PHILOSOPHICAL THOUGHT AND ITS
EXISTENTIAL BASIS: THE SOCIOLOGIES
OF PHILOSOPHY OF RANDALL COLLINS
AND PIERRE BOURDIEU

“While it is true that sociology must deal with ‘pauperism, prostitution, and plumbing,’ it is all the more true that sociology must take part in explaining the highest, widest, and deepest reaches of the human mind.” (Albion W. Small, 1925).

Abstract

The sociology of philosophy is a relatively new discipline aiming to link philosophical thought to the social conditions from which it has emerged. This article examines how two of the discipline’s main representatives, Randall Collins and Pierre Bourdieu, understand the relationship between social conditions and philosophical thought in their main relevant works, to so provide a more precise definition of the term ‘social conditions’/‘social factors.’ Basic differences between Bourdieu’s and Collins’s approaches are considered, as are the consequences of these differences for how much autonomy each author is prepared to ascribe to what they call, respectively, the ‘philosophical field’ and ‘attention space.’ The argument is made that the conceptual innovations built into both of these terms represent a clear step forward from Karl Mannheim’s overly vague notion of ‘existentially connected knowledge.’ Ultimately, it is nevertheless Bourdieu’s explanatory model that is shown to be the more powerful one of the two.

1. This paper is largely based on my doctoral dissertation Filosofisociologi – ett sociologiskt perspektiv på filosofiskt tänkande [The Sociology of Philosophy – A Sociological Perspective on Philosophical Thought] (Lund: Lund Univ. Press, 2007). The first draft of this article was written for a symposium on philosophical cultures held in Helsinki, Finland, in April 2008. Had it been conceived today, a discussion of Neil Gross’ important study, Richard Rorty: The Making of an American Philosopher (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press), would certainly have had to be included in it. In this study, Gross introduces his theory of “intellectual self-concepts,” which he juxtaposes with both Collins’s and Bourdieu’s sociologies of philosophy. Even if it has not yet managed to influence research in the field to a comparable extent, Gross’ theory can rightly be characterized as a “challenger paradigm” within the discipline that deserves to be discussed side by side with both Collins’s and Bourdieu’s work in the area (Carl-Göran Heidegren, Henrik Lundberg, “Towards a Sociology of Philosophy,” Acta Sociologica 53 (2010): 1-18.

Key words
Randall Collins, Pierre Bourdieu, Karl Mannheim, Sociology of philosophy, Sociology of knowledge

1. Introduction
Sociology of philosophy is a relatively new discipline within sociology, aiming to link philosophical thought to the social conditions from which it has emerged. Before long, however, the scientific orientation that this ambition means for the discipline leads to the question what exactly is meant by the reference to ‘social conditions.’ In this article, I examine how two of the discipline’s main representatives, Randall Collins (born 1941) and Pierre Bourdieu (1930-2002), understand the relationship between social conditions and philosophical thought in their main works on the subject. The general aim in this exercise is to provide a more precise definition of the notoriously vague notion of ‘social conditions’/‘social factors.’ Such a closer definition is necessary for the sociology of philosophy if it is to be capable of proposing detailed explanations for philosophical changes, among other things. In other words, the sociology of philosophy must not content itself with merely drawing some general parallels between society and culture on the one hand and knowledge and thought on the other. The article also shows how the conceptual innovations by Bourdieu and Collins, put forward through their terminology of the ‘philosophical field’ (Bourdieu) and the ‘attention space’ (Collins), represent a clear step forward from Karl Mannheim’s overly vague notion of ‘existentially connected knowledge’ [seinsverbundenes Wissen]. Basic differences between Bourdieu’s and Collins’s approaches, and the consequences that these differences have for how much autonomy each author is prepared to ascribe to the philosophical field /attention space, will then be considered in closer detail. Finally, the argument will be made for the superiority of Bourdieu’s explanatory model compared to that of Collins’s, based on its ability to build on the strengths of both Mannheim’s and Collins’s work in the area while avoiding the pitfalls of each.

Philosophical cultures, the theme of this special issue, are one of the social factors influencing philosophical thinking. As will become clear from what follows, the models put forward by Bourdieu and Collins differ from each other in the extent to which they each, in principle at least, allow for the influence of a certain culture on philosophical thought. Before I enter into this discussion, however, a few more general observations on the subject of the sociology of philosophy are in order.

The sociology of philosophy is a sub-discipline within the broader field of sociology of knowledge. Both Collins and Bourdieu are heavily influenced by the classical tradition of the sociology of knowledge, which can be traced back to Émile Durkheim and Karl Mannheim. They both make use of inherited conceptual tools devised already by their predecessors working within that tradition. Collins, for instance, borrows Durkheim’s notion of collective effer- vescence for his sociology of philosophy, and, though he never openly acknowledged his theoretical indebtedness to Mannheim, the latter’s inspiration is clearly in evidence in the work of Bourdieu. Just like Mannheim, Bour-