



Pierre Bourdieu: from the study to the street

Angela McRobbie

The move of the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1930-2002) from academic analysis towards vigorous public engagement was a refreshing reversal of a familiar trend. It was also characteristic of an intellectual whose interest in power, value, “symbolic violence” and the quality of media and political culture is increasingly relevant to the way we live. A London-based colleague, working in an environment less receptive to Bourdieu’s radicalism, pays warm tribute.

“**P**ierre Bourdieu est mort”. It was his prolific and increasingly radical scholarship, not any attractions of image or temperament, that guaranteed Pierre Bourdieu’s death to be the front-page headline in *Le Monde* last month. A figure once esteemed solely by his professional colleagues – he had studied with Louis Althusser in the early 1950s, and his proposer to the chair of sociology at the College de France in 1982 was Michel Foucault – gradually won through to public acclaim and respect by the strength of his ideas alone.

It is a story with particular resonance from the perspective of London, which Bourdieu last visited just over a year ago when he spoke at the Institute of Contemporary Arts to mark the translation of his eight hundred-page volume *The Weight of the World*. (This 1993 study, *La misere du Monde* in the original, of the ordinary travails of disadvantaged persons across France

in their own words, sold over one hundred and twenty thousand copies in France alone.) Bourdieu was joined on the panel by the playwright David Edgar, and policy advisor to the British prime minister, Geoff Mulgan.

Bourdieu was no doubt delighted that his study was so well received by Geoff Mulgan, who indicated its enormous value to the British government’s Social Exclusion Unit; but in characteristic form Bourdieu then went on to deal a savage blow to all such policy units and think tanks for their piecemeal approach to social policy and their preference for American style ‘good ideas’ which could almost be drawn out of a hat. Mulgan winced, not just because of the swipe at New Labour but also because on this occasion Bourdieu was able to command the full moral and political high ground.

David Edgar made the point that the days were long gone when the left and liberals recognised the heroism of poverty, the daily dramas of



trying to make ends meet, of stretching a budget to allow for some minuscule pleasures. The evening ended with Bourdieu – who used to invoke “the Left of the Left” as his constituency – indicating the need for a new left political party.

This direction from sociology into the mainstream of political debate reflected Bourdieu’s role in recent years. More often the opposite is the case, with youthful radicalism giving way to a retreat into the academy. For Bourdieu it was the dangers of French political life – following the pathway of America and the UK in the embracing of free market values, de-regulation and the running down of the public sector – which forced him onto the streets in the strikes and demonstrations of the last few years.

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This also encouraged him to produce an endless stream of articles and monographs on, among other things, the growth of ‘polling’ and focus groups in French politics, which emulates the American model of ‘marketing’ policies in the right kind of way to attract the electorate as though they were customers, not citizens.

Bourdieu also wrote forcibly about changes in the media where a critical agenda has been abandoned in favour of “demagogy and subordination to commercial values” and where entertainment has become the touchstone for journalistic practice.

Insight, quality and relevance versus fashion

Pierre Bourdieu was undoubtedly the most important sociologist of the post-war period. He knew and debated with all the leading French intellectuals of his era. There is no doubt that he often felt that to be a sociologist was a

secondary status in comparison to the brilliant stars of French philosophy. On the other hand there are many like myself who would dispute the ‘foundational’ claims of philosophy.

Bourdieu himself was the sociologist of structures, of ‘fields’, of taste, and especially of hierarchies. He demonstrated throughout his career how power works to sustain existing social relations including those connected with knowledge itself. From the wallpaper we choose, to the books we read, to the qualifications we

aim for, to the election of vice-chancellors, Bourdieu was able to explain, with recourse to empirical and conceptual research, how these seemingly naturalised processes were often the result of “symbolic violence”.

I only met Bourdieu once, at the ICA event mentioned above, but I wrote several pieces for his ‘literary supplement’ entitled *Liber* – an offshoot from his many publishing ventures.

Just a couple of weeks ago I thought to email him to let him know how the heartland of British television, the so-called ‘makeover TV’ programmes dedicated to homes, gardens, food and clothing, were vivid re-enactments of his most famous study of taste first published in France in 1976. Indeed I wanted to get on the Eurostar with a clutch of videos of the latest taste presenter and cultural legitimator Lawrence Llewellyn Bowen telling the tasteless how they could do it better. Now it is too late for that and I’m so sorry.

Like most great intellectuals, Bourdieu provoked and outraged. In the last few years he typecast Anthony Giddens as the pangloss of neoliberalism and British Cultural Studies as an offshoot of multi-national publishing corporations, neither of which endeared him to overworked and beleaguered UK academics who



thought themselves to be endlessly defending public sector values.

But this fraternal concern – for that is what at root it was – is even more reason for us to mark his death as the passing away of one of the foremost world intellectuals of the post-war period. That the wider British public know so little about Pierre Bourdieu says a good deal about the decline of ideas and the role of thinkers in public life in my own country. But although he never become fashionable in the Anglo-Saxon world in his lifetime, his readership will grow, I believe, as the

importance of his critique of globalisation with all its ramifications becomes more influential.

20 February, 2002

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