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Cultural Sociology 2008; 2; 242
DOI: 10.1177/1749975508091035

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Nathalie Heinich’s Sociology of Art – and Sociology from Art

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ABSTRACT
The French sociologist Nathalie Heinich has carried out innovative sociological analyses of the field of art since the 1980s. While she is a major figure in French sociology, most of her books are as yet not translated into English. The article seeks to communicate the main contours of Heinich’s ideas to an Anglophone audience, by outlining the nature of her most important works concerned with modern and contemporary art, particularly concentrating on her most recent publications. Heinich’s advocacy of a descriptive, interpretative sociology of art – as opposed to a ‘critical’ sociology in the manner of Bourdieu – is depicted and considered. The article also traces out her growing orientation towards the development of a ‘sociology of values’.

KEY WORDS
Bourdieu / Heinich / French sociology / norms / sociological methodology / sociology of art / values

More than any other object, art enables us to rethink, sometimes to abandon or to reverse, a certain number of positions, routines, mental habits that are anchored in the sociological tradition – or at least in a certain way of practising this discipline. (Heinich, 1998c: 8)

Introduction

In more than 15 works about the field of art, the French sociologist Nathalie Heinich has attempted to establish not only a new sociology of art, but also a new sort of sociology in general. In the past two decades this ambitious
undertaking has led her from a sociology of art (sociologie de l’art) to a sociology originating from art (sociologie de l’art in the sense of à partir de l’art). Her always interesting research projects and her sometimes provocative methodological dispositions that frequently lead to innovative research results, all deserve serious attention, not only by sociologists of art, but by sociological and other scholars more generally. She is thus probably the most important and perhaps the most unconventional sociologist of art in France at the present moment. Although her work is very well known in the francophone world, it remains the case that there is a distinct lack of English translations of her books, and thus her ideas are perhaps not as well known in English-speaking contexts as they should be. Thus one aim of this essay is to present her oeuvre to an English language audience, in the hope of drawing further attention to it, both in the anglophone world and globally.

I will concentrate in this piece on Heinich’s most recent publications, focusing on the shift towards – in her terminology – a ‘sociology of values’. I will begin with a brief biographical depiction of Heinich herself. I will then present the research projects and the results deriving from them, before proceeding to outline the contents of her books published in the past several years. These range from those works which take contemporary art as their main research object, to studies that reflect her growing interest in more general questions concerning the nature of contemporary society. Finally, next to a critical review of her work, I will attempt to evaluate the degree to which she has been successful in accomplishing her goal of establishing a revivified sociology of art, as well as a renewed sociology in general.

**Biography and Background**

Nathalie Heinich was born in 1955 in Marseille, and graduated with a Master’s degree in philosophy in 1976. She continued her studies in Paris, where she completed her PhD thesis in sociology under the supervision of Pierre Bourdieu. At that time, she was an unconditional follower of Bourdieu, a ‘Bourdieuusienne’ as his disciples called themselves. Bourdieu supported her candidature for a post at the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS) in Paris, which she took up in 1986. But Bourdieu distanced himself from her and many of his other erstwhile disciples (such as Luc Boltanski, with whom Heinich has also worked) in the later 1980s, when they started to practise a form of sociology that was different from his own. Heinich has said that it took her approximately ten years to develop her own understanding of sociology separate from Bourdieu’s, as well as to discover that in addition to the critical sociology of her former mentor, there was also an interpretative sociology that was analytical and descriptive rather than focused on revealing and criticizing structures of domination (see Heinich, 2007b), and she has defended this former type of sociology ever since. Having received the habilitation qualification in 1994,¹ she now holds the post of Research Director at the CNRS and is a member of several research groups.
She regularly publishes scholarly articles, and carries out a wide range of empirical studies, most of them commissioned, which are then expanded into books. Summing up a diverse sociological oeuvre, one may say that Nathalie Heinich has two main areas of research, namely the sociology of art and the sociology of feminine identity. The former is certainly the more important for her. Among other projects in this general area, she has worked on analyses of artists and authors, as well as on the reception of art. Her publications deal with the fields of visual art and literature as well as cinema. She often addresses questions of sociological methodology, an orientation that has led to the methodological treatise of 1998 *Ce que l’art fait à la sociologie* (*What Art Does to Sociology*), which can be considered a defence of her own brand of descriptive and pragmatic sociology. Heinich is a well established but nonetheless controversial sociologist and author, due to her vehement advocacy of this sort of sociology and her rejection of the type of critical sociology championed by Bourdieu.

**Sociology of Art Publications, 1991–2001**

Heinich’s empirical researches in the earlier part of her career, which initially remained unpublished, later became the foundational material for her books in the sociology of art. The first publication which gained her wide public acclaim was *La gloire de Van Gogh: Essai d’anthropologie de l’admiration* (1991), an analysis of the posthumous glory and mystification of the artist. Significantly, as of the time of writing, this is the only one of Heinich’s books to be translated into English (as *The Glory of Van Gogh: Anthropology of Admiration*, Princeton University Press, 1996). In this work, she considers Van Gogh to be the original example of the now dominant model of the ‘accursed artist’, a figure taken to be a singular but nevertheless highly admired being. Marginalizing artists while simultaneously considering (some of) them to be geniuses, is for Heinich a paradoxical situation that very much exemplifies the ‘singularity regime’ of contemporary Western societies. According to Heinich, this regime began to be established in the 19th century and subsequently has grown to become dominant ever since. Unlike in previous eras, in this regime an individual’s singularity is considered to be a positive trait rather than a negative characteristic.

This text was followed by various other books until in 1998 Heinich published two closely related works that helped fully establish her pre-eminence as a sociologist of art. The first was *Le triple jeu de l’art contemporain* (*The Triple Game of Contemporary Art*), a large tome that analyses both the differences between ‘modern’ and ‘contemporary’ art (which Heinich defines as different ‘genres’), and also the ways in which the ‘singularity regime’ described above has altered the rules of the art world. In three steps – the production of contemporary art as transgression, the reception of art in the form of rejection, and the integration of this kind of art by intermediary institutions such as museums – Heinich describes the paradoxical development of an art world in which the
transgressive moment becomes mandatory, thus accelerating the ‘three-step- 
game’ just mentioned and resulting, for artists, in the dilemma of an obligatory 
transgression which she calls the ‘permissive paradox’ (Heinich, 1998a: 338).

Originally Heinich had planned an epilogue to this book that was to be 
concerned with the methodological positions she deems necessary for sociolog-
ical work of this sort. However she could not integrate the epilogue add into 
the book, and it was published separately in the same year under the title Ce 
que l’art fait à la sociologie (What Art Does to Sociology) (Heinich, 1998c). She 
considers this book to be her first attempt to present a more general sociologi-
cal position (Heinich, 2006: 72). Indeed, the fact that the title of the book refers 
to the field of art is almost misleading, for it is really a book concerned with 
issues to do with research methods. In this text, Heinich warns against a ‘socio-
ideology’ (Heinich, 1998c: 9) that considers the social realm as an ultimate 
ground to which every phenomenon can be reduced. She here openly distances 
herself from Bourdieu’s critical sociology, her own position being close to what 
Luc Boltanski has called the ‘sociology of criticism’, involving an inductive, 
empirical, descriptive, pragmatic and interpretative sociology. In Heinich’s 
opinion, the sociologist should not aim to reveal and criticize the so-called ‘true 
value’ and ‘true significance’ of his or her research objects, but should instead 
merely describe how the value judgements and systems under scrutiny ‘are 
defined, legitimated or invalidated, constructed, deconstructed or reconstructed 
by the actors’ themselves (Heinich, 1998c: 77). On this view, the sociologist has 
to consider and accept the possible coexistence of logically contradictory value 
systems, which should lead him or her to a pluralist and relativist epistemolog-
ical position. Especially in relation to art, which is of such high value for the 
actors in the art field, the sociologist should free himself or herself from a nor-
mative position, Max Weber’s arguments in favour of value neutrality being at 
the very centre of Heinich’s understanding of sociological practice.

Heinich then completed two books in the sociology of literature. The first, 
L’épreuve de la grandeur (1999a), concerned how literary prizes can drastically 
affect and change the reputation of an author. The second, Être écrivain (2000), con-
sidered the different possible constructions of a writer’s identity. Both books are part 
of her ongoing analyses of the ‘singularity regime’ mentioned earlier. Heinich then 
published La sociologie de l’art for the popular book series Repères in 2001. (For 
this same series, she had already written, in 1997, the book La sociologie de Norbert 
Elias, the latter figure being one of her most important sociological inspirations, next 
to Max Weber, Erving Goffman and, in a critical vein, Pierre Bourdieu.)

By depicting the history of the sociology of art, as well as its main research 
foci and methods, La sociologie de l’art is the only systematic review of this 
research field available in French to this day. Heinich structures the history of 
the sociology of art into three ‘generations’: first, sociological aesthetics (which 
alysed relations between art and society), second, social history (analysing art 
in society); and fact-finding sociology (analysing art as society). These ‘genera-
tions’ are not only temporal ones, for they also coincide with various disci-
plinary traditions, conceptual positions and methods. Sociological aesthetics is
mainly preoccupied with the ‘de-autonomization’ of art and searching for the links between ‘art’ and ‘society’. Social history primarily analyses the economic, social, cultural and institutional contexts of art production and reception. Finally, fact-finding sociology is interested in the functioning of the art world itself, in its actors, interactions and internal structures. The second part of the book presents some research results deriving from work undertaken within this last ‘generation’, of which Heinich evidently considers herself a member. She concludes this book with a summary of her statements from the earlier Ce que l’art fait à la sociologie, again questioning the sort of critical sociology associated with Bourdieu.

During the ten-year period from 1991 to 2001, Nathalie Heinich was more than just part of the ‘boom’ in the sociology of art in France. She contributed to the ongoing development of this field with a number of decisive books that sought to overcome the Bourdieusian paradigm of the field of cultural production as an arena composed of structures of domination. Instead, she introduced an analytical and descriptive approach to the sociology of art that does not content itself with the presentation of statistics and surveys. After the publication of La sociologie de l’art, a double shift in her work became clearly discernible: a move away from a sociology of art, first towards a sociology from art, and then towards a sociology of values.

Publications 2002–present: Sociology From Art

In 2002 and in 2004, Heinich published two co-authored books that demonstrate the questions that she feels are raised by consideration of both the field of art, and also of its effects on other social fields. First, with the philosopher and jurist Bernard Edelman, she published L’art en conflits. L’oeuvre de l’esprit entre droit et sociologie (Art in Conflicts: Artistic Work Between Law and Sociology), a book in which the social and legal status of artists, authors, exhibitions and artworks is analysed from two different perspectives, namely sociology and legal studies. The book is a collection of previously published articles, but these are organized in such a way as to create a dialogue between the two authors. The only previously unpublished chapter comes at the end of the book, and contains a discussion between the authors concerning a manifesto against censorship. This manifesto is particularly interesting, because neither author remains neutral in their opinions. In this context, it is important to note that Heinich’s axiological commitment to value neutrality, and her refusal to engage in critical sociology in the manner of Bourdieu, does not imply an all-encompassing abstention from value judgements. On the contrary, she sees the committed sociologist as a possible bridge-builder between different persons and their divergent opinions. Nonetheless, in her view explicit value judgements are only permissible when the sociologist does not act as a scientist (Heinich, 2007a: 70 and following). It is only when the spheres of the researcher, the expert and the intellectual are kept separate that evaluative statements should
or can be made, a separation of roles and spheres that Heinich makes explicit in this book (Heinich and Edelman, 2002: 10).

The second co-authored book dealing with these questions, this time written with the philosopher Jean-Marie Schaeffer, is *Art, création, fiction. Entre sociologie et philosophie* (*Art, Creation, Fiction: Between Sociology and Philosophy*) (2004). This book consists of one (sometimes previously published, sometimes new) article by each author for each of the topics of ‘art’, ‘creation’, and ‘fiction’, followed by ‘response articles’ by the other author, resulting in a total of 12 pieces altogether. This book depicts the frontier territory between sociology and philosophy, and the methods and analytical perspectives that belong to each. Since in contrast to *L’art en conflits*, there are direct responses by each author to the other’s contributions, in this book both authors not only utilize the tools of their respective disciplines, but also make these methods and approaches explicit. Heinich defends a pragmatic, descriptive and analytical brand of sociology that combines both empirical research and theory, thus differentiating a sociological approach from a more purely philosophical one. But while she argues that the boundary between sociology and philosophy should not be blurred, she does not deny that there are many overlaps between the two approaches, nor does she refuse the possibility of cooperation between them. However, she is convinced that only a clear definition of what a distinctively ‘sociological’ approach is will allow a productive crossing of these borders. This is a position that is pursued in both these co-authored books.

Just as *Le triple jeu* and *Ce que l’art fait à la sociologie* can be considered as continuations of previous studies, so too can 2005’s *L’élite artiste. Excellence et singularité en régime démocratique* (*The Artistic Elite: Excellence and Singularity in a Democratic Regime*) be viewed as a continuation of some of the arguments contained in *Du peintre à l’artiste* of 1993, *Être artiste* of 1996, *Être écrivain* of 2000, and even *La gloire de Van Gogh*. In this book, concerning the notion of the ‘artist’, Heinich analyses the role and status of authors and artists from the French Revolution through to the present day. In her view, there has developed a radically altered understanding of this type of individual. She shows how over time artists have come to live within the ‘regime of vocation’, as opposed to the previous condition of, first, the regime of ‘artisan craftwork’ and then the regime of the ‘professional’. The ‘regime of vocation’ is seen to go hand-in-hand with the ‘singularity regime’ that she had earlier analysed in *Le triple jeu*. In such a condition, the artist is no longer understood as a simple artisan or as a professional who has studied at an academy, but rather is seen as a creator by vocation and by personal inclination, whose works of art are expected to be unique, original, innovative and outstanding. Artists have come to replace the aristocrats who lost their privileged position during the French Revolution. Elite status, and various privileges granted to such an elite, are no longer assigned by social status at birth (although excellence is thought to be an innate trait, just as aristocratic birth was), but is instead achieved by merit, that is by personal abilities and talents. This is apparently a ‘democratic’ shift in the nature of regimes. However, excellence comes to be
defined by singularity, in the sense of an individual who is both exceptional and socially marginal, a condition analysed in *La gloire de Van Gogh*, which focused on the social type of the ‘accursed artist’. This way of defining and evaluating individuals is regarded by Heinich as being peculiar to the world of the artist, and is therefore neither purely ‘aristocratic’ nor ‘democratic’ in nature.

The existence of this new type of (artistic) elite is only possible in the historically novel political system of democracy, in which everyone theoretically has a chance to become a part of such an elite. Heinich in this book not only depicts this contradictory mixture of aristocracy, meritocracy and democracy, but also criticizes how ‘logicistic’ modes of analysis (which uphold the ideal of logical non-contradiction) have tried to deny or eliminate the co-presence and ambivalence of heterogeneous value systems within this one regime (Heinich, 2005: 273 and following), a position previously pursued in *Ce que l’art fait à la sociologie*. Heinich considers the paradoxical situation of a ‘marginalized elite’, a group that is (and is seen to be) simultaneously ‘excellent’, ‘democratic’ and ‘singular’. The development of such a state of affairs is understood as involving a revolution which created the sorts of status that artists today enjoy, a situation analysed in *Le triple jeu*. In the present day, artists are allowed to take more liberties than any other type or category of individual. In this sense, *L’élite artiste* can be read as the ‘prequel’ to *Le triple jeu*. Heinich notes that in modern society, the field of art is just one field among many which have experienced a novel tension between principles of ‘excellence’ and ‘equality’, an observation which, by the end of *L’élite artiste*, leads her to reflect on the political ramifications of this issue: How can inequality be based and justified in a ‘democratic’ system, especially given the apparent necessity for any complex society to contain privileged elites (Heinich, 2006: 122)? The field of art provides a striking example of what happens when contradictory value systems coexist in the same social order. Heinich’s overall epistemological position means that she refrains from promoting one value system over another, stating in the final sentence of the book that ‘here stops the sociologist’s competence’ (Heinich, 2005: 351). More than just a book in the sociology of art, *L’élite artiste* is in fact also a work of political sociology, for it questions the place of excellence and singularity in a democratic society based on the value of equality. More broadly, it attempts to elaborate valid analytical models that can be used in the understanding of other social fields, an undertaking that begins to lead Heinich away from the sociology of art, as she herself states, towards other matters (Heinich, 2006: 120, 123, Heinich, 2007a: 50).

Heinich’s next book publication was *La sociologie à l’épreuve de l’art* (*Sociology in Confrontation with Art*), which is in fact an interview with Heinich carried out by the editor Julien Ténédos. The book consists of two volumes, the first published at the end of 2006 and the second in January 2007. The interview has a dual structure. On the one hand, it follows a chronology and can be read as autobiography. On the other hand, the chronology also lends itself to a thematic approach, such that the interview is structured in five chapters. In the first volume, these are ‘Education’, ‘Contemporary Art’,
‘Identity and Singularity’, while the second volume contains ‘Feminine Identity’ and ‘Construction of a Sociology’. The second volume also contains an extensive bibliography. Unlike more conventional interviews with scholars, this one includes a substantial amount of coverage of Heinich’s personal background and career history, details of which she willingly shares and through which the reader gains insights into the French academic system and how it has affected the nature of her work. She outlines the main contours of all of her research up to that time, and how her books, articles and studies have been received by both academic peers and laypeople.

The interview functions as a commentary and summary of her work, and can be used as a guide to her other books. For example, in a particular passage she explains the difference between a scientific book like *L’élite artiste* and an interview book like *La sociologie à l’épreuve de l’art* itself. In the former, the sociologist is meant to set out ‘the tools for taking an [analytic] position’ on the subject matter at hand, but given Heinich’s insistence on value neutrality, she adds that in such a work ‘people do not need you to take a position for them’ (Heinich, 2007a: 86). Conversely, in the latter sort of book, which is itself not a product of scholarly research, she says that the interview can allow oneself the freedom to voice one’s own opinions about specific matters when asked. Thus it is in this interview, and not in *L’élite artiste* itself, that she admits that, vis-à-vis the ambivalent situation of the artistic elite – positioned between desires for social equality on the one side, and claims to social superiority on the other – that the ‘democratic compromise’ proposed by modern artists is certainly not the worst state of affairs. This is so as long as the artist is not considered as a realization of the Nietzschean *Übermensch*, who is granted special privileges merely for being an artist. This view can in turn be read as a socio-political critique of the figure of the contemporary artist that was depicted in *Le triple jeu*, but was not subjected to such engaged criticism in that context.

Nathalie Heinich’s most recent book, *Pourquoi Bourdieu* (2007b), returns her to the question of the adequacy, or otherwise, of that figure’s contribution to sociology in general, and the sociology of culture more particularly. In this text, Heinich sets herself the task of answering the question as to why and how Pierre Bourdieu became the mythical personification not only of the committed intellectual, but also of sociology as a whole. It is neither a purely scientific study, nor a simple biography of Bourdieu, or even a work of autobiography, charting Heinich’s own relations with the former. It is rather a mixture of all three genres. She looks at Bourdieu primarily through a heavily self-critical retrospection of her own relationship to him, while simultaneously subjecting Bourdieu and his work to critique. She illuminates his charismatic, all-encompassing personality, the nature of both his supportive peers and his many detractors, and the situation of sociology as a discipline during his time of preeminence. By putting together pieces of the puzzle of the so-called ‘Bourdieu effect’ in this way, she goes beyond earlier, more conventional critiques of Bourdieu’s sociology. His research in the sociology of art unsurprisingly plays an important role in the book, since the field of art had a very special place in
Bourdieu’s oeuvre. Heinich depicts here how Bourdieu both reduced art to means of distinction (revealing and denouncing, among other notions, the alleged illusion of the ‘creative individual’), and also viewed the field of art as a site of possible subversion of structures of domination (Heinich, 2007b; see chapter 4). It is this kind of double movement, involving a form of double discourse, that Heinich identifies and deconstructs throughout the book, citing many instances of the contradictions and paradoxes in Bourdieu’s work. She meticulously traces out both the growing politicization of his scientific discourse towards the end of his life, as well as what she sees as the scientification of his political discourse. This double movement Heinich regards as a blending of two separable positions that she feels should be kept separate, Bourdieu’s combining of the two being seen to lack the necessary value neutrality that good sociology requires.

It might be thought that Pourquoi Bourdieu stands at a relative distance from Heinich’s other works. However, it has certain affinities with La sociologie à l’épreuve de l’art, as both books reveal much about Nathalie Heinich herself, in this case about her admiration of Bourdieu when she was a young researcher, and her long-term endeavours to create a type of sociology that differed from his version. Moreover, in a certain way Pourquoi Bourdieu comes full circle, in that it can be understood as a reworking of La gloire de Van Gogh. Given its treatment of the construction of Bourdieu’s reputation, The Glory of Bourdieu: Anthropology of Admiration could very well have been its title. The Bourdieu book is also linked to L’élite artiste, in the sense that the latter tome closes with a general analysis of the role and symbolic value of privileged elite figures, while the former demonstrates how Bourdieu came to occupy the role of that sort of figure.

**What Nathalie Heinich’s Sociology of Art Does to Sociology**

In order fully to understand the nature of Nathalie Heinich’s sociology of art – especially her recurring advocacy of an ‘interpretative’ sociology over an ‘explanatory’ one, and her insistence on a descriptive approach that stays true to the axiom of value neutrality – it is helpful to note that all of the work presented in this article originated during the period of the so-called ‘quarrel of contemporary art’, which took place in France throughout the 1990s. This was a dispute between experts and intellectuals concerning the possibility of defining new objective criteria for evaluating contemporary art. The debate involved on the one side those who judged contemporary art as being too commercialized, too sensation-seeking and wholly intellectually empty, and on the other, those who in turn judged these sorts of critic as conservative and ignorant of the true nature of the art they were talking about.

Heinich did not explicitly take part in this public debate, which was carried out via the means of innumerable articles and books by a wide range of art critics, philosophers and other sorts of theorist. Her sociological methodology attempted to assume a meta-position above this mêlée. By refusing to make
value judgements for or against contemporary art, and by trying to position sociology as a science that can help social actors to better understand one another, through the means of describing their value systems instead of taking part in disputes about them, she wanted to show a way out of what she saw as the dead-end of this sort of debate. However, the quarrel itself was never resolved and was in fact simply suspended. In the 1997 article ‘Face à l’art contemporain’ (‘Facing Contemporary Art’), she nonetheless voiced the hope that her book _Le triple jeu_ would ‘connect … people who do not talk to each other any more’ (Heinich, 2003a: 13). In the subsequent piece ‘Retour sur les retours’ (‘Review of the Reviews’), she notes with regret that _Le triple jeu_ was in fact considered as taking a partisan position in the quarrel by both the defenders and detractors of contemporary art, whereas she herself regarded it as a purely descriptive study that does not take any particular value-laden position at all (Heinich, 2003a: 17 and following).

More generally, she sees this situation of misreading as linked to what she regards as more general misunderstandings as to the nature of sociology itself, a nature she feels is rather hard to make comprehensible to others, ‘including to some sociologists’ (Heinich, 2003a: 20). In Heinich’s opinion, several axioms of good sociological practice have to be respected. In the first place, there is sociology’s non-normative nature. As we have seen, Heinich favours a descriptive and interpretative sociology, as opposed to an explanatory and critical one. But she notes that in favouring such a position, a certain problematic contradiction arises: by defending one type of sociology against another, she makes a normative statement that goes against her own axiom. However, she argues that the abstention from normativity in relation to the research object is a totally different thing from abstention from normativity in relation to the tools of research. As she puts it, the ‘imperative of neutrality operates at a meta-theoretical or epistemological level, that allows the sociologist to pronounce on the good ways of doing sociology – but not on the good ways of being in society’ (Heinich, 1998c: 72, see also Heinich, 2003c: 200).

The second axiom of good sociological practice concerns the specificity of sociological research methods, which Heinich considers as a crucial criterion for defining the discipline itself. One could certainly say that most of these methods are not used exclusively by sociology. For example, both surveys and statistical methods are used by other social science disciplines. However, these methods are novel contributions to the study of art, for the latter up until relatively recently was analysed using the typical (and certainly not ‘sociological’) methods associated with humanities disciplines like history of art and philosophy. In this sense, specifically sociological methods are unique to the sociology of art, and it is the use of these which allow and justify a specifically sociological analysis of the field of art. In addition, it is the judicious and careful use of these methods which facilitates the possibility of a kind of sociological analysis which is value neutral and which stands above matters of disputes of value, such as the quarrel described above. What the critics of _Le triple jeu_ had missed was that the study was based around techniques of research that allowed a neutral position to be
taken with respect to the clashing value systems that they themselves were engaged in either eulogizing or decrying.

The third axiom of good sociological practice involves the view that the sociologist should in a certain way let himself or herself be guided by the views of the actors he or she is studying as regards his or her choice of the research object to be investigated. One should take into account what issues seem relevant to them. A critic of such a position could argue that this undermines one of sociology’s key strengths, namely the ability to point out aspects of reality that were not viewable by the actors themselves. However, as concerns the construction of the research object, Heinich separates out the choice of the research object from the formulation of the research problem, stating that these are in fact two different things. While the objects motivate the actors, the problems interest the sociologist. In this sense, the actors can show what things to analyse, but the sociologist still has to decide for himself or herself which perspective to work from when analysing those things (Heinich, 2003c: 203 and following; Heinich, 2006: 48).

Many readers might find Heinich’s views on such matters relatively uncontroversial. However, one of her positions that is certainly up for debate is her categorical refusal to include works of art in the analytical work of the sociologist of art. Heinich does not say that the sociologist should leave them aside completely, but in several places she has said that ‘the sociology of artworks is unlikely to be interesting’ (e.g. Heinich, 2007a: 43). This is in distinct contrast to a more essayistic sociology which engages in forms of art criticism, but which for Heinich is not really sociology at all.

Although her view here is certainly potentially defensible, formulations like ‘unlikely to be interesting’ do appear a little contradictory. Clearly Heinich does not wholly reject the sociology of artworks, since in a certain way she practises it herself. In *L’élite artiste* – and indeed prior to that, in *Etats de femme* (1996) – she uses novels as forms of documentary evidence – as contextual ‘field’ (Heinich, 2007a: 14) – for the purposes of analysing the social status of the artist in the 19th century. Indeed, in *L’élite artiste*, she examines over 50 such books. She clarifies her methodology by stating that there are, in fact, only two ways of including works of art in a sociological study. First, via a pragmatic perspective that observes ‘what they do rather than describing what they are or saying what they are worth’, a position pursued in *Le triple jeu*. Second, via the use of artistic works, such as novels, as documentary materials (Heinich, 2007a: 43, see also Heinich, 1998c: 77). In addition, works of fiction have the advantage of tending to represent not all of experience, but only the problematic, and thus sociologically interesting, parts of it (Heinich, 2007a: 26). Overall, the point of Heinich’s statements in this regard is to make clear that the sociologist is not an art critic, and thus should not make any value judgements on the artwork he or she analyses, a position that conforms to her understanding of the nature of sociology in general.

To non-French readers, the recurring theme of interpretative versus critical sociology and the emphasis on methodological issues may appear as a very French set of concerns. The two antagonistic positions that dominate French
sociology are generally not as pronounced in other countries and Heinich’s constant return to consideration of them may seem somewhat exaggerated. Yet every country has its specific sociological peculiarities, and an author’s being very aware of their subtleties certainly can assist in the comprehension of their own research practices. Disputes that have taken place within French sociology of art prove the extent to which this research area is firmly established in France, while in other countries it is often quite subordinate to the sociology of culture, both administratively and in terms of hierarchies of intellectual importance. Many sociologists, Heinich says, either ‘do not dare to venture into the aesthetic field because they think it is reserved for experts, or disdain to enter into it, because they think it is condemned to [be analysed by] … discourses deprived of any cognitive validity’ (Heinich and Schaeffer, 2004: 11). Heinich has not only worked against these sorts of attitudes, but has also demonstrated how results and accomplishments in this research area are highly pertinent to other areas within sociology.

Conclusion

Nathalie Heinich is certainly one of the most interesting and most productive sociologists of art in the world in the present day. Thus it is both curious and regrettable that her most frequently translated publications are not those books which concern the sociology of art (as the bibliography at the end of this article attests).

Those who have followed the development of her work over the last few decades will continue to witness the evolution of her sociological ideas in the future. In the last several years, Nathalie Heinich has shifted her interests away from the sociology of art per se, towards broader questions that she discovered through her analyses of the field of art. The synoptic book La sociologie de l’art, the autobiographical La sociologie à l’épreuve de l’art, and in particular L’élite artiste, the contents of which lead from analyses of the art world towards a more general political sociology of elites, all mark turning points in her work. In La sociologie à l’épreuve de l’art, she declares her recent work to be characterizable as ‘a sociology from art, which considers art as a means of revealing general phenomena that are characteristic of an entire society’ (Heinich, 2006: 120; italics added). Heinich at the present time is still concerned with ongoing book projects concerning the field of art, but she has definitely begun to move more towards a general ‘sociology of values’ (Heinich, 2007a: 95), thus turning the subject matter of the conclusions of her previous books into her primary research focus.

If we pose the question of whether Nathalie Heinich has succeeded in renewing the field of sociology in general, this remains to be seen. The descriptive and interpretative sociology that she stands for is not new per se, as can be seen by her numerous citations of the work of Max Weber. But the consistent application of this type of sociology in her future books, which will undoubtedly
be more politically orientated and focused on the sociology of values, will be a very interesting development to follow. In certain ways, Heinich’s sociology is a challenge to us all. She constantly reminds us of the effect our personal value judgements might have on the content and readership of our work, yet at the same time she does not hesitate to publish very personal books. This alternation between Nathalie Heinich the scientist, and Nathalie Heinich the individual person, constantly forces us to remember the necessity and utility of a pluralist epistemological position – there is never one ‘truth’, not even in science.

Notes
1. The habilitation is the highest academic degree in France and some other countries.
2. This is not, however, in the sense of feminism or gender studies, which Heinich finds problematic for their normative positions.

Bibliography (in chronological order)


(translated into Japanese)


(translated into Chinese)


(translated into Italian)


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