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THE SOCIOLOGY OF VOCATIONAL PRIZES:  
RECOGNITION AS ESTEEM



Nathalie HEINICH

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“It is almost as if there were a conspiracy not to register or document the fact that we are, and always have been, an honour-hungry species”<sup>ii</sup>

Twenty years ago, Eliot Freidson suggested that the vocational dimension of artistic and scientific practices presents a “challenge for sociological analysis”, in particular in studies of professions (Freidson 1986). This is also true for sociological research on recognition processes more generally; but the issue of recognition in studies of professions, rooted in debates in the fields of moral philosophy (Honneth 1995; Taylor 1992; Fraser 1995, 1998) and anthropology (Goode 1978; Todorov 1996), had barely been considered in sociology or in economics at the time.

Why have the social sciences so rarely addressed recognition as a specific issue, that is, as a goal in itself for the actors and a matter of personal identity and social interdependency (Caillé 2007), rather than as a matter of power-relations among others, or a mere step in the search for prestige or “distinction”, as in Pierre Bourdieu’s model (Bourdieu 1979)? One reason might be, as I will here suggest, that the study of recognition necessitates a major paradigm shift away from the theories of economic or political domination that are the legacy of Marx, Bourdieu and Foucault, toward theories of interdependency—a sociological and philosophical literature that is less well-known.

Drawing on the works of Honneth, Todorov and Elias, this paper offers a reflection on ways of re-thinking the study of vocation and recognition, ways that will hopefully provide social scientists with interesting challenges and potentially fruitful new avenues of enquiry. From this perspective, the search for material profits, or even for domination, are no longer the only, nor even the most important keys to understanding human behaviour; and, further, vocational activities (or, in Freidson’s terms, “non profit-oriented certified professions”: Freidson 1986) can be seen to epitomize a more general phenomenon, namely, a need for recognition proper to the whole of social life.

In vocational worlds, prizes, or awards, are the best-known form of recognition (though there are certainly some other ones that will not be examined here). Important in both the arts and the sciences—although their place in each differs in some ways—, they raise fundamental

value problems for juries, for winners, for their peers and for others concerned with recognition processes. Two surveys concerning the meaning of literary and scientific prizes from the standpoint of the awardees (and not of the judges, which would imply quite another perspective) provide, here, a close examination of some problems of justice and envy raised by prizes, as well as more general insights into basic issues pertaining to sociology and social studies of recognition, especially the need for a shift in the approach taken by the sociologist: a shift from the issue of domination to the issue of interdependency, and from the issue of respect to the issue of esteem.

### *Intangibility*

Prizes in the sciences and the literary arts provide a rich terrain for studying recognition, in large part because these vocations are arguably more susceptible to the need for and impact of recognition processes than more market-oriented activities (or “profit oriented certified professions”). A prize often involves a certain amount of money—especially in the case of scientific prizes and Nobel Prizes. It also generates a worldwide reputation that may be transformed into more material facilities. Yet the benefits of recognition can in no way be reduced to this material aspect, as Marxist and post-Marxist theories would suggest: how could we then understand the many commentaries surrounding such events, the precautions people observe in dealing with them, and the very intimate nature of some of the issues raised in confronting the meaning of prizes? Sociology, like economics, would indeed miss a considerable part of human experience if it reduced prizes to their mere material dimension, a point that has been well noted by Brennan and Pettit:

“The tendency among economists who discuss the value of reputation is to see it as deriving entirely from the value of the commodities it enables an agent to secure. Like money, esteem is taken to give an agent a certain purchasing power in the domain of consumption goods—an expectation of being able to use it to obtain some goods—and that is assumed to be the reason it is attractive. We do not think that this reductionist view of market reputation carries over to esteem more generally. We seek esteem or shrink from disesteem among people we are very unlikely to meet again; we even seek esteem or shrink from disesteem among those who will live after our time and whom we will never meet. It is hard to see how this could make sense if esteem had no value for us other than a means of securing consumption goods” (Brennan and Pettit 2004: 4).

Should we then speak of the “symbolic” dimension of recognition in order to address matters of prestige, reputation, merit, stature, self-confidence, and so on? Rather than using such a polysemic term, I will once more follow Brennan and Pettit in evoking the “intangible”

dimension of recognition, along side the “invisible hand” of the market and the “iron hand” of the state:

“It is common nowadays to think that there are only two reliable controls available for ensuring that people will act in a manner that conduces to the common good: the one is the invisible hand of the market, the other the iron hand of law and administration—the iron hand of the state. [...] We think that this dichotomous picture of regulatory possibilities is misconceived. In particular, we think that it overlooks the possibility of subjecting people to a quite different sort of discipline: that involved in being required to act so as to secure esteem and escape disesteem. We think of this discipline as an intangible hand that complements the invisible and iron hands that have monopolised the attention of regulators” (Brennan and Pettit 2004: 4-5).

Needless to say, intangibility does not mean ineffectiveness: we all know the deep affective consequences of the way we perceive our own image in the eyes of others, whatever the way it is symbolized.

### *Recognition and vocation*

Artistic and scientific activities obviously differ in many ways, but, at least in our modern western world, one thing they have in common is their qualification as a “vocation”. The basic property of vocational activities is what Bourdieu called an “inverted economy” (Bourdieu 1977), in which remuneration serves to carry out the activity rather than the activity serving to produce remuneration, as is the case in ordinary economy. In the arts, this fundamental and very specific property is sometimes called “art for art’s sake”. According to Caves: “This property implies that artists turn out more creative products than if they valued only the incomes they receive, and on average earn lower pecuniary incomes than their general ability, skill, and education would otherwise warrant” (Caves 2000: 4).

Elsewhere I have proposed a “comprehensive” approach of the “vocational world” of writers (Heinich 2000) and a description of the shift from “professional” to “vocational” activities in painting, literature and music (Heinich 2005). I will speak of a “vocational” regime of activity, first because the notion of vocation does not concern all of the arts but only some of the major ones in modern times; and, second, because it does not concern only arts, but other areas, notably, the sciences and religions. The term “vocational”, constructed on the same pattern as “professional”, will thus be preferred to the term “priestly” adopted by Caves, for example, when he proposes that “the conservatory reinforces the attitude of a priestly calling to cultivate art rather than to prepare for a career” (Caves 2000: 24). Here Caves implies that

any vocation would be derived from religion, whereas religious vocation is but a well-known example of the general idea of vocation in western societies (Schlanger 1997).

Stressing the importance of this notion of vocation also allows us to minimize the role of innovation, which cannot be considered a common characteristic of the arts, sciences, and religions, as Diana Crane has proposed (Crane 1976). Innovation does appear as a relevant value, but only in the “regime of singularity” (*régime de singularité*), that is, in the system of values governing modern and contemporary arts and, partly, modern science; whereas part of scientific activity, and religion as a whole, pertains instead to the “regime of community” (*régime de communauté*). The former fosters unicity, originality, or even abnormality, whereas the latter fosters shared references, respect of conventions, and transmission of traditions (Heinich 1996, 1998a, 2005).

Nonetheless, there is an obstacle to the use of the notion of “vocation”. Scholars belonging to the tradition of “critical sociology” (*sociologie critique*) refer to the notion of vocation as a mere illusion on the part of the actors, which should be dismissed in sociological analysis because it would be contradicted by empirical data, for example, if it were measured through observation of the actual financial outcomes earned through vocational activities (Bourdieu 1977, Lahire 2006). But the fact that an activity generates profits (or fails to) is not in contradiction with the actors’ feeling that the activity is undertaken to satisfy the need to create, or to be recognized as an artist, rather than only to earn money. Feelings, as well as values and representations of all kinds, are just as much a part of social life, and thus they belong to the field of sociological insight on the same grounds (but not with the same methods) as ‘factuality’. In other words, our scope is to *understand* the experience of vocation and its relationship with recognition, according to the strong Weberian meaning of “understanding” *versus* “explanation” (Weber 1949): explicating what it means for the actors and for the very logics of experiences, representations and values to which it is related (Heinich 1998b).

This is why our perspective is also quite different from that of sociologist Howard Becker (Becker 1982). While Becker aims to demonstrate that artistic activities are not individual, as many used to believe, but rather collective, my questions are: “Why it is so important for people to perceive these activities as individual?” and “What kinds of clues are used to sustain such a representation?” From a comprehensive perspective, artistic and scientific productions have to satisfy expectations which are not reducible to market criteria, be they more universal or more personal. Since material profit cannot serve as *the* sole marker of quality, rewards are necessarily deferred and dematerialized. In the discrepancy between

the (market) “price” and the supposed (intrinsic or extrinsic) “value”, slips the need for other forms of recognition: that is, the need for an adequate system for the “estimation” of the quality of the work as well as for a process serving to determine an appropriate level of “esteem” to be granted to the work’s creator. Here we find intertwined three major properties of recognition in a vocational regime: personalisation (the link between people and their work), temporality (the complex dynamics of time-frames for achieving recognition and the degree of respect accrued), and mediation processes (with differential powers and meanings with respect to recognition of vocational activities).

*Personalisation, temporisation and mediation in recognition processes*

Vocational activities rely on the strong implication of personhood in one’s work. They thus foster proximity, if not inseparability, between work and person: “estimations” of the price of a picture or a book and the level of “esteem” of its author are thus closely bound together, even if the correspondence between the two may sometimes be debated. This is why, for example, biographical data appear all the more important for critics in cases where the discussed author’s or artist’s work is highly estimated (Heinich 1996). The market value of the work often tends to be directly transmuted into author recognition. While a tradesman might not feel deeply offended if someone questioned the price of a product, creators or authors who feel they exercise a vocation often appear to consider that any minimization of the value of their work constitutes a mark of low regard, a lack of respect for the maker and a personal disqualification. This property accounts for the legendary sensitivity of artists and authors to criticism. Some may interpret this sensitivity as a kind of “susceptibility” or “vanity”, but it is first of all a consequence of the strong affective involvement of creators in their work and also of the concomitant interplay of evaluations of their work with their identity as creators.

In addition to this personal identification with works, vocational activities also have in common a specific temporality, namely a temporality that is oriented toward the future much more than toward the present. Whereas ordinary goods are primarily valued according to their material duration or appeal for consumption, artistic goods and scientific productions are supposed to find an audience far beyond an immediate market. This extension of temporality beyond the authors’ lives renders the process of recognition all the more open and undefined as aspirations for recognition of the work increase. Conversely, the recognition process is more closed and quickly completed when the work is deemed of little interest, deserving but a place in attic, if not the trash. Museums and libraries visibly demonstrate this peculiarity of the artistic and scientific worlds: the process of recognition is ever active and ever a matter of concern

because it may be re-opened at any time through the comparison of a work with other works, past or future (Haskell 1980). This also accounts for a twofold property of artistic and scientific worlds: doubt and suspicion. Artists and scientists may doubt their own value because it is not immediately objectified through rewards; others may be suspicious of success, especially when it occurs quickly and widely.

This temporal specificity of the evaluation process—perceived greatness is bound up with long-term as well as long-lasting recognition—goes together with the “regime of singularity” that has governed the arts since the romantic era (Heinich 2005). As long as originality supersedes conventions and standards, the general public can hardly evaluate the quality of works, since evaluation relies on a very specialized capacity to perceive the “cutting edge” property of works, as well as their internal coherence, given their lack of roots in traditions. Thus, artistic value no longer depends on the short-term market, but on the enlightened judgement of specialists; in the long term, this judgement may extend to laymen, whose admiration will convert into market value once innovation has been accepted as a new norm (Heinich 1996).

When innovations are subsumed into norms there appears a third property of recognition in vocational activities: “mediations” (Hennion 1993). Mediations between works and audiences (such as specialized critics, merchants, curators, publishers and so on) are all the more necessary when the activity is more “autonomous” (Bourdieu 1992) and more governed by the value of singularity. This is why social scientists should investigate not only the objects of recognition (works, authors, etc.) and its instruments (respect, esteem, money, prestige, honours, etc.), but also those mediators who actually allow it or make it happen. Whereas political philosophers often used to address this issue quite abstractly, as if recognition came from “society” in general, social scientists have to focus on the identity of those who grant recognition, because the quality of the recognition depends on the quality of those who grant it.

The link between mediation and temporality has already been established. In 1988, two American art historians, Gladys and Kurt Lang, distinguished three dimensions of “reputation”: “recognition”, granted by a small number of specialists; “renown”, or that which is proper to media and the general public; and “posterity”, or the dimension of a work’s reputation survives the death of its author (Lang and Lang 1988). The English art historian Alan Bowness proposed four “circles of recognition” (Bowness 1989). His model takes into account the double—both temporal and spatial—articulation of the construction of reputations in the arts. The first circle includes peers, who are few but whose opinions play a major role among artists, especially when dealing with innovative art that hardly matches ongoing criteria. The second circle includes



merchants and collectors, engaged in private transactions and immediate contacts with artists. The third circle includes specialists (experts, critics, museum directors, curators, etc.) who usually work in the frame of institutions and at a relative distance from artists (the second and third circles permute when shifting from modern to contemporary art: Heinich 2001). The fourth and last circle includes the general public—more or less initiated or profane—, which is more multitudinous but remains at a distance from artists.

Though apparently simple, Bowness' model is interesting because it associates three dimensions: first, the spatial proximity with the artist (who may personally know his/her peers, probably his/her merchants and main collectors, possibly relevant specialists, but rarely his/her fans); second, the passing of time (the immediacy of judgment for peers, short or middle term for buyers or connoisseurs, and long term, if not posterity, for mere viewers); third, the competence of judges, on which the success of the process of recognition relies (which applies from the first to the fourth circle, according to the degree to which art is “autonomised” and thus “singularised”). This particular structure of recognition epitomizes the paradoxical economy of artistic activities in modern times, times in which innovation and originality have become major criteria. This means that, among the various kinds of mediators, small numbers, who do not pay in monetary values but in aesthetic confidence, are much more powerful in influencing assessments of quality in recognition processes than crowds of admirers—that is, unless they appear long afterwards and thus pay with their confidence very late in the game or even after the artist's death. This is the very logic of the *avant-garde*, as has been demonstrated by the Italian historian Renato Poggioli (Poggioli 1968).

Bowness's model may be roughly applied to vocational activities other than visual arts. In the field of literature, the second and third circles tend to mingle, since there are no “collectors” other than those who buy the books; the fourth circle remains rather strong, while at the other end writers and critics maintain their power of recognition through the institution of prizes. In sciences, the fourth circle does not play any role in recognition, and the second and third circles hardly exist at all, whereas the first circle is by far the most important, since peer groups provide not only esteem, but also quotations, subsidies and prizes.

### *Arts versus sciences*

In contemporary society, creative activities are a more “ideal-typical” expression of the vocational world than any other activity, whereas science is located at the interface of two major orders of qualification, the “regime of singularity”, typical of the vocational world, and the “regime of community”, typical of the ordinary world. Because of this, the question of

recognition raises more problems in the arts than anywhere else. Conversely, recognition through prizes is less problematic in the field of science, which is only partly governed by the vocational world.

In the case of artistic activities, the status of potential prize winners is far less stable and far more fragile and random than in scientific research activities. There is no formal recruitment procedure, no regular permanent salary, no career marked out in advance, no official titles and ranks, no regular collaborators and no work premises to go to every morning to meet with one's colleagues. Given such a weak socialization of the activity and the uncertainty of its value, a big literary prize can be a great event in the life of a writer. For a scientist, however, winning a prize is only one element among many within the highly structured stages of professional recognition. Thus, the impact of a prize on the life of people engaged in creative vocations is inevitably greater, whether negative or positive. Literary prizes clearly generate far more spectacular effects in general than scientific prizes because writers do not have access to the powerful socialization structures of their activity that are provided by laboratories, procedures of institutional recruitment, the system of varied and peer-reviewed publications, collective work, the material registration of proceedings, the regular handling of considerable financial resources, etc. In the field of science, the stages making up the "objectivation" of value occur earlier and are far greater in number than in the field of art.

For all these reasons, this specific moment in the process of recognition is less likely to produce profound changes in the life of a scientific researcher, even if a prize usually provides a much more substantial amount of money in the sciences than in the arts. This may be why scientists are hardly concerned with the problems of identity congruence, which occur in the case of literary prizes, whereas they are as concerned as writers both with the problem of justice—a problem that pertains to the "axiological" or value conditions to be fulfilled by the juries—and with the problem of envy, pertaining to the axiological conditions to be fulfilled by the winners.

### *Two surveys*

This paper draws on insights from two studies of prizewinners. The first, a survey on literary prizes, was based on a dozen in-depth interviews with French awardees, carried out from 1985, with Claude Simon after his Nobel prize, to 1998, with several "prix Goncourt" awardees and some other winners of less famous prizes such as "Médicis" and "Renaudot" (Heinich 1999). It provided an empirical basis for investigating equality and equity as criteria

of justice governing the distribution of goods in society, focussing on prizes as indicators of recognition (Heinich 1999). The objective of this survey was to study the effects of prizes on their winners, to analyse the problems they encountered and, throughout this analysis, to understand the general axiological conditions under which a sudden shift causing a “disparity of worth” (“*écart de grandeur*”), such as that created by receiving a big prize, might be well accepted.

Four main sources of problems were observed: “status incongruity”, pertaining to identity issues (Lenski 1954); reactions of envy, pertaining to inappropriate relationships and rivalry (Schoeck 1980); feelings of injustice, pertaining to failures with regard to the need for equity in a democratic society (Walzer 1983); and plurality of value registers, pertaining to discrepancies or contradictions between categories of evaluation criteria (Boltanski and Thévenot 1991). As for the question of equality and equity in assessments of the justification for recognition of individuals and their works, in the case of awards, equality is of course impossible, since the very scope of a prize is precisely to establish differences of quality, that is, inequalities. Equity was subdivided into four criteria: rank (i.e., age), need, merit and chance. Among the four categories of equity criteria, chance is supposed to be avoided by the work of the jury, which should be able to justify its choices by the candidates’ objective qualities: first of all, merit (be it scientific, literary etc.); and, in cases of equal merit, rank (the elder first) or need (for instance, in cases involving an expensive research program or a difficult moment in one’s life).

The second study of prize winners focused on scientists. In 2002, The Louis Jeantet Foundation in Geneva invited me to carry out the same kind of survey on the winners of its annual European prize for medicine and biology. The study consisted of sixteen semi-directed interviews with mostly French-speaking prize winners (Heinich and Verdrager 2002). Various themes were addressed throughout interviews: circumstances surrounding the awarding of the prize, effects of the prize, awardees’ perception of the prize, the prize’s place in the winner’s overall career and the awardee’s opinions on scientific prizes in general. The empirical findings demonstrate the importance of scientific prize-grantings as a crossroads of values, a crossroads that is especially revelatory for a comprehensive sociology of values.

In order to provide a precise analysis without exceeding the limits of a paper, I will focus here on scientific prizes and on two major issues selected from among many others: first, the issue of justice, pertaining to the fair ways to award a prize; second, the issue of envy, pertaining to the fair ways to accept one.

*Scientific prizes judged by their winners: the problem of justice*

Michael Walzer has made sufficiently evident the plurality of “spheres of justice” which organize the feelings of fairness or non-fairness that accompany any distribution of goods (Walzer 1983). Other scholars have followed, addressing the same issue in different theoretical frameworks or research contexts (Boltanski and Thévenot 1991; Lamont 1992; Lamont and Fournier 1992; Lamont and Thévenot 2000). One fundamental characteristic of all recognition, and of prizes in particular, is that the capacity to “recognize” the best will itself be all the more readily considered credible (or “recognized”) if recognition is granted in accordance with the work produced or the activity performed rather than on the basis of mere proximity to the candidate. In a “sphere of justice” based on merit, solidarity grounded on proximity (be it that of family, friendship, community or nation) should have no place at all: excellence would be the only criterion for choice.

The problem, however, is that when the quality of the work selected is greater, the number of specialists able to judge it is smaller, and, further, the more these few specialists are themselves likely to be practitioners, and therefore colleagues or potential friends (or enemies). Hence there is an increased risk that the selection process will be contaminated by the mutual familiarity (or rivalry) of the persons involved, in place of the objective evaluation of the works. The more specialized an activity, the more proximity interferes with the appreciation of merit. This is the constituent problem of all co-option, whether for a simple recruitment or for an award.

Everyone is well aware of this risk, even if those concerned do not necessarily have a sociologically informed perception of it. Specialized research, even at the international level, happens in a very small world, which means that researchers quite often know each other, especially when they are prize winners—people who are, by definition, singled out and therefore less numerous and better known. Some of them know “all” the other prize winners, at least by name (*“I know them all, and not because of the prize! It’s a small world”*). Many know most of them personally (*“I know a lot of people, a lot of researchers who have already been awarded the prize. They’re often friends of mine”*). It is only when the disciplines are remote from the one practiced by the awardee that, inevitably, the mutual recognition diminishes, and it is here that the Jeantet Prize becomes an effective signal of quality: *“I would say that when a person has won a prize, in a field that I don’t know, yes, in principle it situates them for me. I would think that they are a positive element in that discipline, by reference to the people I know in my fields”*.

When it comes to the committee, however, respondents stress the fact that they do not know the judges (with the exception, naturally, of prize winners who are currently sitting members). This is either because the names were in effect not communicated to the prize winner or were not remembered by him or her; or, further, because he or she prefers—for his or her own sake as much as for any other reason—not to mention any kind of link with the members of the jury, which would inevitably present the risk of minimizing the objectivity of the award. Thus, answers to the question “Do you know the members of the committee? Do you know how it works?” tend to converge:

*“I don’t know anything. Personally, I’m not... Yes, of course I know people, okay. But if you say ‘Who’s on it?’ I no longer have an idea. I know that... Yes, I know people... And I know how it works, they collect external and internal proposals and they discuss it, I think... But I’m not up on that... It’s something that doesn’t interest me, knowing what goes on. I’m not informed. I’m not someone who takes an interest in rumours. That doesn’t interest me”.*

One person knew the members of the committee at the time he received the prize, but has no idea who sits on it today, or at least not by name (this person does know, however, the name of an honorary member); another, by contrast, did not know who was on the committee at the time of the award. In any case, both have “*the impression that they do a good job*”, and even “*the impression that they do their job extraordinarily well*”. One reason they give for this efficiency is the adequate number of jury members: “*It’s very big, there are 20 of us, or even more, I don’t know, and it’s very diverse, and very competent I think*”. Another reason is the number of countries represented, which means that no one country can throw its weight around: “*Different countries are represented; it’s watered down*”. Another, more subtle reason is linked to the requirement that there be a number of former winners on the jury: so it is “*very much in their interest if the quality of the Jeantet Prize remains high*”. On the whole, in light of the awardees’ remarks, the Jeantet Prize appears to be working in an exemplary fashion. As one jury member who is familiar with this kind of committee emphasizes:

*“After I won the Jeantet Prize, I sat on the jury for nine years. Now I’m on lots of prize juries, even for the big international prizes, even big prizes awarded by France, and for me the way the scientific committee of the Jeantet Prize chooses winners is still exemplary... You can write that down, because it’s very important to me. It’s a model of seriousness”.*

Of course, one might expect the winners of a prize, when questioned at the request of the foundation that awards it, to speak rather flatteringly of the institution (even if one takes the precaution of reassuring them that their statements would be anonymous). Yet, if we bear

in mind the virulence of the criticism that winners of big literary prizes level, in private and sometimes in public (i.e., at the selection process), it seems fair to assume that these favourable opinions are more than just diplomacy. The juries of the Jeantet prize seem to fulfil the requirements for justice in the eyes of their awardees.

According to the rather unanimous requisite that prizes recognize excellence, all the prizes do not possess an equal reputation. From the perspective of the European awardees of the Jeantet prize, the Nobel Prize is by far the most prestigious; but, at the same time, it is suspected of partiality in favour of American candidates who are supported by active lobbying efforts. If proven to be subject to the risk of “political” influence, in the broadest sense of the term, the legitimacy of the prize as a form of recognition could be reduced. Some interviewees confined themselves to making assumptions: *“There’s probably more politics and lobbying around the Nobel Prize, but I’m not sure if that’s true. I’m not sure. Perhaps that’s not true”*. Others were less equivocal:

*“The Nobel Prize, in some years, is terrible. There are prize winners who disappear from sight and are quickly forgotten. Over the last few years, it has almost become an American prize: I have seen the change with my own eyes! I don’t know if things will carry on like that, but I do know there’s a huge lobby; I know some people who are very active in it”; “I sincerely believe that the Nobel Prize, for example, is really a prize involving important lobbying. The criteria for attributing the prize are not at all clear. There have been lots and lots of pretty murky goings-on associated with the Nobel Prize for physiology and for medicine. It just so happens that I am a member of some of the prize juries. It’s quite clear they do their job very well, conferences organized, invitations. Anyway, there are a million different ways. I believe there’s lobbying going on the same as in other fields. But I am not sure whether this is specific to the world of science”*.

From this interviewee’s point of view, the Jeantet Prize, because it is less prestigious, is less likely to be subject to lobbying than the Nobel, and thus it is less vulnerable to criticism: *“Does lobbying take place for the Jeantet Prize? Maybe there is, maybe there isn’t. I would guess that there’s probably a little less than for the Nobel Prize, but I might be wrong about that”*. Another scientist goes further by calling for vigilance:

*“I don’t like politics, decisions ought to be made exclusively on the basis of the quality of the scientific work and not on the basis of national interest. But I think that [for the Nobel Prize] countries influence choices to a certain extent. [For the Jeantet Prize] I am not a member of the committee, so I can’t really form an opinion about this matter. But I think that with all prestigious prizes, countries are going to pressure people, because it’s in their national interest. That’s why we need to prevent this from happening as far as possible so that the prize remains an honest prize, above all suspicion, and that people active in the field*

*recognize that the prize winners really do deserve the prize, no doubt about it. If this process gets mixed up with politics, it would mean the end of scientific quality. As far as I can see, the Nobel Prize is at times on the brink of falling into that trap”.*

A prize constitutes a collective, public judgment about a work or an author. But the quality of this judgment may itself be judged by actual or potential awardees: judges are called to the stand and held responsible for their own judgments (Lamont, Guetzkow, Mallard 2005). This evaluation of the prize’s quality is all the more important for the winners in that it determines the validity of the distinction that they have received. Just as there is an (unofficial) scale of quality for researchers, so there is an (equally unofficial) scale of quality for the prizes awarded to scientific researchers or artists. This is calibrated using a variety of criteria: finance (the amount of money awarded), geographical scope (from local to international), and, additionally, the relevance of scientific or aesthetic choices and the prize’s renown.

#### *Prize winners judged by their peers: the problem of envy*

The survey on literary prizes also showed how deeply the winners are exposed to reactions of envy: that is, the desire for something that one does not possess or, more aggressively, the refusal to accept that someone else possesses something that one does not have (and not, as is the case with jealousy, the refusal to accept that someone else possesses something that is putatively one’s own). Given the importance of this feeling and behaviour in a wide variety of cultures and circumstances, this issue exceeds mere psychology, equally implicating anthropology (Schoeck 1980; Foster 1972). Let us examine a case with regard to scientific prizes.

Even if it might appear paradoxical to ask a prize winner whether prizes can have negative effects, our scientists can hardly plead surprise: *“There are always people who are a little bit jealous”*, one straightforwardly answers. But the interviewees do not talk about this matter at length, at least not to an outsider; or else they ascribe the problem exclusively to the Nobel Prize: *“In the case of the Nobel Prize, there is a negative effect, yes, when people become jealous”*. One respondent—who had already denounced the excessive individualization of scientific work—is a little more forthcoming: *“It gives rise to jealousies, to that cult of the star. I sensed this because after reaching a certain point, some people make comments like, ‘Hey, how is it that you got that prize?’ Those who are really honest tell you in those terms”*.

Yet there seem to exist deep cultural differences in the way one deals with the problem of envy. This difference appears in the context of an apparently trifling question, namely the question of what the recipient does with the diploma or document testifying to a distinction, i.e., whether one displays it or files it away. The question put to our subjects took a purposefully vague form, mentioning an eventual “medal”, “object” or “document.” Most remember a document, although one supposes “*there must be a plaque somewhere*”, while another hesitates: “*I remember photographs that were sent to me afterwards, but was it a parchment or a medal? I believe there was a dossier, I think, with a... as far as I recall with a diploma, something like that anyway, but was there a plaque or a medal? I don’t remember anymore*”. Some speak of a “diploma”, others of a “parchment” or “certificate.”

For the most part, prize winners are not uniform in what they have done with their award. Only three of them, including two non-native speakers of French, have hung it on their office wall. The rest have stored it “*somewhere*”, sometimes “*in a nice place*” (but not on the wall) in their apartment, sometimes only to be put away by their spouse, and sometimes to be later packed away in a drawer or box, where nearly all of these prize winners would be hard put to find it again. “*Don’t ask me where it is!*” begs one of the awardees, while another confesses, “*I’ve got a lot of plaques; they’re collecting dust at my place. And I think the Jeantet Prize must be there, too, collecting dust*”.

This is doubtless the only, or at least the main, bias in our sampling—i.e., the favoring of French and francophones. This is an important issue since this openly asserted discretion on the part of the interviewees concerning the display of prizes is clearly a pronounced cultural trait that distinguishes them from prize winners from the English-speaking world, who seem to have no qualms about proudly displaying their distinctions. Such a cultural difference in the display of distinctions often provokes especially emphatic explanations from interviewees; they almost invariably tend toward refusing to exhibit the award in favor of discreetly storing it away. Although our sample is obviously too small to allow for conclusions, we may suggest, as an hypothesis, that there exists, at this point, a rift in values. This rift deserves to be underscored, especially since it exists in a milieu that is highly specialized and therefore, in most other respects, quite closed and (for that very reason) uniform.

It is worth lending an ear to all those who spontaneously prided themselves on not displaying their pride:



*“I kept it in a dossier that’s in a drawer somewhere at home... I didn’t hang it on the wall, no. Oh no, not that! No, I didn’t hang it on the wall”; “That’s like hanging things on the wall, please!”; “I’m not one of those people who show off their diplomas!”; “That’s just not part of how I do things... It must be somewhere, carefully put away in a closet, but I haven’t got it. I don’t frame that sort of thing. You’ll notice in my office there are no certificates hanging on the walls”; “I’m not one of those scientists, if you will, like a lot of those you see in America, where everyone displays [laughs] their diplomas. To make room, I gave all my diplomas to the [institution’s] records department... It’s not something I have any special feeling for”; “I’ve been lucky to have had many citations, and I’d gladly do something with them, but for now I’ve just kept them... I see that more at home than in the lab. I’m not very demonstrative... I have a certain modesty, I think. It would be nice if it was ... recognized with greater force, especially by your family, the people in your field, your world, but I don’t like to display... I don’t like to display the marks of success. I’m not really sure why. That’s a good question you’ve raised there... I think it’s a question of modesty, be it more or less false modesty”; “It’s really not the sort of thing I’d put up [on the wall]... That’s not me at all! ...Because that’s the way it is, I never put up anything. I know there are colleagues who hang all of their diplomas and things like that, but that’s not my thing... It’s like ‘Look, I’ve got this prize, I’ve got that prize, etc’. It’s...”; “My wife put it away somewhere at home. I didn’t display it... No, I find that’s... I find that’s a bit show-offy. I could put it there [points to the wall] like they do in America. Americans often do that, they hang their prizes in their office. That’s not something I really like, to tell you the truth... because I find it a bit pretentious. You’re known for what you do and for this kind of recognition, but I don’t think you have to express that recognition yourself; it’s for other people to express that, if they want to, not you: ‘Hey, look, I got the Jeantet Prize! Don’t forget!’ I find that... No, that’s not my kind of thing”; “I don’t put anything on the walls... I’ve received lots of prizes, I’m a member of lots of academies. I’ll put it in a museum someday... I don’t know, it’s not shyness... No, I think that I simply don’t see why I would show myself to advantage with things on the wall. I mean people know me. And I don’t need to. Either you know me, fine, or you don’t know me, and it’s not because there are diplomas hanging on the wall that I’m any better, huh! ...The Americans do that much more... I don’t draw attention to myself like that. I mean, it’s like decorations, you know, few scientists wear their decorations. Lots have them but they don’t wear them because in the end, we’re not especially... We don’t need to say, ‘See how good we are.’ It’s nice, yes, to have researchers who say, ‘Right, well now, in the end the work done here is not so bad,’ rather than display it on the walls myself... It’s rolled up with other things at home on a shelf. I tell you, one day I’ll organize all that when I have the time and then I’ll leave it to the lab as a souvenir. But in my lifetime, no. That... I think it’s true for everybody. You’re not going to set up some thing to your own glory! ...I’m pleased, I’m very pleased to have been awarded the Jeantet Prize because it represents a certain recognition by your peers after all, so basically you say to yourself, Good, I’m not a complete dummy. But it’s not worth going and playing it up afterwards. Listen, it’s as if you were sticking up a bill, writing on the walls, ‘See how good I am.’ I think there’s a certain Puritanism left... a certain objectivity vis-à-vis yourself, I’d say”.*

Unfortunately, it would be too hasty to allow those who are so “up front” in displaying their distinctions to have their say here, for the simple reason that some interviewees did not spontaneously discuss the matter. Because we were made aware of the pertinence of the question too late, we unfortunately failed to ask all our subjects to provide us with their own interpretation of the phenomenon. We are reduced, then, to proposing hypotheses to explain something that may, in fact, be viewed as a cultural trait, and indeed has every likelihood of being one. In any case, the interviewees’ proclaimed actions, in this instance, do at least confirm prior assertions with regard to the issue of whether to show one’s honours (corresponding to English-speaking culture) or to store them away (corresponding to Latinate culture).

In the course of an interview, we advanced the hypothesis that English-speaking researchers will display their awards without qualms, in contrast to the French-speakers in our sample, who overtly reject such open display. Our Swiss respondent attributed this discretion to “Calvinism” by way of an explanation. We pointed out to him that English-speaking culture likewise evinces a strong Protestant influence, whereas native English-speakers also tend to display their awards. He then pointed us toward another explanation that seems altogether pertinent:

*“Well, the competitive spirit is much more developed in the English-speaking world after all... The fact that you have, well, competition: If you win, you win... And that is also felt, I think, in the sciences, in the United States even more since a good part of the, well, success of science in the United States, I think, is in having a nearly optimal competition in terms of openness and accessibility for everybody. It’s extraordinary after all! Which is not the case here at home, less so in France and far less so in Italy. I think that’s a problem”.*

Let us go farther on into this direction. It is clear that the search for excellence remains a value in both cultures, directing individuals’ desires and actions. Yet the difference seems to be that there is, on the one hand, the value of competition in English-speaking cultures, which are often marked by the competitive spirit and where victory consecrates the good player but does not, however, signify an agonistic wish to eliminate the adversary; and, on the other hand, there is the value of cooperation in Latinate cultures, where formal equality prevails and any claim to excellence appears as a moral shortcoming in danger of sparking envy, such that victory must not be asserted by the winner, only designated—more or less clearly—by others (hence the importance of and sensitivity to the problems of recognition and of prizes, which are an essential element thereof). On the one hand, then, a performance imperative reigns, and on the other hand, a modesty imperative. This would explain why we find, in our largely

French-speaking sampling, that displaying one's distinctions is the exception and filing them away the rule—a choice that our prize winners patently display.

In an order of competition, it is normal to show off and celebrate rewards because victory (along with defeat) is an integral part of the game, binding the community of peers. One not only has to know how to play by the rules but also how to lose, and how to win without being excessively affected by victory—no easy task. This is what is known as “sportsmanship”, reputed to be a specialty of the English-speaking world. When competition or emulation are considered a value, those who refuse it risk being accused of immobilism, lifelessness or a lack of initiative. At the other extreme, the value of cooperation or solidarity tends to cast competition as a blameworthy (on principle) form of rivalry. In the first case, a distinction obtained by a researcher is likely to be celebrated by the members of his laboratory, who see it as a victory of their “team”; in the second case, it is generally ignored because it acts contrary to the principle of equality among the members of the team, and risks stirring up a rivalry among them.

There is no place for competition in an order of cooperation. It is either cancelled out or veiled by the search for solidarity, that is, the combining of efforts toward a common goal. At the same time, personal victory is not viewed as a legitimate aim and should be neither claimed nor, by the same token, displayed, otherwise one runs the risk of appearing to act in a misplaced spirit of rivalry, transgressing the imperative of modesty—or, in more sociological terms, the imperative that obliges a subject to deny or reduce disparities of worth. We have observed that this is the principal bias expressed by our French-speaking sample. There is every reason to believe, then, that the very problem of recognition is more prone to tensions in the vocational worlds of Latin culture countries than in those of English-speaking countries. Prizes indeed emphasize the contrast between value systems based on competition versus those emphasizing cooperation.

Still, the opposition between different cultures must be seen in the proper perspective. First, there is a strong possibility that it is merely a short-term trend. Secondly, it is itself one of the elements of the description and therefore explains nothing. And third, it has the drawback of rendering, in a discontinuous form (English-speaking versus Latin cultures), something that, in my opinion, derives more fundamentally from differences aligned along a continuous scale. This scale embodies degrees of distance from the border between identity (or familiarity) and difference (or being an outsider). Indeed, if we view “the others” (foreigners, or even adversaries) as our peers, that is, our immediate competitors, then it makes sense to enter into competition with them and combine forces in a single team, or a

single laboratory, against opposing teams. In the modern period, this is the pacified or “civilized” agonistic model that takes the form of sports, according to Norbert Elias’s famous analysis (Elias and Dunning, 1986). However, if we consider that the “others” comprise all those who do not belong to the scientific world—that is, if we remove the borderline by including our own peers within “our own kind”—then rivalry would lose all legitimacy, because it would imply fighting against one’s own camp. Cooperation alone would then make sense. But in that case, the disparities of worth within any one group would have to be carefully restricted by modesty, or by the hierarchical institutionalization of individuals’ places, in order to prevent the situation from degenerating into an inter-individual rivalry, which would prove suicidal for the group.

It is this risk of deadly rivalry that the values of competition and cooperation are summoned to control. They have in common the founding principle of all societies, which is the obligation to cooperate with allies and to fight adversaries. The only thing that varies from one society to another, then, is the extension of the alliance, that is, the breadth of the border. Overall, the opposition between competition and cooperation simply demarcates the two extremes, or poles, on a continuum between proximity to and distance from the limit between “us” and “them”: that is, those with whom one can identify with and those whom one can oppose.

In other words, restricting the sporting spirit of competition in favour of increased inflexibility of hierarchies within the group is the price that must be paid for extending the space of solidarity and broadening borders. This is why “*It’s in a drawer... It’s easier not to display those things*”.

#### *Concluding remarks: interdependency and esteem*

These two examples of problems raised by scientific prizes, focusing on justice and envy issues, are but a short illustration of the remarkable insights into the value system surrounding award-giving in the sciences. The ambivalence of prize winners’ feelings toward such prizes is itself evidence of their ambiguous status, caught between a real need for recognition and a system of values that, for various reasons, underrates this need and devalues its manifestations. This is why a “critical” approach—dispelling illusions or condemning faults—would have been totally inappropriate, since it would have deprived us of the possibility to “comprehend” (in the sense of comprehensive sociology) the reasons why the actors themselves exercise their capacities of criticism when talking about prizes, either to appreciate their degree of justice, or to avoid potential reactions of envy.

In Bourdieu's theory of legitimization, recognition tends to be reduced to a "domination effect". Having first relied on Max Weber's comprehensive perspective (Weber 1949), and on Thorstein Veblen's *Theory of the Leisure Class* (Veblen 1899), in order to take a stand against Marxist reductionism for the purpose of making visible the search for prestige or "symbolic profits" (Bourdieu 1979), Bourdieu later increasingly reduced the need for recognition to a struggle for "status", or status distinction; in addition, he reduced the capacity to recognize others to a "symbolic power" of "legitimization" (Bourdieu 1984). Such a conception matches the critical basis of his theory of domination, as well as Foucault's critiques of "power" as expressed in his study of prison (Foucault 1975), in that it reduces power to the imposition of a unique norm, and distinction to the will to improve one's worth, to overshadow someone else, to climb to a position one does not deserve. This critical view of the search for recognition is both that of the actors, who tend to denounce the need for recognition as an expression of one's dependence on other people's opinions or as a manifestation of narcissism; and it is also that of many sociologists, evidenced in the concepts of domination and legitimization. This seems to be part of the reasons why social scientists were so long prevented from taking recognition issues into account, as Tzvetan Todorov has observed (Todorov 1996).

The critical perspective on recognition ignores fundamental features of the phenomena. First, those who endure this "power" of legitimization (viz. artists, scientists) passionately desire that power be exercised (by critics, institutions, market, etc.). Second, there does not exist only "one" power (be it that of "the State"), nor "one" legitimacy (be it that of "the dominant class"), since what is legitimate and powerful in a certain world may be quite ineffective in another. Third, those who grant recognition also depend on those who are granted it, in that their capacity to recognize is itself framed by strong expectations about its fairness. These properties of recognition are particularly obvious in activities based on vocation, where recognition has strong effects on personal identity, on the need to be reassured about one's capacities, and on self-confidence: prestige, considered as a matter of rivalry, is far from being the only stake of a recognition process (Flahault 2002, Ricoeur 2004). We all know how much we care about being quoted by our peers and how much, at the same time, any such requirement would be easily mocked.

Rather than being addressed with the critical concepts of legitimization and distinction, strongly linked to the concept of domination, the issue of recognition, with its rich sociological extensions, should instead be addressed according to the concept of interdependency. Any prize winner deeply depends both on the juries and on their peers'

judgement about the quality of his/her work and person, just as well as any jury depends on the scientists' judgements about the quality of its choices. We certainly depend on those who have the power to recognize us, but this power is itself subordinate to our capacity to recognize it as relevant. This is why Elias' conception of interdependency (Elias 1987, Heinich 1997) appears much more appropriate to address the issue of recognition than the unilateral concepts of "power", "domination" and "legitimization".

However, our relativisation of the domination paradigm does not bring out sort of a peaceful conception of recognition, according to which anyone would both provide and benefit of infinite recognition. Contrary to the notion of recognition as a matter of *respect*, which has been favoured by analysts, especially through the lens of American multi-culturalism and democratization theories (Fraser 2000), the notion of recognition as a matter of *esteem*, on which I focus, stresses the antagonistic, competitive and unequal dimensions of recognition (Heinich, 2008). Without this very dimension of esteem, one could not understand why an award inevitably raises such problems of justice and envy.

The concept of esteem pertains to the theoretical work of Axel Honneth (Honneth 1992). In his now famous book, the German philosopher opposed "respect", which is based on collective status, to "esteem", which is grounded on individual qualities (I will leave aside the third dimension—love and self confidence—which is not at stake here ). The latter is fundamentally unequal, as the American philosopher Michael Walzer had already noted, by way of underlining that, in the struggle for recognition, there can be no equality in actual results—only in possibilities (Walzer 1983). Further, this fundamental difference between respect, as a matter of status, and esteem, as a matter of individual performances, had already been documented in the Enlightenment moral theories of "consideration". Montesquieu and Rousseau balanced the universalism and equality of "dignity" with the inequality of "honour", which depends on individual performances (Haroche and Vatin 1998). This is why the notion of respect (or dignity) is mostly bound to laws and values and to personal or collective identity (citizenship, gender, race, religion etc.), whereas the notion of esteem (or honour) depends rather on actual interactions and facts, as is shown in the sphere of "vocational" activities (Heinich 1999). Far from aiming at equality, artistic, literary and scientific worlds are strongly sustained by a need to rank orders of greatnesses: that is, an individualistic and meritocratic mode of recognition, instead of a collective and egalitarian one.

Is recognition mostly a matter of *respect*, as in questions of civic rights, or of *esteem*, as in the case of prize-giving? The latter is submitted to comparison, distributed in limited quantities, and bound to rivalry, whereas the former pertains to the fundamental dignity of any

human being, which exceeds any comparison and is available in unlimited quantities, as with any moral value. Given the strong trend toward normativity, or value judgements, which weighs heavily on our disciplines, it is easy to understand that approaching recognition issues via questions of respect is perfectly “correct” on political grounds, and this perspective is therefore far more frequently addressed than that which takes into account the issue of esteem, which tends to be neglected because it goes against the commonly-held value of democratic equality. The search for esteem raises a difficult axiological problem in democratic societies because, rather than celebrating or assuming the egalitarian values as a basis for analysis, *the study of esteem engages with fundamental questions about how and why people try to be more important than others*. This is a problem that cannot be resolved by the ritual denunciation of “domination effects”, or by the politically correct claim that identities should be equally respected according to communitarian principles espoused by scholars or theorists.

It is significant that English/American sociology and moral philosophers generally view recognition according to the universalistic and egalitarian issue of “dignity” or “respect”: for instance, in Charles Taylor’s reflections on the problem of “recognition” of minorities by the State (Taylor 1992), or in Nancy Fraser’s emphasis on issues of recognition as irreducible to economic redistribution (Fraser 1995, 1998, 2000). In France, the problem is more often conceived according to the fundamentally un-egalitarian issue of “honour”, in the sense of personal worth (*grandeur*) and the need for confirmation in the eyes of others, as is noted by Todorov, Haroche and Vatin, as well as others now concerned with this issue (Caillé 2007).

Let us then finally suggest that the preference for one or the other perspective may have something to do with our national histories: the issue of respect is fundamental in a society haunted by the problem of racism, such as American society since the abolition of slavery; whereas the issue of esteem is fundamental in a society haunted by the problem of privileges, as in France since the French Revolution.

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## SUMMARY

Artistic and scientific activities, pertaining to the world of “vocation”, are here closely linked to recognition issues. Referring to recent trends in French, German and American sociology and political philosophy, this paper addresses the very status of recognition in present day sociology. Grounded on two empirical surveys about literary and scientific prizes, conducted according to the methods of comprehensive sociology, it displays some of the axiological problems raised by such a mode of recognition, namely the issue of justice, through the fair ways to award a prize, and the issue of envy, through the fair ways to accept one. On a more theoretical ground, it aims to demonstrate that the place of prizes in vocational activities can be better understood through, first, a close examination of the symbolic dimensions of recognition (which questions the limits of materialism and utilitarianism); second, an awareness of the interdependency between competitors and their judges in prize competitions (which upends traditional simplistic denunciation of recognition systems in theories of dominations); third, an acknowledgement of the fundamentally unequal dimensions of esteem (against the reduction of recognition to an egalitarian respect). It thus illustrates the necessity of a triple shift: first, from material to “symbolic” or, rather, “intangible” outcomes; second, from a concern with power and domination to a concern with interdependency; and third, from recognition conceived as egalitarian respect to recognition conceived as un-egalitarian esteem.



## BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Nathalie HEINICH, born in 1955, is research director in sociology at the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS, Paris). She specialized in sociology of arts (artistic professions, aesthetic perception, conflicts about contemporary art), socio-anthropology of identity crisis (in fiction, authorship or survivors testimonies), and epistemology of social sciences. Among more than twenty books, she published *The Glory of Van Gogh. An Anthropology of Admiration* (Princeton University Press, 1996), *États de femme. L'Identité féminine dans la fiction occidentale* (Paris, Gallimard, 1996), *La Sociologie de Norbert Elias* (Paris, La Découverte, 1997), *Le Triple jeu de l'art contemporain. Sociologie des arts plastiques* (Paris, Minuit, 1998), *L'Elite artiste. Excellence et singularité en régime démocratique* (Paris, Gallimard, 2005), *Pourquoi Bourdieu* (Paris, Gallimard, 2007).

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## NOTES

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<sup>ii</sup> G. Brennan, Ph. Pettit, *The Economy of Esteem. An Essay on Civil and Political Society*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2004, p. 1.