbers.

Asperities and Surprises

What could be simpler? Below, there are climbers who want to reach a certain height. In front of them there is a rock, hard, inert, and quietly installed in the expansive timeline of geology. Between the two, the necessary tools are present – a guide of the approximate itinerary, the nails and rope for security, the super-adherent rubber boots. Does not all this seem to fit the good old theory of action? Here, we find human beings endowed with clear intentions, codified competencies, and technical means, attempting to attain an objective by putting into motion plans, plans which they are able to correct as they encounter the incidents that the route will lay before them, by and by.

And yet, does this description give a relevant account of what is occurring? What kind of action is it, what subjects bring it into being, and with what results? The goal most certainly is not to reach the top, for having barely attained it, the climber redescends. The summit, an objective onto which in the golden ages of alpinism, the ‘conquerors of the impossible’ conferred mythic value, has disappeared. The top of the path is nothing but a point of reassurance, that is when it does not arrive at a parking lot! Are they following a plan? Nothing happens as they would want it to. Progress is defined by the gestures that enact it. One might say that the object of the climb is really in the achievement of the route. But even in this, the attempts they make fail, and there lies all the pleasure. A route made is a route already forgotten, to the benefit of the next one, different, more difficult, the route which another climber just attempted in vain. A curious action, in which defeat is more interesting than success.

The objective of the ascent conflates with the actual fact of climbing. What counts is entirely in what is happening. From the point of view of the subject, an analogous reduction erases the distinction between the goal and its realization. At the bottom of the route, the climber is eager to abandon all of the personal attributes that make up his regular identity. To practice this sort of thing together, one might begin at the outset by depositing all of that which is not concerned with this activity. A little bit like among army comrades, nothing remains but the pleasure of doing what is being done, the stereotypical character of each one, the jokes, and of course, the interminable discussion on this or that passage, the traps, the movements to make, the way to place oneself, the rest stops. Before their cliff, the only important thing for a moment, for humans together like this, is common practice. As with all *amateurs* – be they the miniature modellers that come to compare their balsa wood planes on Sunday at the Bagatelle, or the Bocce players on the promenade in the South of France – it is the activity that defines them, not the inverse.

We must go further. There has been a methodological inversion between an adequate description of these curious practices of *amateurs* and a model of action: the means have become the object, the object the means. Therein lies not only a simple bias or a secondary sophistication, calling for but a methodological correction of an all too instrumental conception of action, in order better to take into account action’s situated, improvised character, the fact that it continues to adapt throughout its realization.² For everything which the theory of action emphasizes – the subject, the goal, the plan – is of no importance. All that matters, to the contrary, is precisely what a theory of action places in an instrumental position: gestures, holds, movements, passages – all the words between the two, that attach one to the other, the climber to the rock, that speak their uncertain contact, and that have no meaning if we attribute them to only one or to the other. These words are situated at the precise point where contact between the hand that grasps and the fold in the rock face defines the fact of climbing.³ A ‘movement’ is an indistinct composition of both the minuscule rugged edges of the rock, which design the movement’s possibility and, also the

immediate capacity of the climber's body. The well made or beautiful route, the satisfaction and the level of the climber, all of these will be consequences of their mutual definition in the course of the climb itself. They are not points of departure for an action that unfolds, with or without success, forward.

If the word 'action' is not suitable, it is because it does not permit us to think the primary and necessary characteristic of the climb, of the double erasure of the climber and the rock in the transition that defines one by the other. There is nothing fortuitous about this erasure. It organizes all of the activity and makes it attractive: how will I get by, what is going to happen, what will I feel, how is my body going to react? There is nothing passive about this erasure either. In no way does it signal a reduction to the here and now of the situation, to an interaction without ties and without a past. Quite the contrary: preparation, obstinacy, and training are needed to condition oneself to allow one's body to guess at a movement, to slide itself into its accomplishment, and to surmount in a supple fashion *thus*, what at first seemed to require a brutal effort. The intense pleasure of this effacing of self, to the benefit of a precise gesture, is concentration. The key word for athletes, singers, or pianists, concentration is skirted over too quickly as if it deals with psychology, when actually, it designates the double reduction that intensifies presence: from a whole body to a precise gesture, and from the wall to two or three minuscule stone projections. Far from being an isolated moment which analysis might oppose against determinants, this concentration can only be issued from a tight flux of attachments, as much as to oneself in the life of one's body and training, as well as to others,⁴ and to a collective history, with its fashions, techniques, changing objects and controversies, which can, little by little, appear in all the varieties of forms of common practice.

The body is revealed in gesture and appears to itself, from whence comes pleasure. This is every bit as true for the rock. The rock is not just the inert geological mass that we were speaking of earlier. It, too, is a reservoir of differences, which only the climb reveals and makes emerge. Even rock formations have a history. They are distant, these summits which once inspired fear, snow capped and dark. Summits have been slowly transformed into catalogues of exploits by great alpinists throughout the 20th century. Today, centred around challenging routes, climbing has again made a new rock appear. This rock is catalogued metre by metre in those little guides to cliffs that provide ceaselessly renewed lists of routes, baptised by highfaluting names, rated and commented upon according to very precise criteria. These ratings serve as uniform benchmarks by which every climber can define their level: I can climb a 5 sup., a 6b, an 8a... Is this to say that the same rock formation, the most inert object we thought we could find, is a 'social construction', as the sociologists would say? We can see the weakness of this opposition which suggests a zero sum equation where everything that can be ripped from nature is given to culture and the actions of humans; and inversely, everything that is torn from human beings is given unto nature. What climbing shows is not that the geological rock is a social construction, but that it is a reservoir of differences that can be brought

into being. The climber makes the rock as the rock makes the climber. The differences are indeed in the rock, and not in the 'gaze' that is brought to it. But these are not brought to bear without the activity of the climb which makes them present. There is co-formation. Differences emerge, multiply and are projected. The 'object' is not an immobile mass against which our goals are thrown. It is in itself a deployment, a response, an infinite reservoir of differences that can be apprehended and brought into being. Stated otherwise, the more the object is social, the more it is natural – not the less.

So, what else is taste?

Taste as Activity

Taste is not an attribute, it is not a property (of a thing or of a person), it is an activity. You have to do something in order to listen to music, drink a wine, appreciate an object. Tastes are not given or determined, and their objects are not either; one has to make them appear together, through repeated experiments, progressively adjusted. The meticulous activity of *amateurs* is a machinery to bring forth through contact and feel differences infinitely multiplying, multiplying indissociably 'within' the objects tasted and 'within' the taster's sensitivity. These differences are not 'already there'. Through comparison, repetition and so on, things that are less inert than they appear are made more present. They must be made to appear in and through contact: to taste is to *make feel*, and to *make oneself feel*, and also, by the sensations of the body, exactly like the climber, to *feel oneself doing*.

In displacing the question of taste towards personal dispositions, norms and collective frames, sociology makes of tasting an obvious, ordinary experience. The actual taste, in a situation, is but a more or less mechanical or unconscious application of dispositions, which themselves originate from social determinants. In such a view, the order of things becomes inversed, making tastes a well determined property in all the meanings of the term. They are at once firm and affirming, reducible to causes, seen from the exterior, and all the more decidedly, seen by the subject bearing these tastes.⁵ But such a stable judgment, consistent with its determinisms, is very rarely observed. It is only formulated in very specific conditions, when taste is at first the affirmation of an identity, the display of a social position – as, typically, when a person is facing a sociologist or filling out a survey form. Confronting an unknown object, as does the climber, one is far from recovering such a beautiful consistency between oneself and one's own sensations. Taste as a situated activity is not so pre-established: it points toward the contact, a situation of 'between-the-two', the place and the moment of the uncertain upsurge of sensation. In the act of tasting, in the gestures that allow it, in the know-how that accompanies it, in the supports sought (in other people, or in guides and reviews), in the tiny ongoing adjustments that lay it out and favour its felicity and reproducibility – it is on the basis of all these responses that objects return to those who take an interest in them.

Making One's Determinations Act

This way of making oneself sensible to things through the things themselves looks, now regarded from the sociologist's point of view, like machinery designed to invert the order of things between causes and effects. There exist 'causes' and 'determinations' for taste only if activated by the act of tasting, this attention which makes the situation *be* more present. It is tasters that produce, reinforce and elaborate what determines them, and not the abstract determinisms produced by sociologists or cognitive scientists, who would underhandedly regulate a taste that ignores the taster.

'You love but that which you have been'

Here is an example, obtained by chance, far from a work situation. A phrase came back to me one night, a statement that I did not hear in an interview. I identify this precisely because the ways matter in which the sociologist suddenly pays attention to that which he did not previously see. In a previous life, I loved rock music, and in the course of a conversation between two friends who have stayed more faithful to their youthful preferences, I heard one say to the other: 'You, you only love but that which you have been'. At that moment I had paid them no attention but as a sociologist, this kind of remark sticks in the corners of the mind. And so, floating in my bath, six or seven years later, I reflected on the problem of social determinants so persuasive in the matter of preferences. I was searching for a way of rethinking them once the reflexive capacity of the actors was better situated within the pragmatic frame of analysis we were elaborating. What *are* social determinants in the literature, by the way? They are blind forces that grip you and of which you are ignorant. You think you love things, when no, it is your milieu, your origin, your formation that makes you appreciate them. Or even more, *a la Bourdieu*, it is the very mechanism of this illusion that forms the preference. This is a completely passive vision of 'determinism'. But what did this phrase mean, that 'you only love but that which you have been'? Contrary to Bourdieu, the amateur effortlessly 'does', and finds no problem with it. One says to the other, 'your preferences are not things in and of themselves, rather it is you, your generation, the memory of your youth...'. Your tastes are your past, sedimented (familial, scholarly, social...), they make up your identity. Far from being a hidden truth, the fact that behind every affirmation of preferences there are immediately social identifications is part of people's *common knowledge*.

The big difference that topples a critical analysis over into a pragmatic analysis is precisely that one speaks the statement to the other. *Amateurs* do not struggle against determinisms that the sociologist unveils despite their resistance. *Amateurs* cope with determinisms. They discover them, more easily in others than in themselves, questioning their importance. Does this only appeal to me because I have bathed in it since a very young age? Am I not in fact following a trend, or imitating a friend that I admire? Sometimes by

relying on sociology, *amateurs* characterise their own tastes by taking stock of them. For this to occur *amateurs* have to form some sort of a community for, like in our example, it is only from one *amateur* to another that this kind of thing might be said. If the rocker in question presents the observation to his companion, it is also because he thinks that it might change him. Thus this is an excellent definition of the collective: our taste is the taste of others.

We rely on others in a reflexive way to constitute our tastes – and we know this all too well! This is exactly what my rocker friend was saying. This scene resurging from my memory was in the end very important to me for thinking through these questions. The scene links tastes to others not only in the moment, as a kind of permanently open debate – it is by relying on the opinion of others that I constitute my preferences – but also and moreover, historically, even at the level of the very content of a preference and not only in the way of forming it. The scene indicates a perfect consciousness of the fact that taste, lived by each but fashioned by all, is a history of oneself permanently remade together with others.

This mobilization of social determination completely changes its status. First of all, social determination can be named. Most of all, it is not the be-all-and-end-all of what we can say about tastes. The social determination can also be worked (or not), taken as a support for change or just as a sign of identity, it can be reinforced or surpassed. In sum, it is part of taste, as is its availability to enter into a debate with intimates. This does a lot for the actors who supposedly just believe in the object suiting their taste and are blind to its social determination. On the contrary, *amateurs* do not deny social determinisms, they rather rely on them, as they do masterpieces or on the tastes of others, to ‘determine’ their own tastes. Among all of the possible determinisms, they might select one – here, in our rocker’s story, of taste as a definition of oneself, picked up by others as a sort of frozen repetition; hence the reproach they addressed to this companion of a perpetual return to 1970s rock. By pointing it out, the assertion is put into action, in the uncertain hope that this can, perhaps, make him change.

A Deliberation (With Oneself and With Others ...)

Otherwise stated, the more determinants there are, the more preferences exist, and not the inverse. Far from being agents manipulated by forces of which they are unaware, *amateurs* also ask themselves if too great a proximity to their object does not blind them. Like other aspects of tastes, their ‘sociological’ or mimetic character is a theme of debate between *amateurs*, and not a resource for the sociologist to make interpretations of. How can a part of the object be grasped, from what it delivers to those who are eager to receive it? How can the possibilities that it holds be accessed, the things that it contains and hides in part, and which therefore need to be revealed in order to be deployed? By making fire of all that is wood in order to determine stable causes – in searching for faithfulness to one’s taste or to one’s previous experience; in trusting here, the tastes

of others, or there, the criticisms and blurbs that explain the origins of things, believing thus that these explain preferences; and, elsewhere, in believing in sociology which shows that we never love but that which we have been, our identity and its differences – in all this, one may say that tastes are an image of oneself tendered to others, even if these ‘others’ are largely imaginary.

One of the objectives of the inquiries and experiments that we are conducting on diverse types of *amateur* practices such as sports, music, cuisine or the love of wine,⁶ is to consider taste as within a problematic modality of attaching to the world. It is the difficult process of attachment that produces in the same motion the competences of the *amateur* and the repertoire of objects to which s/he holds. Taste, in spite of a conception which has become hegemonic, is not a gratuitous social game, overdetermined and ignorant of its own existence. In shifting critical competences towards the actors themselves,⁷ this perspective thinks of taste as a pragmatic activity involving *amateurs* turned towards their object in a *perplexed* mode. By ‘perplexed’ we mean them being on the lookout for what it does to them, attentive to traces of what it does to others; a sharing out among the direct sensations to be experienced (or whose experience is being sought), and the indirect relays that permit one to change one’s own judgement a bit, while relying in part on the advice of others.⁸

A casually raised glass...

As dinner advances, each person is more giddy, they talk, they interrupt one another. A guest serves wine to his neighbour, who takes his glass, drinks and sets it back down, all the while continuing the conversation. He eats, looks over, and speaks to another neighbour.

Cut to a second scene. It is the same, the same guests, the same ambience, the same gestures. The man takes his glass, he begins to drink. At this point, he stops an instant, takes two small sniffs, drinks again, makes a ‘moment’ with his lips while replacing his glass and before taking up and continuing where he was in the broken thread of conversation.

Very few elements differentiate these two scenes. A second of attention ‘lent’, as one might say, to what is being drunk. There is no need for the guest to comment or to congratulate the host. Nor is it necessary for the person drinking to have clear consciousness that a change of state has taken place. No need that he passes intentionally from one way of being present at the dinner (through conversational exchange) to another (that of his palate to the wine he is drinking, and of himself in his degustation), before returning to the first. *Voilà* what would be a very heavy descriptive apparatus, weighing down the instance with too burdensome a charge, the drinker with too precise an intention, the course of the action with a rupture that nobody felt. It is an ordinary displacement, like those through which we ceaselessly operate in all situations without awareness. No need to isolate two courses of contrasting action as though in reality we were not permanently gripped in a whole tissue of states, of modes of being present to ourselves, to the situation, to others and to objects, that interlace, superimpose,

that encase themselves like parentheses. We sweep a crumb from the table, we clear the throat, we laugh, we excuse ourselves after too brusque a gesture, we interrupt ourselves a moment to follow a conversation just within earshot. We do not cease to perform these little controls: what is So and So doing? what are they laughing about over there? it is late...; I'll have another serving from this dish that is being taken away.... The ordinary state is this spontaneous management of multiple relationships to one's body, to others, to things, to events, rather than in the univocal installation of oneself into a rapport with a definitively delineated object. One tends to pose this final disposition as evident from the moment that one begins to consider tastes, when, to the contrary, it is this final disposition that is exceptional. This disposition demands an explicit effort, the targeting of a precise object, it presumes intention and will, a temporal and material framework, training, time, and favourable conditions. The (albeit slightly) more attentive taste of the second guest as compared to the first, does not need all of this setting up. It is enough to open one of these multiply enfolded parentheses without disturbing the course of affairs any further.⁹

Even so, reduced to such a nuance, a pause marked by a movement of the lips, this small gesture introduces an important difference. Barely perceptible, it signals another arrangement of the self, a degree attained in the tasting. Less of an intention than an attention, and a stronger presence of the tasted object, each reinforces the other without a primary cause. He has not simply drunk, he has drunk a wine. There is no taste without this minimal ordering of experience that makes the experience appear, this light shifting of self with self, which opens a parenthesis in the course of what is happening, modifies it, orients it, makes it enter into a frame, even if all these small events are adumbrated, occurring without effort or calculation. I drink and 'I drink', I feel effects and I stop and reflect for an instant on what 'it' does to me. There is also no taste in the other direction without this intensification of the object, which itself responds or provokes. The object also shifts, advances a notch, to deploy itself and deliver its riches, involving a more marked contact and a rising in its presence. Before any putting into words and before we need to know more about the wine or the drinker, it is on that moment of attention that I would like to focus our attention. As does the drinker, I would like to reinstate this open, interrogative instant at the centre of our analysis of taste. This moment marks itself by the surge of an intensified contact, provoking a shift between the self towards the object, and a shift of the object towards the self. What the minimal word 'attention' expresses so lightly and so well – in a single movement, like the taster's gesture – these two displacements which make contact, grant attention to, capture the attention of.¹⁰

Yet, this minimum implies such a great deal. In the first place, reflexivity on the part of the taster¹¹ ('Hey, this wine's not too bad...' – to whom other than oneself as the yet undefined subject of experience is this curious interjection addressed, this 'hey' which invites the required attention?). And, on the part of objects, it implies a capacity to interrupt, to surprise or to respond. This right to advance, this is *their* reflexivity, their power to make themselves more present. Objects are not already there, inert and available at our service. They deliver

themselves, unrobe themselves, impose themselves on us. Language is, thankfully, less exacting than the philosophies of the subject and of intentionality. Language unscrupulously authorises objects this use of the reflexive (as when we say that one must let the wine 'express itself'), that *amateurs* know so well: beautiful things only offer themselves to those who offer themselves to beautiful things.

There is nothing fortuitous about this opportune philological reminder of the link between reflexivity and the capacity of things to emerge. This is what was expressed by the 'middle' Greek form (poorly named, as middle is a word that admits the pre-existence of the active and the passive between which it would place itself, when in fact it is to the contrary the origin and foundation of both).¹² The middle form is not a secondary form which would be neither active or passive, but it is primary and foundational, that from which beings and events arrive. The middle form precedes these all too voluntary regimes, for which it is the matrix: it arrives to itself as it arrives, it passes itself as it is passed.... Who is born when they are born? Becoming, knowing, arriving, existing, desiring.... most of these verbs which the Greek employed in the middle form designate something that emerges forth, of which we would be hard pressed to distinguish as active or passive. Stable states such as these are at best a result of this very emergence or happening. This middle form – a form which existed prior to the division of the subject and the object – has been chased out by this very division in most modern languages, and they have to invent various grammatical ways of restoring it, when needed. In English, it is by the invading use of the gerundive (becoming, etc.). It is not by chance that the reflexive form took it over in French, with great inventiveness, giving birth to many untranslatable formulas, like 'cela se passe', 'cela ne s'invente pas', 'l'affaire se présente mal', etc. Guess which subject or object may be signified in the expression 'il s'agit de...' in French ('what is at stake here is...'): the grammarian would have trouble finding his way around within this extraordinary and simple formula: that the subject is 'impersonal' hinders neither (self) reflection, nor speaking about action without the least trace of an actor.

In contrast to the ultra-modernist theme which reflexivity has *also* become, notably with the Anglo-Saxons (I will return to this below), this felicitous use of the French language emphasizes another meaning of reflexivity, at once more secret and more decisive, when it functions not through given subjects and objects, like a sophisticated supplement to the faculties of a subject to know the world, but to the contrary through indeterminate subject-objects, not yet emerged. While things happen, are experienced ('se passent', 's'éprouvent', in French, still in the reflexive), this reflexive examination is precisely in the process of 'determining' us. This is a usage particularly welcome in the case of tastes. In effect, in French one says that a music 's'écoute', that a wine 'se boit'.... To accentuate listening is to reintroduce into taste the act of tasting: the irreducible heterogeneity of a real event, not only the masterpiece and the listener, or a wine and a drinker, but of bodies, of devices and dispositions, of duration, an ungraspable object, an instant that passes, states that emerge. After all, outside of laboratories and schools, what else is music?

Taste as a Reflexive Activity

Taste gains something by being thus placed in a relationship with the idea of reflexivity, reflexivity not only in the modern and political sense, but also and more importantly – this was the point of the opening scenes – in its primary, originating sense, which insists on the indeterminate moment of what is appearing. Reflexivity is the key notion of analysis. It is at once a central modality of *amateur's* activities, a modality of the presence of objects,¹³ and a necessary method for the sociologist.¹⁴

But what should be understood by 'reflexivity'? In the literature, the term has multiple, superimposed meanings which can render its use confusing. Moving from the most official to the most radical, in my estimation – that is to say, from a 'strong' meaning, clear and framed, but with subjects and objects as givens, to a 'weak' indecisive sense, but opened up to the 'happening of things' – we have first of all a political interpretation, depicting a modern world obsessed by expression through discourse, a world which does not cease to self-evaluate.¹⁵ The concept is a key one in anthropology, the discipline where the reflexive thesis erupted and flourished. There it comes out of the symmetrical idea of a knowledge of the other that turned out to be actually nothing more than a mirror held out by the Occident facing itself.¹⁶ A second common reference of the word occurs in social science, referring to the surprising capacity of social scientific information to be rapidly reintegrated as a resource for actors. Reflexive, therefore, in the sense that the groups being observed reacquire the theories made about them which changes the observations that were made of them in the first place. A third and further meaning that is slightly different and which Bourdieu, for example, mobilized with aptitude, is the reciprocal idea that the sociologists must apply the analysis that is produced about others to themselves. It is according to this meaning of reflexive that Bourdieu is catalogued among the reflexive authors in the USA.

All of these meanings remain compatible with classical sociological theories. They render these theories more sophisticated only by adding to a traditional, linear concept of science, a supplementary twist, turning from the sociologist to the actor, from the actor to the sociologist – or even from the sociologist as actor to the sociologist as sociologist. Above all, all of them consider the problem of reflexivity within the framework of a theory of knowledge. The world itself remains an inert object that the sociologist only targets, even if the fact that we belong to that world obliges a few intellectual contortions.

By contrast, it seems to me that the most disturbing implications of reflexivity, even if these are more complicated and more difficult to grasp, are those concerning its tie with the activity itself (in other words, to continue outrageously to simplify the question, turning from the actors to the actors, and from the actors to objects – and vice versa). No activity can be defined outside of its own accomplishment, the support, the frames by which, making emerge in the same gesture its participants and its objects, it defines 'itself'.¹⁷ Or, using an ethnomethodological formula (difficult to translate into French, this time: it is not

for nothing that reflexivity is so tightly linked to language), we could say that ‘activities provide their own accountability’, their own aptitude to present themselves, they give a grasp on their own reporting.¹⁸

‘De Gustibus Disputandum’

In this perspective we understand to what extent the question of taste is decisive. The way we characterized it, the reflexive character of taste is almost a definition, its foundational act: an attention to, a suspension of, a stopping at what is happening – and symmetrically, a stronger presence of the object being tasted. The object also advances, takes its time, unfurls and exhibits itself. If one accepts a casual glass, thinking of other things, then one is not an *amateur*. But if one stops even for a fraction of a second, to observe oneself tasting, the gesture is installed. From a fortuitous, isolated event that happens to you, one moves into the continuity of an ongoing interest. The instant becomes an occasion among others in a course that leans up against past occasions. This is the difference between liking and ‘liking’, in quotes, that being an *amateur* is, even to a minimal degree.

We see that this differentiated and differentiating attention relates to a double historicity, both personal and collective, and more generally to a space of its own, in which the activity was able to give itself locations, moments, and the means of constituting itself as such: this taste is also reflexive in the ‘strong’ sense. It is a framed activity. One does not appreciate wine or music as though one has tripped over a rock. One likes wine AND one ‘likes wine’ (or this or that wine), in quotes: one drifts lightly away from oneself to ‘enter’ into this activity, which has a past and a space, demarcated by its objects, its other participants, its ways of doing, its locations, its movements, its instructions. This is what at once constrains and produces, obliges attentiveness, involving training and gestures, which makes people, little by little, become *amateurs*, and without dissociation, which makes the wine have a taste to which they become sensitive. Reflexivity pertains all the way through. It is the same for music. One must make oneself into a musician to be a musician, and music is nothing without the attentiveness (personal, collective, historical...) that makes it so. Certainly, all of this occurs through verbalization, but it cannot be reduced to this alone.

On the methodological level, to say that the taste of wine or a musical object are not given, but result from a performance by the taster, a performance that relies on techniques, corporeal training, repeated experiments, and which is accomplished in time, both because it follows from the unfolding of a settlement and because its success flows out from the moment, is, in large part, to dispel the very possibility of describing the know-how of *amateurs*. Under these terms, the primary sociologists of taste are the *amateurs* themselves. It is not possible for the exterior observer, the sociologist, to observe taste in the same way that they themselves think that the *amateur* looks at a work of art: that is, as an object that can be contemplated, and not as an effect that might or might not emerge. With taste and pleasure, the effects are not exogenous variables, or automatic attributes of objects. They are the results of a corporeal practice, collective and instrumented,

settled by methods that are discussed endlessly, oriented around the appropriate seizing upon of uncertain effects. It is for this reason that we prefer to speak of attachments.¹⁹ This word splits the opposition between a series of causes that would come from without, and the elusive and inexpressible instantaneousness of a present that cannot be reduced to analysis. On the side of *amateurs*, it insists less on labels and more on states, less on auto-proclamations and more on people's activities; on the side of the objects, the works and pieces tasted, it leaves open their right to respond, their capacity to co-produce 'what is happening', that which will emerge from contact.

Placing emphasis on the analysis of taste as a collective, reflexive, instrumented activity is also to point at the thousands of devices that *amateurs* have invented. The space opened by taste is in no way a no-man's land. It is on the contrary rather full – of objects and tools, devices, frames, confrontations and references, of all kinds of supports, collectives and material equipment that permit taste to deploy itself beyond the here and now of the interaction. These are at once instruments and the traces, ceaselessly mobilized, of the presence of others. There are other options for deciding one's taste than either determinism or spontaneity. As we have seen, far from fleeing determinisms, the taster is replete with them: his problem is not to escape determinisms, but to refine their quality. Determination is a synonym of attachment – it is what links us, constrains us, holds us, and what we love, what binds us, that of which we are a part.

Letting Happen and Making Happen

What matters is what happens, what it does, what comes to light, in oneself and in things – and not what one is seeking. It is a question of sensing, of being taken, of feeling. But this is in no way a passive state: this making available of oneself could not be more active, as the word 'passion' effectively connotes; it passes through an intense mobilization of one's abilities, it is backed up by skills and traditions, objects and tools. It has a history, it defines a collectivity. Taste is a making, a 'making aware of', and not a simple act of sensing. It is active, but contrary to an action, it is entirely turned toward an availability to what comes. It is an active way of putting oneself in such a state that something may happen to oneself. A curious activity, indeed: it is a passivity actively sought, or an activity intentionally undergone, letting oneself be carried away, overflowing with the surprises that arise through contact with things.²⁰

Putting their determinisms social or otherwise, back into the hands of actors, pertains to a genuine sociological genre. To do so plays on elements less familiar to the sociologist, such as the body or 'circumstances'. The climber's body is not given in advance either. It is discovered in gesture, it is a physical determinism in and of itself whose measure is taken in the very test itself – and it is this that gives pleasure. One further thing that is difficult to conceptualize in taste – and I will conclude on this problem – is the place to be accorded to circumstances, to devices, to moments. That the love of art, that the pleasures of the *amateur* depend on locations and moments, this is what is not easy to

grasp. I will take an example from an interview – an interview that again, as usual, I did not immediately understand!

'It depends', or, Dora's couch

Failed interviews are often the best ones that we do – without knowing it. Despite all of its theoretical prerequisites (or because of them?), at the moment when s/he poses his or her questions in actual research situations with someone, the sociologist is scarcely better armed than any other person. S/he copes as s/he is able, launching new attempts, trying questions that are a little silly, above all destined to unleash the particular associations of the interviewee. For a certain research project, I was questioning a lady of a certain age once, a very important *amateur* of music who purchased and listened to it enormously – a woman, however, who was difficult to 'get a grasp of', as they might say in the climbing world.

- You appreciate baroque music?
- Yes, yes, well, it depends.
- Classical music?
- Yes, yes, classical music...
- And the other kinds of music?
- Yes, yes, the other kinds of music, well, it depends.
- And baroque music, you prefer the new currents, new interpretations?
- Yes, yes, well, it depends.

It depends, it depends.... There are some days like this.... I finally tucked away in a corner this interview which at bottom had not been 'fruitful' for me. Our survey progressed in the meantime. Much later, looking for 'pure' cases exemplifying various forms of taste, we could find no-one whose taste was focused not on the object, not on himself or herself, not on others' tastes, but on the circumstances. And suddenly, I remembered Dora. Re-reading that forgotten interview, hardly considered conclusive, we finally understood (and could read in her responses) the originality of a form of taste, installed in the art of the situation, in the meticulous search of the appropriate moment. The 'it depends' was a description completely adapted to her search, where I had seen nothing but a poor evasion, an 'I don't know' which said nothing precisely – it was necessary that I make myself sensitive to her posture, simply to be at the correct reference points to read her!

All at once, as soon as this 'entry' was understood, far from being empty or failed, the interview revealed itself to be full of answers. Far from resisting the interview, Dora had not stopped talking to me – and she had done that very well, including much detail about what she does when she listens to music. She goes back to her home, feeling tired. She has bought a particular type of CD player, and so was well prepared with regard to this taste, not to listen to different kinds of music, but to know what might please her at any given moment. She has equipped her taste. She has cases into which one can put six CDs. She chooses some CDs rather randomly

from her library – in effect, the question of genres was not at all pertinent to her, for it does not depend on genres. Starting from this initial choice, itself rapidly made, she installs herself on her sofa. She has a superb hi-fi stereo system (she also gave me a very precise statement on sound and music), she flips, she zaps, if it is not right she zaps some more, until she arrives at the right one, to what works for that night....

What was she telling me? That for her, taste was neither a repertory of superior works, nor ‘her’ particular taste that she was searching to discover, but it was the quest for the right piece at the right moment, for what would please in this situation, now, presently. But this, this is a constant of taste! In short, ‘it depends’. Contrary to the dualism that makes everything depend either on masterpieces ‘themselves’, or on a taste that we ‘have’ (personal or determined – it is the same thing, in both cases it is considered a property of the subject), Dora reminds us that taste is first of all an opportunism of the moment and of situations. To be introduced into a repertory of objects, that we ‘choose’ from in this way and that, primarily because they present themselves to us. Though less orthodox than the official, over-selective version, this understanding of taste, which highlights its common features, will be recognized by many *amateurs*.

Conclusion: Dependencies

Taste effectively depends on everything – another declension of the word ‘attachment’. The firmest causes either do not produce the expected effects, or may not be recognized. And inversely, starting from repetition, partial, indiscreet, coming from oneself, from others, from things and from circumstances, the firmest choices are soon put into question. This does not lead to relativism, but to new experiences, to all of those revisions, conversions and discoveries that mark the careers of *amateurs*.

To the variety of things, or rather their infinite capacity to produce differences, an irreducible variety of formats of taste responds, combining multiple determinants. To name the most classic formats in this regard: following the taste of others, searching for one’s own preferences, focusing on the quality of things and the training to perceive what is considered to be the best, and, like Dora, looking for the adequacy of a happy moment or the instantaneous felicity of a situation.

The key question is definitely to do with the problematic presence of ‘the object’ within taste. What place is accorded or not accorded to the responses of objects, that is, to their ‘respondance’? For being ‘socially constructed’, the object exists nonetheless: it is, on the contrary, more present. We cannot continue to oscillate indefinitely between linear interpretations, that is, ‘natural’ ones – taste comes from things themselves – and circular interpretations, that is, ‘cultural’ ones – objects are what we make them – in this strange zero sum equation between objects and society. By showing how taste comes to things thanks to the *amateurs*, we fully rejoin pragmatism.²¹ Pragmatism made us give up the dual world – things on one side autonomous but inert, things on the other

side, pure social signs – so as to enter a world of mediations and effects, in which the body that tastes and the taste of the object, the group that loves it and the range of things they love, are produced together, one by the other.²² The attachments link all of these heterogeneous elements, at once determinant and determined, that carry constraints and make the course of things rebound.

Translation by Martha Poon

Notes

- 1 We have kept the French word '*amateur*', because it is more appropriate and general than 'enthusiast' or 'fan', but is less about 'expertise' than the word 'connoisseur'. It is used here in a wider sense than the negative English one, of *amateur* as 'non-professional', and it designates any lay-person engaged in a systematic activity, which makes them develop, in various degrees, their sensitivities or abilities in that domain.
- 2 Suchman (1987).
- 3 Cf. the beautiful description of fingers on the strings of a guitar by Michel Serres (1985).
- 4 The rope is there as a faithful reminder of those attachments, which in case of a fall prevents one from being crushed flat below. But 'others' are integrated into the activity all through its design: the plotting of the course, its rating, the objectives, the heroes and role-models, etc..
- 5 This is the ceaselessly reflexive but exclusively used mode of interpreting preferences developed by Bourdieu (1984). Moreover, when he treats music, he uses a questionnaire which is particularly reductionist.
- 6 See Hennion, Maisonneuve and Gomart (2000); Hennion (2004); Hennion and Teil (2004). Tia DeNora (2000) addressed very similar issues about people's ways of remembering tunes or choosing 'gym' soundtracks.
- 7 Boltanski and Thévenot (1991).
- 8 Here we are referring to the model of belief as a form of reliance on a succession of guarantees (objects, intimates, others, likelihoods...) as proposed by Michel de Certeau (1981).
- 9 To see the way that Thévenot has reformulated these questions, see Thévenot (1990).
- 10 See the irreplaceable analyses of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, in particular (1964).
- 11 The reflexive character of an activity (involved here, to its zero degree, by the simple fact of having entered into an identified disposition) does not assume that there is necessarily reflection by actors (which implies a much higher degree of calculation and of consciousness, and a transition from a simple variation in our modes of being present in a situation, to the register of deliberate action).
- 12 Cf. Benvéniste (1966), pp. 168–175, and Hennion, Maisonneuve and Gomart (2000), p. 166.
- 13 See Conein, Dodier and Thévenot (1993).
- 14 The sociologist's account also changes status in this regard: it becomes an active part of the individual and collective definition of what taste is today. On the methodological plain, this reflexive character of taste, from the moment when it begins, is precisely what renders possible its later verbal re-expression in front of other people, as in an interview setting or an experimental set-up.
- 15 Beck, Giddens and Lash (1994).

- 16 Clifford and Marcus (1986), Geertz (1996).
- 17 The reflexive form used here in French (of course), 'l'activité se définit', does not indicate, in a sympathetically ambiguous manner, whether it is done so by itself, by its actors or by the observer.
- 18 From this point of view, it is ethnomethodology which has operated to reorient sociology (Garfinkel, 1967). It was authors inspired by this current that asked the question about the status of objects in science and technology studies, even if they most often ended up dissolving the thesis in 'social construction', initially a close cousin of ethnomethodology (cf. Berger and Luckmann, 1966), but one whose constructivist developments went in a very different direction, cf. Woolgar (1988), Ashmore (1989). For a symmetrical critique of naturalism and constructivism, see Latour (1991). I freely admit that these cavalier summaries of the positions of reflexive authors cannot do their work justice, but alas, this cannot be the object of this paper.
- 19 About this notion of attachment, see Callon (1992); Gomart and Hennion (1999); Latour (2000).
- 20 Gomart (1999); Gomart and Hennion (1999).
- 21 See James (1996 [1912]).
- 22 The sociology of taste owes a great deal to the work conducted on sciences and techniques, in particular at the Centre de Sociologie de L'Innovation (Ecole des Mines de Paris), and to what was referred to as Actor-Network Theory (ANT) – see Callon (1986) and Latour (1991).

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