

**Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc Wacquant**

## **NEOLIBERAL NEWSPEAK : NOTES ON THE NEW PLANETARY VULGATE \***

In a matter of a few years, in all the advanced societies, employers, international officials, high-ranking civil servants, media intellectuals and high-flying journalists have all started to speak a strange Newspeak. Its vocabulary, which seems to have sprung out of nowhere, is now on everyone's lips: 'globalization' and 'flexibility', 'governance' and 'employability', 'underclass' and 'exclusion', 'new economy' and 'zero tolerance', 'communitarianism' and 'multiculturalism', not to mention their so-called postmodern cousins, 'minority', 'ethnicity', 'identity', 'fragmentation', etc.. The diffusion of this new planetary vulgate -- from which the terms 'capitalism', 'class', 'exploitation', 'domination', and 'inequality' are conspicuous by their absence, having been peremptorily dismissed under the pretext that they are obsolete and non-pertinent -- is the result of a new type of imperialism whose effects are all the more powerful and pernicious in that it is promoted not only by the partisans of the neoliberal revolution who, under cover of 'modernization', intend to remake the world by sweeping away the social and economic conquests of a century of social struggles, henceforth depicted as so many archaisms and obstacles to the emergent new order, but also by cultural producers (researchers, writers and artists) and left-wing activists who, for the vast majority of them, still think of themselves as progressives.

Like ethnic or gender domination, cultural imperialism is a form of symbolic violence that relies on a relationship of constrained communication to extort submission. In the case at hand, its particularity consists in universalizing the particularisms bound up with a singular historical experience by making them misrecognized as such and recognized as universal.<sup>1</sup> Thus, just as, in the nineteenth century, a number of so-called philosophical questions that were debated throughout Europe, such as Spengler's theme of 'decadence' or Dilthey's dichotomy between explanation and understanding, originated, as historian Fritz Ringer has demonstrated, in the historical predicaments and conflicts specific to the peculiar world of German universities,<sup>2</sup> so today many topics directly issued from the particularities and particularisms of U.S. society and universities have been imposed upon the whole planet under apparently dehistoricized guises. These commonplaces -- in the Aristotelian sense of notions or theses with which one argues but over which there is no argument -- , these undiscussed presuppositions of the

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<sup>1</sup> Let us make clear from the outset, to avoid any misunderstanding and ward off the facile accusation of 'anti-Americanism' -- a foolproof defence against any critical examination of any imposition (cultural, economic or political) originating in America -- that the United States has no monopoly over the claim to the universal. A number of other countries, France, England, Spain, Japan and Russia among them, have, at various past epochs strived -- or are still striving -- to wield forms of cultural imperialism within their own sphere of influence (especially colonial). These are comparable in every respect, except that, for the first time in history, one country now finds itself in a position to impose its point of view on the world to the whole world.

<sup>2</sup> Fritz Ringer, The Decline of the Mandarins, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969.

discussion owe most of their power to convince to the prestige of the place from whence they emanate,<sup>3</sup> and to the fact that, circulating in continuous flow from Berlin to Buenos Aires and from London to Lisbon, they are both ubiquitous and everywhere powerfully relayed by supposedly neutral agencies ranging from major international organizations (the World Bank, International Monetary Fund, European Commission and OECD), conservative think tanks (the Manhattan Institute in New York City, the Adam Smith Institute in London, the Fondation Saint-Simon in Paris, and the Deutsche Bank Foundation in Frankfurt) and philanthropic foundations, to the schools of power (Science-Po in France, the London School of Economics in England, Harvard's Kennedy School of Government in America, etc.), to the mainline mass media, which tirelessly spew out this all-purpose *lingua franca* because it is suited to giving the illusion of ultramodernism to busy editorialists and over-zealous specialists in the cultural import-export industry.

In addition to the automatic effect of the international circulation of ideas, which tends, by its very logic, to conceal their original conditions of production and signification,<sup>4</sup> the play of preliminary definitions and scholastic deductions replaces the contingency of denegated sociological necessities with the appearance of logical necessity and tends to mask the historical roots of a whole set of questions and notions -- the "efficiency" of the (free) market, the need for the recognition of (cultural) "identities" or yet the celebratory reassertion of (individual) "responsibility" -- that will be said to be philosophical, sociological, economic or political, depending on the place and moment of reception. Thus "planetarized," or globalised in the strictly geographical sense of the term, by this uprooting and, at the same time, deparicularised as a result of the illusory break effected by conceptualization, these commonplaces, which the perpetual media repetition has gradually transformed into a universal common sense, succeed in making us forget that, in many cases, they do nothing but express, in a truncated and unrecognizable form (including to those who are promoting it), the complex and contested realities of a particular historical society, tacitly constituted into the model and measure of all things: the American society of the post-Fordist and post-Keynesian era, the world's only superpower and symbolic Mecca, characterised by the deliberate dismantling of the social State and the correlative hypertrophy of the penal State, the crushing of trade unions and the dictatorship of the 'shareholder-value' conception of the firm, and their socio-logical effects: the generalization of precarious wage labor and social insecurity, turned into the privileged engine of economic activity.<sup>5</sup>

The fuzzy and muddy debate about 'multiculturalism' is a paradigmatic example. The term was recently imported into Europe to describe cultural pluralism in the civic sphere, whereas in the United

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<sup>3</sup> The historian Thomas Bender has noted how, in recent years, the products of American research have acquired 'an international stature and a drawing power' comparable to that of 'American movies, pop music, software and basketball' ('Politics, Intellect and the American University, 1945-1995', *Daedalus* 126, December 1997, pp. 1-38).

<sup>4</sup> P. Bourdieu, 'Les Conditions sociales de la circulation internationale des idées', *Romantische Zeitschrift für Literaturgeschichte*, 14, 1-2, 1990, pp. 1-10.

<sup>5</sup> Cf J.F. Handler and Y. Hasenfeld, *We the Poor People: Work, Poverty and Welfare*, New York: Twentieth Century Fund, 1997; L. Wacquant, *Les Prisons de la misère*, Paris, Editions Raisons d'agir, 1999 (trans. *Prisons of Poverty*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2001); R. Freeman, ed., *Working Under Different Rules*, New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1994; R. Milkman, *Farewell to the Factory*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1997, and L. Mishel et al, *The State of Working America, 1998-1999*, New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1999.

States, it refers, in the very movement whereby it obfuscates it, to the continued ostracization of Blacks and to the crisis of the national mythology of the ‘American dream’ of ‘equal opportunity for all’, correlative of the bankruptcy of public education at the very time when competition for cultural capital is intensifying and class inequalities are growing at a dizzying pace.<sup>6</sup> The locution ‘multicultural’ conceals this crisis by artificially restricting it to the university microcosm alone and by expressing it on an ostensibly ‘ethnic’ register, when what is really at stake is not the incorporation of marginalized cultures in the academic canon but access to the instruments of (re)production of the middle and upper classes, chief among them the university, in the context of active and massive disengagement by the State. American ‘multiculturalism’ is neither a concept or a theory, nor a social or political movement -- even though it claims to be all those things at the same time. It is a screen-discourse, whose intellectual status is the product of a gigantic effect of national and international allodoxia, which deceives both those who are party to it and those who are not. It is also an American discourse, even though it thinks of itself and presents itself as a universal discourse, to the extent that it expresses the contradictions specific to the predicament of American academics: cut off from all access to the public sphere and subjected to a high degree of competitive differentiation in their professional milieu, U.S. professors have nowhere to invest their political libido but in campus squabbles dressed up as conceptual battle royals.<sup>7</sup> This is to say that, wherever it is exported, multiculturalism spreads these three vices of American national thought: 1) groupism, which reifies the social divisions canonized by the State bureaucracy into a principle of knowledge and political claims-making; 2) populism, which replaces the analysis of the structures and mechanisms of domination with a celebration of the culture of the dominated and their ‘point of view’, elevated to the rank of a proto-theory in action; and, finally, 3) moralism, which thwarts the application of a sound rational materialism in the analysis of the social and economic world and, in the present case, condemns us to a debate without end or effects on the need to ‘recognize identities’ when, in the triste reality of everyday, the problem simply does not lie there:<sup>8</sup> while philosophers revel in scholastic discussions of ‘recognition’ and ‘identity’, hundreds of thousands of children from the subordinate classes and ethnic groups are rejected from primary school simply because there is no room for them in the crumbling establishments of the major cities (this year 25,000 of them were excluded in the city of

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<sup>6</sup> D. Massey and N. Denton, American Apartheid, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993; Economic Policy Institute, Beware the U.S. Model, Washington, DC: EPI, 1995; Jennifer Hochschild, Facing up to the American Dream: Race, Class and the Soul of the Nation, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996.

<sup>7</sup> Any reader who would doubt this characterization will be convinced of its accuracy by consulting any one of the textbooks and anthologies on the subject that have proliferated in recent years to serve the lower segments of the U.S. teaching market, see, for example, C. Willett, ed., Theorizing Multiculturalism: A Guide to the Current Debate, New York: Blackwell, 1998.

<sup>8</sup> The diversity of cultures is no more a product of our century than the globalization of material and symbolic exchanges, since it is coextensive with human history, as Emile Durkheim and Marcel Mauss pointed out long ago in their ‘Note on the notion of Civilisation’ (Année sociologique, 12, 1913, pp. 46-50; in translation in L. Wacquant, ed., Marcel Mauss on Ritual, Exchange, and Social Transformation, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, in press). Mauss captured this phenomenon with the audacious notion of ‘internation’, unknown to latter-day theorists of globalization (see M. Mauss, ‘La Nation’, Année sociologique, 3ème série 5, 1953-54, pp. 20-68; also in translation in Marcel Mauss on Ritual, Exchange, and Social Transformation).

Los Angeles alone), and one in ten youths from households earning less than 15,000 dollars per year has access to a university campus, compared to 94% of the children of families with an income exceeding 100,000 dollars.

The same demonstration could be made about the highly polysemic notion of 'globalization', whose upshot -- if not function -- is to dress up the effects of American imperialism in the trappings of cultural ecumenicism or economic fatalism and to make a transnational relation of economic power appear like a natural necessity. Through a symbolic reversal based on the naturalization of the schemata of neo-liberal thought, whose domination has become complete over the past twenty years thanks to the zealous efforts of conservative think tanks and their allies in the political and journalistic fields,<sup>9</sup> the reshaping of social relations and cultural practices after the U.S. template, which has been forced upon advanced societies through the pauperization of the State, the commodification of public goods and the generalization of job insecurity, is nowadays accepted with resignation as the inevitable outcome of national evolution, when it is not celebrated with sheeplike enthusiasm. An empirical analysis of the trajectory of the advanced economies over the longue durée suggests, in contrast, that 'globalisation' is not a new phase of capitalism, but a 'rhetoric' invoked by governments in order to justify their voluntary surrender to the financial markets and their conversion to a fiduciary conception of the firm. Far from being -- as we are constantly told -- the inevitable result of the growth of foreign trade, deindustrialization, growing inequality and the retrenchment of social policies are the result of domestic political decisions that reflect the tipping of the balance of class forces in favour of the owners of capital.<sup>10</sup>

By imposing on the rest of the world categories of perception homologous to its social structures, America is refashioning the entire world in its image: the mental colonization that operates through the dissemination of these false-true concepts can only lead to a sort of generalized and even spontaneous 'Washington consensus', as one can readily observe in the sphere of economics, philanthropy or management training.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, this double discourse which, although founded on belief, mimics science by superimposing the appearance of reason --and especially economic or political reason -- on the social fantasies of the dominant, is endowed with the performative power to bring into being the very realities it claims to describe, according to the principle of the self-fulfilling prophecy: lodged in the minds of political or economic decision-makers and their publics, it is used as an instrument of construction of public and private policies and at the same time to evaluate those very

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<sup>9</sup> K. Dixon, Les Evangélistes du marché, Paris: Raisons d'agir Editions, 1998.

<sup>10</sup> On 'globalization' as an 'American project' aimed at imposing the 'shareholder-value' conception of the firm, see N. Fligstein, 'Rhétorique et réalités de la "mondialisation",' Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales, 119, September 1997, pp. 36-47, and idem, The Architecture of the Market, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2001. A more detailed argumentation on the dissemination of the notion of the 'underclass', the highly peculiar U.S. conception of 'race' and the debate between 'liberals' and 'communitarians' can be found in P. Bourdieu and L. Wacquant, 'The Cunning of Imperialist Reason', Theory, Culture, and Society, 16-1, February 1999, pp. 41-57. On the 'globalization' of U.S. policing and penal policy (the so-called 'broken-window theory', zero-tolerance, the imprisonment of drug offenders, etc.), see L. Wacquant, 'How Penal Common Sense Comes to Europeans: Notes on the Transatlantic Diffusion of Neoliberal Doxa', European Societies, 1-3, Fall 1999, pp. 319-352.

<sup>11</sup> See the articles in the dossier 'America in Everybody's Heads', Le Monde diplomatique, 554, May 2000, pp. 4-11.

policies. Like the mythologies of the age of science, the new planetary vulgate rests on a series of oppositions and equivalences which support and reinforce one another to depict the contemporary transformations advanced societies are undergoing, economic disinvestment by the State and reinforcement of its police and penal components, deregulation of financial flows and relaxation of administrative controls on the employment market, reduction of social protection and moralizing celebration of ‘individual responsibility’, as in turn benign, necessary, ineluctable or desirable, according to the oppositions set out in the following ideological schema:

### Summary table of the elementary forms of neoliberal thought

<i>STATE</i> -----globalization ---->	<i>MARKET</i>
constraint	freedom
closed	open
rigid	flexible
immobile, fossilized	dynamic, moving, self-transforming
past, outdated	future, novelty
stasis	growth
group, lobby, holism, collectivism	individual, individualism
uniformity, artificiality	diversity, authenticity
autocratic (‘totalitarian’)	democratic

The imperialism of neo-liberal reason finds its supreme intellectual accomplishment in two new figures of the cultural producer that are increasingly crowding the autonomous and critical intellectual born of the Enlightenment tradition out of the public scene.<sup>12</sup> One is the expert who, in the shadowy corridors of ministries or company headquarters, or in the isolation of think tanks, prepares highly technical documents, preferably couched in economic or mathematical language, used to justify policy choices made on decidedly non-technical grounds (the perfect example being plans to ‘save’ retirement schemes from the supposed threat posed by the increase in life expectancy, where impeccable demographic demonstrations are used to railroad privatization plans that consecrate the power of shareholders and shift risk to wage earners through pensions funds).<sup>13</sup> The other is the communication consultant to the prince -- a defector from the academic world entered in the service of the dominant whose mission is to give an academic veneer to the political projects of the new State and business nobility, and whose planetary prototype is without contest the British sociologist Anthony Giddens, a Cambridge University professor recently appointed Director of the London School of Economics and father of ‘structuration theory’ -- a scholastic synthesis of various sociological and philosophical traditions decisively wrenched out of their context and thus ideally suited to the task of academicized sociodicy.

<sup>12</sup> P. Bourdieu, ‘The Corporatism of the Universal: The Role of Intellectuals in the Modern World,’ *Telos*, 81, Fall 1989, pp. 99-110.

<sup>13</sup> Frédéric Lordon, *Fonds de pension, piège à cons? Mirage de la démocratie actionnariale*, Paris, Editions Raisons d’agir, 2000.

One may see the perfect illustration of the cunning of imperialist reason is the fact that it is England -- which, for historical, cultural and linguistic reasons, stands in an intermediary, neutral position (in the etymological sense of ‘neither/nor’ or ‘either/or’) between the United States and continental Europe -- that has supplied the world with a bicephalus Trojan horse, with one political head and the other intellectual, in the dual persona of Tony Blair and Anthony Giddens. On the strength of his ties to politicians (as indicated by the glowing blurbs by Anthony Blair, Romano Prodi and Fernando Cardoso on the back of his latest book, entitled, perhaps ironically, The Third Way and its Critics) Anthony Giddens has emerged as the globe-trotting apostle of a ‘Third Way’ which, in his own words, which must here be cited literally,<sup>14</sup> ‘takes a positive attitude towards globalization’; ‘tries (sic) to respond to changing patterns of inequality’, but begins by warning that ‘the poor today are not the same as the poor of the past’ and that ‘likewise, the rich are not the same as they used to be’; accepts the idea that ‘existing social welfare systems, and the broader structure of the State, are the source of problems, not only the means of resolving them’; ‘emphasizes that social and economic policy are intrinsically connected,’ in order to better assert that ‘social spending has to be assessed in terms of its consequences for the economy as a whole’; and, finally ‘concerns itself with mechanisms of exclusion at the bottom and the top (sic)’, convinced as it is that ‘redefining inequality in relation to exclusion at both levels is consistent with a dynamic conception of inequality’. The masters of the economy, and the other ‘excluded at the top’, can sleep in peace: they have found their Pangloss.

\* Forthcoming in Radical Philosophy, 108, January 2001.

This is the expanded translation (by David Macey and Loïc Wacquant) of an article that originally appeared in French in Le Monde Diplomatique, 554, May 2000, pp. 6-7, in a special dossier on “America in Everyone’s Heads.” It was published simultaneously in German, Italian, Portuguese, Spanish, Brazilian, Japanese and Greek, but not English since, curiously, The Guardian chose not to include this dossier in its monthly reprint of Le Monde Diplomatique.

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<sup>14</sup> The phrases that follow are taken from the catalogue of textbook-style definitions of his theories and political views given by Anthony Giddens in the FAQ (Frequently Asked Questions) section of his London School of Economics web site: <[www.lse.ac.uk/Giddens/FAQs.htm](http://www.lse.ac.uk/Giddens/FAQs.htm)>.