

An Inventive and Iconoclastic Scientist ¹

Loïc Wacquant

Before being the “engaged intellectual” allied with upsurging social movements that the French media long vilified (during his lifetime) and briefly celebrated (upon the announcement of his sudden death) without ever taking the trouble to read and understand him, Pierre Bourdieu was first and foremost an exceptional scientist, a sociologist by trade and not a philosopher (as Le Monde had it on the title of its front page on 24 February 2000). The difference is not a matter of mere semantics, as his entire oeuvre attests, and he never ceased to claim and defend this “pariah science,” modest in the patient attention it requires for the ordinary things of the world, yet immensely ambitious in the scope of its purview —“everything is social,” Bourdieu asserted—and eminently unsettling in its inescapable political repercussions. Bourdieu changed forever the face of his chosen discipline, rehabilitating the science of society, which had fallen into indigence and indifference in its home country after the passing of Emile Durkheim and his students, decimated as they were by the First World War, and transforming in the process all related domains of inquiry, from anthropology, education, gender and queer studies, to history, political science, economics, linguistics, geography, comparative literature, aesthetics, and—ultimate irony or affront—even philosophy itself.

In a mere two days, with the self-assurance that only ignorance grants, magazine rhetoricians have already drawn up a balance sheet of “what will remain of Bourdieu.” But for the thousands of researchers around the world who are working with his concepts, questioning his theories, and testing his models, it will take decades to get the full measure and trace out all the implications of a thought fundamentally resistant to “textbookization.” Always turned toward the production of new empirical objects, this thought is less a collection of fixed propositions and scholastic precepts than a “toolkit” forged by and for research, aimed at posing scientifically those fruitful questions which, by tearing the veil of taken-for-grantedness, enable us to see the social world, and ourselves, with new eyes. Sociology according to Bourdieu is a methodical metanoia forever begun anew, a cognitive (and collective) ascesis requiring that we continually question not only the

¹ This piece was written on the morrow of Pierre Bourdieu’s passing and appeared in several publications in Europe and Latin America; it was translated into English by Malcolm Fairbrother, with help from Ryan Centner and the author.

preconstructions of common sense but also the divisions between disciplines and the inherited hierarchies among objects, techniques, and theories which mould the production of knowledge—in short, an ongoing mutual dissection of social reason and scientific reason.

There is now no practice, no institution, no zone of social space, subproletariat or intelligentsia, peasant or professor, marriage or unemployment, school or church, state or market, science, art, sport, the body, the media, politics, ethics, or the relations between the genders, age groups, ethnic groups or classes, whose study was not profoundly influenced by Bourdieu. For he managed to join the rigor of the scientific method with the inventiveness of the artist, an incomparable theoretical culture wedding authors that the canonical tradition is fond of opposing—Durkheim and Weber, Marx and Mauss, Cassirer and Wittgenstein, Husserl and Lévi-Strauss, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and John Austin, Gaston Bachelard and Erwin Panofsky—with a tireless practice of research deploying the complete gamut of techniques of observation and analysis, from ethnography to prosopography to statistics, in which he invested a libido sciendi without bound or bottom.

Pierre Bourdieu possessed an insatiable curiosity for all experiences, all existential games, all social universes, and he would have wanted to live a thousand lives in order to understand them all, to capture their hidden causes and their intimate reasons. Only a few days ago, he was evoking his visit to the boxing gym in the black ghetto of Chicago where I was then conducting an ethnographic study of the craft of prizefighting under his guidance. He exclaimed, as if by regret, “Ah, I would have really liked to learn to box with a guy like DeeDee” (my octogenarian coach, a disciple of Joe Louis’s trainer and member of the U.S. Boxing Hall of Fame). Bourdieu detested social formalities and academic pomp — he turned down dozens of honorary doctorates from universities in every continent. At the University of Chicago, again in April of 1989, he asked me to help squirrel him away from a reception organized in his honour by the Dean of Social Sciences. We slipped out and ended up eating in a dingy diner in the Mexican *barrio* of Pilsen, where he proceeded to question at length, in Spanish, our waitress about her trajectory as a migrant before going to listen to the blues in Muddy Waters’ famous Checkerboard Lounge at the heart of the South Side. There, he was struck by the “economy and dignity with which the Blacks were dancing,” whereas “the Whites, they were dancing as they believed the Blacks danced.” To his eyes, there was infinitely more sociology to be learned from these two banal scenes of everyday life than from the affected conversations and tiresome hobnobbing of the U.S. academic establishment.

Nothing pleased Pierre Bourdieu more than contact with younger researchers, and he never missed an opportunity to “dirty his hands” and help them design their research and assess its results. During his last visit to the United States, at Berkeley in the spring of 1996, and despite a grotesquely overburdened schedule—featuring ten public lectures in twelve days on as many topics (among them Flaubert’s symbolic revolution, masculine domination, the invention of the state, the logic of the gift, the power of law, and the mission of intellectuals in the century to come)—before enormous crowds that followed him everywhere and kept growing over the course of the week, and in spite of incessant demands for appointments by the leading minds of campus, he insisted on visiting my undergraduate class and on holding office hours to meet with doctoral students and find out about their research. The night before, he read with great attention the synopses of the projects submitted by the lucky thirty who were to meet him. I can visualize him, fallen asleep from exhaustion on the green armchair in the mezzanine after his reading. I recall the flicker of incredulous amazement in the eyes of the students leaving my Barrows Hall office, two by two, after their historic “consultation” with the “sociological witch doctor.” And I will never forget the tired but blissful smile of Pierre Bourdieu at the end of the afternoon, that of an iconoclastic scientist happy to ply his trade.

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