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“Everything is social”: in memoriam, Pierre Bourdieu (1930-2002)

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In memoriam Pierre Bourdieu (1930-2002)

Pierre Bourdieu died on 23 January 2002, after struggle with cancer. Born on 1 August 1930, he was the grandson of a sharecropper and son of a farmer who later turned postman in the Béarn village of Lasseube. Talent and effort, along with state scholarships, propelled him to the apex of French culture and international social science, but Bourdieu never (mis)took academic success and professional honor for simple evidence of self-worth or proof of meritocracy.

Bourdieu was at the top of his class at the *École Normale Supérieure*, the central institution for consecration of French intellectuals, yet he never felt the unselfconscious belonging of those born to wealth, cultural pedigree and elite accents. Instead, he developed an extraordinary capacity for critical social analysis and epistemic reflexivity. His sense of bodily insertion into the competitive and insular universe of French academe encouraged his revitalization of the Aristotelian-Thomist notion of *habitus*. His awareness of what his classmates and teachers did not see because it felt natural to them informed his accounts of the centrality of *doxa* and misrecognition in social domination. Though educated in philosophy, Bourdieu embraced sociology precisely in order to make empirical research a tool for breaking through ordinary consciousness to achieve truer knowledge about a social world usually considered too mundane for philosophical attention.

In 1955, Bourdieu was sent to do military service during the “pacification” of Algeria. He then stayed on to teach at the University of Algiers and to conduct research in Kabylia and with Berber-speaking migrants in Algiers, producing his first book, *The Algerians*, in 1958 (we give dates of original French publication but English titles where translations are available). A series of further books on Algeria focused on work and workers, the crisis of agriculture, and the clash between indigenous culture and colonial and market power. Confrontation with the Algerian war, and with the transformations wrought by colonialism and capitalism, left a searing personal mark on Bourdieu, shaping his intellectual orientation and commitment to the principle that research must matter for the lives of others. It was also in Algeria that Bourdieu learned to fuse ethnography and statistics, ambitious theory and painstaking observation, and crafted a distinctive approach to social inquiry aimed at informing progressive politics through scientific production.

Field data from Kabylia also supplied the foundation for Bourdieu’s theoretical innovations in *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (1972) and *The Logic of Practice* (1980). Influenced by Lévi-Strauss, he nonetheless sought a way to reach beyond structuralism’s static character and more generally beyond the dualisms of structure and action, objective and subjective, social physics and social semiology. For this he drew on the materialist side of Durkheim and Marx but also on phenomenology and later ethnomethodology, on Wittgenstein and linguistic analysis, on Cassirer’s neo-Kantianism, and on the work of his own teachers Bachelard, Canguilhem, and Vuillemin. He famously approached human social action as simultaneously “structured” and “structuring” and the socialized body as “analogical operator of practice”. Through empirically-based reflexive analysis, he sought to establish the conditions for both objective and subjective perspectives, and for avoiding the pitfalls of what he later termed

“the scholastic bias” – the tendency of academics to project their own (hermeneutic) relation to the social world into the minds of the people they observe.

Pursuit of a reflexive grounding for social science was the central motivation for Bourdieu’s sociology of intellectuals, notably in “The Scientific Field” (1975) and the books *Homo Academicus* (1984) and *The State Nobility* (1989). The other motivation was Bourdieu’s acute interest in social inequality and the ways in which it is masked and perpetuated. His analyses of symbolic power and cultural capital are among his most influential. Already prominent in his work on Algeria, this theme became central when he turned his attention to France -- notably in an early study of matrimonial strategies in his native Béarn published in 1963 (and soon to appear in a book left in press at his passing, *Le Bal des célibataires*). In 1964 he published *The Inheritors* and in 1970 *Reproduction in Education, Culture, and Society* (1970). Both books examined the ways in which apparently meritocratic educational institutions reproduced and legitimated social inequalities, for example by transforming differences in family background or familiarity with bourgeois language into differences in performance on academic tests or making the culturally arbitrary appear as unquestionable truth. Bourdieu’s exploration of the different forms of power later blossomed into a theory of the relations among economic, cultural, social and symbolic capital in class reproduction (especially in *The State Nobility*).

Bourdieu’s best known book, *Distinction* (1979), addressed these themes in an effort to overcome the opposition of objectivist (Marxist) and subjectivist (Weberian) theories of class. It was also a response to Kant’s Third Critique. Much as Durkheim had sought to challenge individualistic explanation of social facts in *Suicide*, so Bourdieu sought in *Distinction* to uncover the social roots and organization of judgment and taste. Sociology thus gave him a means to rethink major philosophical themes by means of empirical observation and analyses rooted in “a practical sense of theoretical things” rather than through theoretical disquisition. His most important exception to this approach came with *Pascalian Meditations* (1997), in which he disclosed the epistemological mooring of his work in “historical rationalism” and explicated his philosophical anthropology (anchored by a dispositional theory of action and a conception of human beings as forever thirsting for recognition).

Bourdieu’s approach to culture and power drew also on a series of influential empirical studies of art and artistic institutions, starting in the mid-sixties with *Photography: A Middle-Brow Art* (1964; years later Bourdieu’s own impressive photographs from the Algeria became the subjects of museum retrospectives). His quantitative research on museums and their publics published as *The Love of Art* (1966), and extensive studies of the religious, intellectual, philosophical, academic, and juridical fields. In these and other investigations, he laid the basis for a general theory of “fields” as differentiated social microcosms operating as spaces of objective forces and arenas of struggle over value which refract and transmute external determinations and interests. His deepest and most sustained work on fields, as well as his most historical research, focused on literature and was capped by his masterwork *The Rules of Art* (1992), a study of the symbolic revolution wrought in literature by Flaubert, Baudelaire and others. Bourdieu’s greatest unfinished work is arguably its companion study,

a sociogenetic dissection of Manet and the transformation of the field of painting in which he played a pivotal role.

Bourdieu approached sociology as practical activity centered on research, not simply a body of scholastic principles—a perspective he shared in teaching and in *The Craft of Sociology* (1968). He downplayed the idea of individual talent and stressed collective work and socially organized innovation. Beginning in his early studies in Algeria, he often collaborated with other scholars, including Abdelmalek Sayad, Alain Darbel, Jean-Claude Passeron and many others. *The Weight of the World*, a massive ethnography of social suffering in France, lists 22 collaborators (with regret we refrain from listing Bourdieu's co-authors here). The creation and publication of such work was organized through ethnographic dissection of social suffering in contemporary France, the Center for European Sociology; the journal, *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*; the European review of books, *Liber*. At the same time, Bourdieu was a tireless teacher at the École des Hautes Études (from 1964) and at the Collège de France where he was elected in 1981 to the chair of sociology held earlier by Marcel Mauss and Raymond Aron.

Though extraordinarily prominent in France, Bourdieu resisted the prophetic role of the “total intellectual,” as he referred to Sartre. He sought instead to influence public debate mainly through rigorous scientific research. Nonetheless, during the clashes of May 1968, some students literally carried *The Inheritors* onto the barricades. As France's foremost public intellectual after the passing of Foucault, Bourdieu defended the homeless, illegal immigrants, anti-racist activists, and precarious workers. In the 1980s, he produced two signal reports on the future of education at the request of the Socialist government. Forever wary of official politics, however, he sought to bring academics, trade unions and social activists together in nonparty forms of social intervention suited to an era in which science and the media play a central role in social domination. He organized a network of progressive social scientists into the group *Raisons d'agir* (“Reasons to act”) and launched a publishing house of the same name to bring sociological analyses of contemporary civic issues to a broader public. In first book, *On Television* (1996), Bourdieu addressed how the media undercut public discourse by reducing it to “cultural fast-food.” Especially in the last dozen years, Bourdieu worked to protect the achievements of the social struggles of the twentieth century -- pensions, job security, open access to higher education and other provisions of the social state -- against budget cuts and other attacks in the name of free markets and international competition. In the process, he became one of the world's most famous critics of neoliberal globalization, a theme central to his two short volumes, *Acts of Resistance* (1998) and *Firing Back* (2001) and to his forthcoming volume of political essays, *Interventions, 1961-1991*. In alliance with Gunther Grass, Hans Haacke and others he sought to join progressive intellectuals in a new internationalism.

Though remarkably famous — apt to be recognized in the street or cafes, especially after he was featured in the award-winning film, *Sociology is a Martial Art* (2000) — Bourdieu was a very private and surprisingly shy person. He loathed academic pomp and official honors. He steadfastly refused to appear on television and once expressed shock at the willingness of Americans to talk publicly about their marriages, sexual mores and personal habits — even while they refused to have open political arguments. The French were the opposite, he said,

and he might have meant himself personally. He sheltered his family life and felt acutely the sacrifices public life demanded of time with his wife and three sons. For decades he quietly supported students from Kabylia in the pursuit of higher education, a fact that speaks not only to his personal generosity and sense of obligation, but to his faith that, for all their complicity in social reproduction, education and science remain our best hope for reducing domination. He will be missed deeply both by those who knew him well as well as by those, in and out of the social sciences, whose knowledge and vision of the world were transformed by his work.

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