

## **In memoriam: Pierre Bourdieu 1930–2002**

On January 23, 2002 sociology lost one of the most influential French thinkers of our time, Pierre Bourdieu. His death, following a brief bout with cancer, prompted public acknowledgment from all sectors of French society ranging from intellectuals and grassroots activists to the French president and prime minister. Much of the press throughout Western Europe (and several U.S. newspapers) eulogized his death with comments from leading intellectuals of many countries. Within professional sociology his productivity was prolific and consequential. An International Sociological Association survey placed *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (1979)<sup>1</sup> as the sixth most important social scientific work of the twentieth century.<sup>2</sup> *Contemporary Sociology* (May, 1996) reviewed *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (1972) as one of the ten most influential books of the past 25 years. The *Social Science Citation Index* shows Bourdieu to have become the most frequently cited French social scientist since the early 1990s. Thus, his intellectual influence had become thoroughly international, including Asia and particularly Latin America, as well as Western Europe and North America.

Author of some forty books and five-hundred articles, Bourdieu founded and guided the journal, *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales* for over 25 years, the collection of books (*Le sens commun*) with Editions de Minuit for over 25 years and in 1996 started his own publishing house, Editions Liber-Raisons d'Agir. His appeal, however, was not limited to the profession of sociology but was much broader, particularly in the last several years, as he came to play an important and highly visible role of public intellectual in France and Western Europe. Given the number of close associates that worked with him over the years and the much larger network of social scientists drawing direct influence in their work from him, it is no exaggeration to say that Bourdieu founded a veritable school of sociology, the most important in France since Emile Durkheim.

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### **Bourdieu's career**

Pierre Bourdieu was born in 1930 into a lower-middle-class family; his father was a small farmer who became a postman in the village of Lasseube in Southwestern France. He spent his early years in this remote rural region of Béarn and spoke the regional dialect. A particularly gifted and industrious student, he first entered the Lycée de Pau (1941–1947), then the prestigious and academically selective Parisian Lycée Louis-Le Grand (1948–1951). In 1951, he entered the academically elite Ecole Normale Supérieure (ENS) in Paris where he prepared the agrégation in philosophy. Jacques Derrida was a classmate. Louis Althusser taught there. Alain Touraine preceded Bourdieu at the ENS in 1945 and Raymond Boudon followed in 1954. He simultaneously took courses at the Faculty of Letters in Paris (1951–1954).

ENS is known for cultivating an abundance of *esprit critique*, and in this Bourdieu excelled. Little escaped his critical flair: peers, professors, the school itself. Of humble social and cultural origins, Bourdieu experienced ENS not only as a miraculous survivor of strenuous academic selection, but also as a cultural and social outsider. This personal experience of alienation within French academe motivated him to submit French schooling – indeed all institutions – to critical examination. Indeed, one finds Bourdieu normalizing this critical disposition as a desirable – if not necessary – ingredient for the successful pursuit of sociology itself. It is striking that Bourdieu's self-perception of being an outsider to the French intellectual world informs, throughout his life, his sharply critical posture toward this very world in which his phenomenal rise to intellectual renown occurred.

After finishing the agrégation in philosophy in 1955, Bourdieu, like so many agrégés before him, went to the provinces to teach philosophy at the secondary level. He began teaching at the Lycée Banville in Moulins (1954–1955) just outside of Paris. But the war with Algeria intervened, and he was called into military service in Algeria (1958–1960). Colonial Algeria and the war for liberation were important to Bourdieu's career for it was there that he actually began his social scientific work as a “self-taught” ethnologist among the Kabyle peasant communities. His first book, *Sociologie de l'Algérie* (1958), several subsequent books and papers, and his early and revised formulations of his theory of practices in *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (1972) and *The Logic of Practice* (1980) were directly informed by this first field-work experience.

Like many French intellectuals, Bourdieu opposed the French colonial war effort and for this reason was eventually obliged to leave Algiers and return to Paris. There he assumed an appointment as one of Raymond Aron's teaching assistants at the Sorbonne. He taught at the Sorbonne from 1961 to 1962 and then at the Faculty of Letters at the University of Lille through 1964. In 1964 he became one of the directors of studies at the Ecoles des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales (EHESS) in Paris. He refused to complete the state doctorate degree, which is the standard requirement for those seeking chairs in the French universities. Bourdieu made his early career in research centers and seminar rooms rather than university lecture halls.

For a time, Raymond Aron was an important institutional sponsor as Bourdieu assumed direction of Aron's research center in 1964. Sharp differences soon emerged after the 1964 publication of *The Inheritors*, in which Bourdieu, along with his co-author Jean-Claude Passeron, advanced stinging criticism of the class-based character of the French university population and of student culture. He soon broke with Aron in disagreement over the 1968 French university crisis and set up his own research center. In 1970 Bourdieu and Passeron would publish their landmark book *Reproduction: In Education, Society and Culture*, which has become one of the contemporary classics in the sociology of education.

Extensive surveys of French consumer practices, cultural tastes, and lifestyles and further analysis of his Algerian data in the 1970s culminated in two major books, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (1979) and *The Logic of Practice* (1980), which helped Bourdieu gain entry in 1981 into the Collège de France, the pinnacle of French intellectual life. *Distinction* was also a commercial success that brought him considerable media attention. The new public notoriety, however, did not diminish his research productivity. The 1980s brought to fruition his cumulative empirical and critical study of the French university and the system of the *grandes écoles*. His study of the Paris university faculties and professorate culminated in the 1984 publication of *Homo Academicus*. The research project on the *grandes écoles*, begun in the early 1970s, finally was published in *The State Nobility* in 1989. Near the end of the decade he began a new research project on public housing policy in France and that led to several articles in *Actes* and culminated in the 2000 publication of *les Structures sociales de l'économie*.

The early 1990s brought further research and publication successes. In 1992, he published *The Rules of Art*, which assembles his work on Flaubert – a sort of sociological response to Sartre’s work on Flaubert – and the rise of artistic and literary fields in France. The 1993 publication of *The Field of Cultural Production* brought together several major essays on art, literature, and culture that he had written over the 1968–1987 period. The research on housing was followed in the early 1990s by a massive interviewing project of lower-middle-class individuals on the theme of social suffering and exclusion. This research led to the 1993 publication of *The Weight of the World*, which was also a commercial success. His call for a critical and reflexive practice of sociological investigation would find expression in 1992 with the widely read *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology* (coauthored with Loïc Wacquant). In 1993 he received the CNRS (Centre National de Recherche Scientifique) Gold Medal for outstanding contributions to scientific research. (This prestigious award is seldom given to someone in the social sciences – Lévi-Strauss received it in 1968.) Several subsequent and important books include *On Television* (1996), *Pascalian Meditations* (1997), *Masculine Domination* (1998), and *Acts of Resistance* (1998). In late 2001, *The Science of Science and Reflexivity* appeared in French and three more books completed just prior to his death will soon appear. The most complete listing of his works can be found at the following web site: <http://www.iwp.uni-linz.ac.at/lxe/sekktf/bb/>

### **The public intellectual**

While an extraordinarily productive sociologist, Bourdieu also became in the 1990s, following the death of Foucault (1984), the leading public intellectual in France. Prior to the 1980s and 1990s, Bourdieu rarely made public political declarations in the tradition of Parisian intellectuals. His efforts during the 1960s and 1970s had focused on developing a professional sociology as distinct from the academic sociology taught in the universities and the media-oriented pop sociology that flourished in French intellectual circles. He wanted to transform sociology into a rigorous research enterprise that would be critical though not prophetic, theoretical though empirically researchable, and scientific though not positivist. To that end he devoted his energies to creating a research center, a sociological journal and a network of researchers that would institutionalize and legitimize his vision for sociological inquiry. Indeed, Bourdieu’s silence during the May 1968

student uprising was conspicuous, because virtually all other leading French sociologists at the time took public positions regarding the student movement.

Yet, even Bourdieu's earliest work has a political dimension. While drawing a sharp distinction between politics and the scientific work of sociology, Bourdieu insists on the political relevance of sociology. For him, sociology is to be the study of power. Since effective exercise of power requires legitimation, the practice of sociological research has the effect of unmasking and debunking hidden, taken-for-granted power relations shaping social life. His earliest Algerian work on peasant attitudes toward time spoke critically of French colonialism and efforts to modernize traditional communities. *The Inheritors* contributed to the growing critical consciousness of class inequalities in French higher education during the May 1968 student movement. *Reproduction* informed a generation of labor leaders and activists as well as students, teachers, and sociologists of the subtle inequalities in education. But not until after entry into the Collège de France in 1981, and particularly after the death of Foucault (1984), did Bourdieu begin more frequent direct political involvements. Armed with both the intellectual prestige of the Collège de France and the scientific legitimacy of the 1993 CNRS Gold Medal award, by which the French scientific community gave special recognition to sociology as a science and Bourdieu as its most recognized spokesperson, Bourdieu could intervene politically with an authority not available to him in earlier years. And intervene he did. He began to sign more public declarations, participate in demonstrations, grant more interviews, appear on television, and join political protest groups. He became France's leading public intellectual.

Change in his institutional position only partially explains Bourdieu's rapid ascendancy to the public intellectual position that seemed to many to be in line with that held by Sartre and Foucault before him. The attack against welfare state provision by Thatcher in England and Reagan in the United States spread to Western Europe. To his considerable disgust, even the Socialists in France began to advocate market-oriented reforms that would reduce both the size and responsibilities of the welfare state. Though traditionally critical of state power, Bourdieu came to view the new era of globalization and fiscal constraints on state spending as even more threatening to the well-being of communities. His research in *The Weight of the World* (1993) undoubtedly sharpened his awareness of and gave voice to disenfranchised and

marginalized individuals and groups who experienced directly the dislocation, precariousness, and constraints imposed by reduced state social services. The tremendous success of *The Weight of the World*, in terms of sales, public debate and media attention it provoked, brought to Bourdieu a new level of visibility as a public intellectual. This success opened up for Bourdieu the possibility of a new and effective political role based on his scientific authority.

While a long-time critic of media-oriented intellectuals (whom he dismissed as superficial), Bourdieu became increasingly convinced that the marketing orientation of cultural and political life had so advanced that it had become virtually impossible for alternative viewpoints to gain a fair public hearing. He viewed the arena of public debate as increasingly monopolized by technocrats and journalists pushing out artists, writers, and scientists. The voices of grassroots activists, immigrants, the unemployed, and labor activists were too easily dismissed as “irrational” and “unrealistic” in the climate of globalization and austerity that were justified in the neo-liberal language of financial necessities. Bourdieu came to believe in the urgency of his role as a critical intellectual and social scientist to speak forcefully against this neo-liberal discourse that he believed has come to exercise a powerful censoring effect on public debate. He denounced as the “neo-liberal scourge” the euphemized language of financial rigor, flexibility, and efficiency as harboring the market interests of dominant and privileged groups. His sharply focused criticism of neo-liberal bias in media journalism in his little “red book” *On Television* (1996) was a major publishing success and provoked sharp debate over the role of the mass media in France. Yet, Bourdieu believed that his more direct political involvements did not compromise his rigorous and objective practice of sociology as a science. In his words, the challenge was to “think politics without thinking politically.”

Finally, I should note that Bourdieu’s unexpected death is grieved not only within the scholarly and intellectual milieu. Even more than Foucault before him, Bourdieu had touched the political sentiments of thousands of grassroots activists, labor leaders, immigrants, peasants, teachers, transit employees, homeless advocates, gays and lesbians – a wide range of individuals and groups who benefitted least from the triumphal forces of globalization and privatization of the public sector. He brought to their diverse concerns a sense that within the distant and august halls of French science and high culture they had been heard and understood and their causes had been defended by one, Pierre Bourdieu.

**Notes**

1. Publication dates are for the original French versions of the cited works.
2. In addition, *The Logic of Practice* was ranked 40th and *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture* 48th. The only other French thinkers to make it into the top 50 were Emile Durkheim and Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (16th).

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