

Editorial

Science (Sísifo): games of strength and truth

The reading of the book *Science de la Science et Reflexivité. Cours au Collège de France 2000-2001*¹ by Pierre Bourdieu led to this editorial. The French sociologist took science as the object of his analysis, he himself expounding, as a researcher, “a generalised reflexivity”. The question that he raised in opening the book is somewhat paradoxical: “how can scientific activity, a historical activity, inscribed in History, produce truths considered trans-historical, independent from History, outside any relation with place or time, therefore eternally and universally valid?” Bourdieu stated that he did not intend to relativise scientific knowledge in the light of its historical conditions, but, to the contrary, he attempted to contribute to enable scientists to better understand the social mechanisms that guided their practice and also the social world in which knowledge of nature and man is produced.

The discussion made me reflect on my relation, as a researcher of the educational past, both regarding the political decision makers, commonly transformed into “clients” of scientific expertise and translators of the truths they themselves create, and the so-called public opinion, bearer, almost always emphatically, of a representation of the truth also loaded with scientifically proven certainties.

All this derives from an assessment study of specialised musical art teaching, commissioned by the Ministry of Education from the Faculty of Psychology and Education Sciences of Lisbon University in 2006 on which I have since then worked with my colleague Domingos Fernandes, in the midst

of great controversy. This triangulation leads to intense tension and toing and throwing which is important to be pondered on. As academics, our experiences in the so-called service to the community are set out in a twofold perspective. On the one hand there are those who view science as a legitimising authority of decisions which, if truth be told, do not need to be objectivised on reasoning and on the connectors expounded by the researchers; on the other hand there are those who, in the name of their interests, determine the illegibility and undermine the credibility of all the scientific work that seeks to identify the blockages, traditions and clamours for the possibility of an assessment. And the reflection, while worthwhile in my view, is not so much in the direction of refusal of this invocation-translation-denial-diabolisation invariant and more in the direction of becoming aware beforehand, and I would say acutely aware, that it is always inside this mechanic that our discourse is socially decoded. In these terms it seems easy to me to claim a critical assumption as having to be on the basis of the science that we aim to undertake. And this assumption brings into crisis and radically frames a problem of visions that today arise *naturalized* by the tradition and by the consensus of the dominating elites, but which always result from compacting processes that are ambiguous, contradictory, and even arbitrary at times. When dissected meticulously — in other words with empirical evidence — these processes often oblige the actors to look more uncomfortably at the positions

in which they deem themselves to be installed, with the calmness befitting of one who speaks the truth and from a moral standpoint. This possibility has to be forced and stretched as far as possible. Advocating a genealogical history that may go against the present and its blind certainties. And it is here that from Bourdieu I move on to Foucault.

I summarise in this court a Foucaultian supposition, which I believe incisive for the matters under discussion here: *there is no relation of power without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, or any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time relations of power*. The exercising of government is — it was and will be before and after all of us do what we are doing — a creative and productive activity to a large extent mediated by categories and diagnoses produced or promulgated by scientists. In effect, if the political reasoning makes the reality enter into the domain of the thinkable, the technologies of government aim to translate the thinking into the domain of the reality and establish, in the concrete world of people and the things that surround them, agile spaces and devices able to act on it. Through an exercise that intertwines genealogical lines, at times coming from the remotest of origins, Foucault shows us in his work how the technologies of domination are informed historically by the sciences — from medicine to philosophy to law — in order to classify, objectivise and standardise individuals.

The most important consequence that this kind of historical research has for my work is to make it not only compulsory, but indeed a central issue, to discuss the *status of science and the games of social validation of the scientific discourse*. Although the question appears to be of an epistemological nature, what we are dealing with is attempting to understand what transformations are brought about in the field of knowledge; however, the goal will never be to compose an anthology of assertions scientifically accepted as correct or rejected, or false, in a given time in the past. What a critical history of scientific reasoning should focus on are, in their correct place, and in the formula used by Canguilhem, the practical implications resulting from the circulation of the truthful discourses.

It is a notorious fact that science has always spoken the truth, which means precisely and no

more than the truth is simply what science says. Taking into account the type of historical-social formatting of individuals in modernity, expounded by Foucault, my analysis deriving either from academic commitments or the service to the community, seeks to lead to spaces of debate in which the subjects discover one another inside or outside the criteria of the scientific truth of the time. From the start I will have to know how to exchange the scientific pronouncement in itself for an internal analysis of the scientific discipline; exit from the history of the formation of a scientific discourse to the history of the formation of a scientific discipline, and essentially shifting from speaking the truth of the standard discourse to the discipline that demarcates the territory of the truth.

As you can see, in my personal research project science is at the epicentre of the analysis. I am always trying to understand how the credentials of the sciences are operating in relation (i) to the regimes of the institutional practices, (ii) to the practical reasoning that confers these same regimes with given purposes and objectives, (iii) to the technologies that authorise the non-human agents, as the technical artefacts used in devices of inscription, gathering and dissemination of data, which also take part in the operations of the government of individuals.

I have persuaded myself that, proceeding in accordance with this agenda, I can contribute with information and diagnoses that, in themselves, help to produce new information and different diagnoses. I do not speak in the name of truth; I speak having as my horizon the possibility of new truthful scenarios. Of a promised future truth.

ENDNOTES

1. From the Portuguese translation Pierre Bourdieu (2001). *Para uma Sociologia da Ciência*. [Towards a Sociology of Science] Lisbon: Edições 70.

JORGE RAMOS DO Ó
(Lisbon, 11 April 2008)

Translated by Thomas Kundert