
The Sociological Life of Pierre Bourdieu

Pierre Bourdieu both brilliantly illustrated and bluntly belied his distinctive social theories with a brimful life that, through unlikely twists and long-winding turns, was anchored by an abiding commitment to science, intellectual institution-building, and social justice. He had a sociologically and academically improbable trajectory. As Raymond Aron was fond of saying, Bourdieu was an exception to the laws of the transmission of cultural capital that he established in his early books (with Jean-Claude Passeron) *The Inheritors* (1964/1979¹) and *Reproduction in Education, Society, and Culture* (1970/1977): the grandson and son of sharecroppers from a marginal province, he rose to the apex of the French cultural pyramid and became the world's most cited living social scientist. Reared to join the high caste of philosophers, the supreme intellectual species in postwar France, he embraced instead the lowly and then-moribund discipline of sociology, which he helped revitalize and renew, and whose influence in the public sphere he extended like no one before him.

Yet Bourdieu also embodied many of his signal theoretical innovations and teachings in his own scientific practice and output. His view that social action is governed by dispositions acquired by durable immersion in social games finds expression in his insistence and ability to fuse high-level theoretical work with mundane research activities. His call for a reflexive social science capable of controlling for its biases so as better to unhinge 'rites of institution' is exemplified by his 'Lecture on the Lecture' (1982/1990), a vivisection of his inaugural lesson at the Collège de France, and in *Homo Academicus* (1984/1988), a pitiless analysis of the social determinants of intellectual production in the French university – and thus of himself as an academic being. His conviction that rationalism is fully compatible with historicism and endows sociology with a pressing civic mission is materialized in the diverse yet convergent writings which stamped his final years, such as the books *Pascalian Meditations* (1997/2000) and *Science de la science et réflexivité* (2001) and the political essays gathered in *Contre-feux* (1 and 2, 1997/2000, 2001/2002), as well as in his personal engagement in social struggles against neoliberal globalization and in defense of intellectual autonomy, the jobless, the homeless, and undocumented migrants. His commitment to the 'corporatism of the universal'

is amply manifested in his tireless efforts to disseminate the instruments of critical thought and to create a 'collective intellectual' capable of advancing a transnational *Realpolitik* of reason.

* * *

Pierre Bourdieu was born in August 1930 in Béarn, a rural region of southwestern France enclaved at the foot of the Pyrénées mountains, in a tiny village where the native tongue was still *occitan*. His primary school days were spent amongst the children of peasants, factory workers, and small shopkeepers in another remote village reputed for its archaism which was later to be the site of one of his first ethnographic studies – and the topic of his last book in press at the time of his passing on 23 January 2002, *Le Bal des célibataires* (2002), in which he diagnoses the crisis of the peasant society of his youth brought about by the dislocation of marital strategies and gender relations. After distinguished studies as a boarder at the public high school of the nearby town of Pau, where he was renowned as an avid player of rugby and *pelotte basque*, the young Bourdieu received a state scholarship and was advised by one of his teachers, an alumnus of the Ecole normale supérieure, to enroll in the top preparatory course leading to this elite school, the *khâgne* of the Lycée Louis-le-Grand in Paris, which brought together the country's best students in an atmosphere of intense competition and scholarly devotion.

Bourdieu soon entered the Ecole normale supérieure where, as his success commanded, he took up the queen of disciplines, philosophy. But, in reaction against the mood of the time, dominated by Sartrean existentialism that suffused education and intellectual life at large, he delved into the study of logic and the history of science under Alexandre Koyré, Jules Vuillemin, Eric Weil (whose famous seminar on Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* he attended), Martial Guéroult (a master scholar of Leibniz under whom he wrote a research thesis on the *Animadversiones*), Gaston Bachelard, and Georges Canguilhem (who had similarly mentored Michel Foucault a few years earlier). After passing the *agrégation* in philosophy (with Jacques Derrida, Louis Marin, and Emmanuel LeRoy Ladurie in his cohort), the freshly minted graduate elected to teach philosophy at the high school of Moulins, a small town in mid-central France. A year later, in 1955, he was called under the French flag in Versailles but, being constitutively rebellious to military authority, he was swiftly sent for disciplinary reasons to Algeria to serve in the 'pacification' of the North African colony.

This first-hand encounter with the harrowing realities of the war waged by France on rising Algerian nationalism was to change Bourdieu's intellectual fate forever: it aroused his interest in Algerian society from a political as well as a scientific standpoint and triggered his practical

conversion from philosophy to social science. His first book *The Sociology of Algeria*, written in 1957 and published in translation in 1962 in the United States by Beacon Press, was an impeccably scholarly study synthesizing historical, ethnological, and sociological knowledge, but it also displayed the flag of the yet-to-be-born independent Algeria on its cover and warned about the contradictions of the colonized society and the delusions of the nationalist movement (anticipating the quagmire in which many Third-World countries would find themselves stuck for decades after independence). Bourdieu conducted his first anthropological inquiries in the war-torn regions of Kabylia, Collo, and Ouarsenis, three strongholds of the nationalist guerrilla. From the beginning, he mated ethnography with statistics, microscopic interpretation with macroscopic explanation, to map out the social cataclysm wrought by colonial capitalism and the independentist struggle. He sought to connect evolving social structures and cultural forms, as can be seen in his two books, *Travail et travailleurs en Algérie* (1963, on the discovery of wage work and the formation of the Algerian urban proletariat) and *Le Déracinement* (1964, with Abdelmalek Sayad, on the destruction of traditional agriculture and society), and in his collection of classic ethnological essays *Algeria 1960* (1977/1977, on the Kabyle sense of honor and time and the 'disenchantment of the world' under the press of wage labor and the market economy).

Together with his philosophical training and social personality, the peculiar circumstances under which Bourdieu effectively trained himself in anthropology, sociology, and statistics and carried out the field studies which served as empirical springboard for his groundbreaking *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (1972/1977) explain his signature concern for *reflexivity*: to continually turn one's sociological tools upon one's scientific practice so as to reflect critically on the social conditions and concrete operations of construction of the object was a pressing practical requirement, sometimes even a matter of life and death, in wartime Algeria. The need to control the distortions that the analytic posture – what Bourdieu would later term 'the scholastic point of view' – introduces in the relation between observer and observed, between actual social life and the accounts that the sociologist produces of it, is a central pillar and theme of his lifework, running from *The Craft of Sociology: Epistemological Foundations* (1968/1990, with Jean-Claude Chamboredon and Jean-Claude Passeron) to *The Logic of Practice* (1980/1990) to *Pascalian Meditations* and its extended discussion of the 'three forms of the scholastic fallacy' which leads us to 'mistake the things of logic for the logic of things' in science, aesthetics, and ethics.

Gradually, the brilliant student destined to philosophical honors and the historical study of epistemology (his initial plans upon military release were to teach philosophy and to enter medical school in Toulouse, as Canguilhem, who was supervising his career, had done) was turning into

an anthropologist. Bourdieu learned some Arabic and Berber, first in the field and later at the Ecole des langues orientales in Paris, and absorbed Lévi-Straussian structuralism; he taught at the University of Algiers and carried out extensive fieldwork and surveys there until 1960, when the procolonial Algiers coup forced him to flee abruptly to Paris ('liberals' like him were under threat of death). Back in France, he took up a position as an Assistant Professor at the Sorbonne and later at the University of Lille, where for the first time he read systematically and gave courses on Durkheim, Weber, Marx, Schutz, and Saussure, as well as British anthropology and American sociology, of which he was a fond consumer. Simultaneously, he continued to analyze field data collected during frequent sojourns in rural and urban Algeria during the vacations months until 1964.

* * *

It is at this time that Bourdieu became Director of Studies at the Ecole des hautes études en sciences sociales and founded the Center for European Sociology, at the behest of Aron who had received a large grant from the Ford Foundation. There, he trained and assembled over three decades a prolific team of scholars who investigated the most varied questions with (i) a focus on the relations between culture, power, and social inequality; (ii) a steadfast concern with blending rigorous theory with systematic observation, against both the empiricist tendencies of US sociology and the theoreticist bent of a French intellectual milieu forever fascinated by literary models; and (iii) full recognition of the 'double objectivity' of the social, as composed of distributions of material resources and positions, on the one hand, and of the embodied classifications through which agents symbolically construct and subjectively experience the world, on the other. Thus Bourdieu moved insensibly from anthropology into sociology, a craft he came to embrace because it seemed to him best suited to grasping the complexities of social reality – instead of keeping the latter at a safe distance, as philosophy and structuralist ethnology turned out to do. And he proceeded to mate in his research practice the rationalism of Bachelard and the materialism of Marx with Durkheim's neo-Kantian interest in symbolic forms, Weber's agonistic vision of competing *Lebensordnungen* with the phenomenologies of Husserl and Merleau-Ponty. The result was an original theoretical framework, *constructed through and for the production of new research objects*, aimed at unraveling the multisided dialectic of social and mental structures in the operation of domination.

Within a decade, Bourdieu had extended his pathbreaking analyses of the contribution of education to the perpetuation of social inequality in *The Inheritors* to the analysis of other cultural practices, with *Photography*:

A Middle-Brow Art (1965/1990) and *The Love of Art: European Art Museums and their Publics* (1966/1990), as well as a series of linked inquiries into the microcosms of religion, literature, science, philosophy, law, politics, and high fashion. In these and other works, climaxing with *The Rules of Art* (1992/1996), in which he uncovers the 'structure and genesis of the artistic field' in the times of Flaubert (in oblique response to Sartre's theory of creation in *The Idiot of the Family*), he honed and deployed the conceptual arsenal that arms the science of practice and the theory of symbolic violence that have earned him a place in the sociological pantheon. Bourdieu coined the notion of *cultural capital* and inserted it into a generalized conception of capital as congealed and convertible 'social energy'. He retrieved and reworked the Aristotelian-Thomist concept of *habitus* to elaborate a dispositional philosophy of action as springing from socially constituted and individually embodied 'schemata of perception and appreciation'. He forged the novel analytic tool of *field*, designating relatively autonomous spaces of objective forces and patterned struggles over specific forms of authority, to load the static and reified notion of structure with power and endow it with historical dynamism. And he sociologized the Husserlian concept of *doxa* to ground the 'natural attitude of everyday life' in the coincidence of social and mental structures through which the world magically comes to appear as self-evident and its makeup is put beyond the reach of debate and design.

This inseparably theoretical and empirical work culminated in Bourdieu's twin master-books, *Distinction* (1979/1984) and *The Logic of Practice* (1980/1990), which propelled him to the chair of sociology of the Collège de France in 1981. In the first volume, Bourdieu effects a Copernican revolution in the study of class and culture by abolishing the sacred frontier separating high culture from ordinary consumption. Linking the most varied realms of life, from eating and mating to aesthetics and politics, he demonstrates that judgment is not an innate gift but a socially learned ability that serves to wage denegated class struggles via the symbolic battles of everyday life and stances adopted in 'fields of cultural production'. He reveals that social space is organized by two crosscutting principles of differentiation, economic capital and cultural capital, whose distribution defines the two oppositions which undergird major lines of cleavage and conflict in advanced society, that between the dominant and dominated classes (defined by their volume of capital), and that between rival fractions of the dominant class (opposed by the composition of their capital). This theory of social space, group making, and symbolic competition is generalized in *The Logic of Practice* in which two modes of domination, personal and structural, are differentiated and their workings traced via the moulding of the 'body as analogical operator' of practice. Thence, the category of *symbolic power*, defined as the ability to conserve

or transform social reality by shaping its representations, i.e., by inculcating cognitive instruments of construction of reality that hide or highlight its inherent arbitrariness, takes center stage. Deciphering the mechanisms of symbolic violence in its varied guises is the central aim of such books as *Language and Symbolic Power* (1984/1990, in which Bourdieu takes to task structural linguistics and extends his theory of practice to encompass linguistic and discursive exchanges), *The Political Ontology of Martin Heidegger* (1988/1993, a sociological resolution of the vitriolic controversy around the politics of Heidegger's philosophy and a radical questioning of philosophy's claim to extra-social status), *The State Nobility* (1989/1995, an exploration of the social bases of technocratic domination in advanced society which adumbrates a theory of the state as 'monopolizer of the legitimate use of symbolic violence'), and, last but not least, *Masculine Domination* (1998/2001, understood as the paradigm of power wielded through cognition and misrecognition).

* * *

Although he became famous very young (in the mid-sixties with *The Inheritors*) and was handed the mantle of Parisian '*maître à penser*' a decade after the passing of Michel Foucault, Bourdieu persistently avoided – indeed, denounced – the distractions of media stardom and diligently sought to safeguard the intellectual autonomy he regarded as the vital precondition for a rigorous sociology as well as a vigorous politics. Instead of joining in the 'society games' for which French 'magazine intellectuals' are rightly renowned, he devoted his energies to constructing institutions of scientific production sheltered from the twin dependencies of state command and market rule. His editorial and publishing ventures, carried out with his long-time assistants Rosine Christin and Marie-Christine Rivière, are emblematic of this posture. For 25 years, Bourdieu directed the series '*Le sens commun*' at the prestigious house Editions de Minuit, in which he published unknown or forgotten classic works (by Durkheim, Mauss, Cassirer, Schumpeter, and Bakhtin), translations of leading contemporary authors (among them Bateson, Bernstein, Goffman, Goody, and Labov), and original research by some of France's younger sociologists and historians. The interdisciplinary journal he founded in 1975 and shepherded until his death, *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, strove likewise to denationalize social science, to break down the preconstructed notions of ordinary and scholarly commonsense, and to break out of established forms of scientific communication by commingling analysis, raw data, field documents, and pictorial illustrations, under the motto 'to display and to demonstrate'. Its rare combination of conceptual exigency, methodological reflexivity, and sociopolitical pertinence enabled it to

function as the mouthpiece of an activist science of society which reached a large readership well beyond the walls of academe (the last issue published under Bourdieu's stewardship sketches a sociological archeology of 'Votes' a few months before the pivotal French presidential and legislative campaigns of Spring 2002).

For a decade starting in 1989, Bourdieu directed *Liber*, a 'European review of books' published simultaneously in nine European languages and countries, that he created to accelerate the cross-border circulation and cross-fertilization of innovative works in social science, the humanities, and literature. *Liber* also revealed an artistic facet of his intellectual personality that found a fuller expression in his collaborations with conceptual artist Hans Haacke (in a joint book, *Free Exchange*, 1994/1995), theater playwright Philippe Adrien, and sculptor Daniel Buren – an attempt to work with filmmaker Jean-Luc Godard failed miserably due to clashing styles. Mindful of the manifold obstacles that hamper the dissemination of a sociology that aims at undermining all manner of symbolic imposition, Bourdieu also published several volumes of essays based on public lectures and seminar talks given in France and abroad – *Questions of Sociology* (1980/1993), *In Other Words* (1987/1994), and *Practical Reasons* (1994/1998) – in which he supplies readers from different countries and disciplines the tools needed to grasp the substance, interrelations, and implications of the various strands of his work.

The same *combination of scientific autonomy and civic engagement* set the policy of Raisons d'agir Editions ('Reasons to Act'), a hybrid militant-cum-scholarly press formed in the wake of the mass protests of December 1995 against the Juppé government plan to downsize the French welfare state in conformity with the European 'stability pact'. Launched by Bourdieu's blockbuster anatomy of the foibles of journalism, *On Television* (1998/1999) and building on the huge popular success of the collective tome *The Weight of the World* (1993/1996, a thousand-page socioanalysis of emerging forms of social suffering in contemporary society that was adapted for video and theater), Raisons d'agir Editions became an overnight publishing phenomenon with five best-sellers in two years and it helped broadcast Bourdieu's critique of the hidden springs and unforeseen consequences of the neoliberal revolution far and wide. Pierre Carles's award-winning documentary, *Sociology is a Martial Art* (2000), captures well how Bourdieu's social theories and public position-takings came to inform the thinking and action of countless militants and ordinary citizens involved in upsurging social movements throughout Europe ranging from ecologists and gays to homeless rights advocates, anti-racism associations, and trade unionists disarmed by the obsolescence of traditional vehicles for worker militancy. The subtle shifts in the wedding of social science and political action over 40 years are fully documented

in Bourdieu's first posthumous book, *Interventions, 1961–2001* (edited by Frank Poupeau and Thierry Discepolo, 2002).

The numerous groups of activist intellectuals that Bourdieu guided or goaded in the closing decade of the century – *inter alia* the International Parliament of Writers, the Association for Rethinking Higher Education and Research (Areser), the International Committee for the Defense of Algerian Intellectuals (Cisia), Raisons d'agir, and the General Estates of the European Social Movement – are so many small-scale incarnations of the 'collective intellectual' that he dreamed of building across disciplinary boundaries and national borders to bring the joined symbolic competencies of artists and scientists to bear on public debate and to reconstruct a viable progressive agenda true to the historic ideals of the Left betrayed by the neoliberal turn of socialist and labor parties everywhere. Against the faddish and facile prophecies of postmodernism, he believed not only in social science as a knowledge enterprise but also in sociology's capacity to inform a 'rational utopianism' needed to salvage institutions of social justice from the new barbarism of the unfettered market and withdrawing state. Bourdieu conceived of a unified social science as a 'public service' whose mission is to 'denaturalize and defatalize' the social world and to 'necessitate conducts' by disclosing the objective causes and the subjective reasons that make people do what they do, be what they are, and feel the way they feel. And to give them thereby the instruments to master the social unconscious that governs their thoughts and limits their actions, as he relentlessly tried to do his own.

Note

1. The first date given is the initial publication in French. The second date is for the publication of the English translation.

Loïc Wacquant
University of California, Berkeley
Centre de sociologie européenne, Paris

Biographical note: Loïc Wacquant is Professor of Sociology at the University of California, Berkeley and Researcher at the Centre de sociologie européenne du Collège de France. He is the author, with Pierre Bourdieu, of *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology* (1992, translated into 17 languages). His recent books include *Prisons of Poverty* (1999, translated into 13 languages), *Body and Soul: Ethnographic Notebooks of an Apprentice Boxer* (2000, translated into 6 languages), *Parias Urbanos* (2001), *Simbiosi mortale* (2002), and *Punir les pauvres* (2002).

Address: Department of Sociology, University of California, Berkeley, Berkeley CA 94720, USA. [email: loic@uclink4.berkeley.edu]