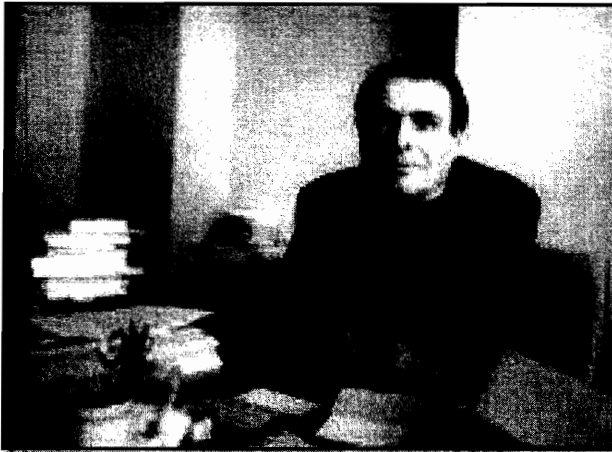


HEART OF BOURDIEU*

An interview with Loïc WACQUANT

It is just over ten years since the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu passed away. In that decade, the diffusion and influence of his work around the world has grown exponentially, making him the first and only social scientist of the second twentieth century to join Karl Marx, Émile Durkheim and Max Weber among the classics of social science. This milestone is being marked by the publication of *Sur l'État (On the State)*, Bourdieu's lecture course at the Collège de France from 1989 to 1992, and by special conferences and dossiers in leading national media in several countries. In this interview, Loïc Wacquant discusses Bourdieu's intellectual legacy and the increasing significance of his former teacher's work for contemporary scholarly research and public debate.



Pierre Bourdieu portrait on the cover of the book: *Pierre Bourdieu: A Critical Introduction*, by Jeremy F. Lane.

Can you tell us how you first encountered Pierre Bourdieu?

Loïc Wacquant: I met Bourdieu at a public lecture he was giving on "Questions of Politics" one grey evening in November 1980 at the École Polytechnique just outside Paris. After the talk, which I found dense and abstruse, the discussion continued informally in the school cafeteria with a group of students until the wee hours of the morning. There, Bourdieu dissected the subterranean connections between politics and society in France on the eve of 1981 elections that led to the victory of Mitterrand with the *maestria* of a surgeon. It was an illumination, and I immediately thought to myself, 'If that's sociology, that's what I want to do.' So I took up studies in sociology at the University of Paris in Nanterre and took to skipping class at the Ecole des HEC [France's top economics school] to attend Bourdieu's lectures at the Collège de France, where he

had just been elected. At the end of those lectures, I would wait him out patiently and then exhaust him with questions. We developed the habit of going back to his home together walking through Paris. It was a fabulous private tutorial for an apprentice sociologist.

What did Bourdieu represent for you then and how did you view him in relation to other luminaries such as Claude Lévi-Strauss, Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida?

LW: Bourdieu was already famous as the author of *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (1972), which challenged the mentalist structuralism of Lévi-Strauss with its concern for capturing the ordinary activities of people in concrete situations, but also of *Distinction* (1979), which refuted the philosophical vision of taste defended by Derrida to reveal that our most intimate preferences are stamped by our position and trajectory in society.

But I did not construe Bourdieu in relation to other major thinkers of the time, first because I did not have any intellectual ambition and also because he was a very approachable, warm, and shy man. I saw him more as the conductor of the journal *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, to which I had subscribed in spite of my great difficulties reading it. *Actes* is a unique scholarly journal in that it brings its readers into the kitchens of science: it allows one to see the process of production of the sociological object, which is built in rupture with common sense. For a generation of researchers, the best way to learn from Bourdieu was to read the journal he had founded and edited for a quarter of a century. Later, others discovered his thought through the short books of the series "Raisons d'agir" ["Reason to act"] that he launched in 1996.

What adjectives would you use to characterize Bourdieu's sociology?

LW: Bourdieu is an encyclopedic sociologist. He published thirty books and nearly four hundred articles that tackle the most diverse topics, from kinship in rural communities to schooling, social class, culture and intellectuals, to science, the law and religion, masculine domination, the economy, the state – and the list goes on. But beneath this bewildering array of empirical objects lies a small number of principles and concepts that give his *oeuvre* striking unity and coherence.

Bourdieu develops a *science of human practice*, which feeds a critique of domination in all of its forms: class, ethnic, sexual, national, bureaucratic, etc. This science is anti-dualistic, agonistic and reflexive. *Anti-dualistic* because it circumvents the antinomies inherited from classical philosophy and sociology, between the

body and the mind, the individual and the collective, the material and the symbolic, and it fuses interpretation (which traces reasons) and explanation (which detects causes) as well as the micro and macro levels of analysis. This sociology is *agonistic* in that it posits that all social universes, even the most apparently irenic such as the family or art, are the site of multifaceted and interminable struggles. Finally, Bourdieu's sociology departs from others – including those of the founding fathers, Marx, Durkheim and Weber – in that it is *reflexive*: sociologists must imperatively turn the tools of their craft onto themselves and work to control the social determinations that weigh on them as social beings and cultural producers.

What are the distinctive concepts that form the heart of Bourdieu's sociology?

LW: For Bourdieu, historical action exists under two forms, incarnate and institutionnalized, sedimented in bodies and concretized in things. On the one side, it “subjectivizes” itself by being deposited in the depths of individual organisms in the guise of categories of perception and appreciation, bundles of durable dispositions that he calls *habitus*. On the other side, it ‘objectifies’ itself in the guise of distribution of efficient resources, which Bourdieu captures with the notion of *capital*, and of microcosms endowed with a specific logic of functioning, that Bourdieu calls *fields* (political, juridical, artistic, etc.).

The agenda of his sociology consists in elucidating the dialectic of history made body and history made thing, the contrapuntal interplay of habitus and field, disposition and position, which takes us to the heart of the mystery of social life. Bourdieu proposes that the mental structures (of habitus) and the social structures (of field) interpellate, respond and correspond to each other because they are linked by a genetic and recursive relationship: society moulds the dispositions, the ways of being, feeling and thinking characteristic of a class of persons; which dispositions in turn guide the actions whereby these same persons mould society.

Add to this the core idea of the plurality and convertibility of species of capital: in contemporary societies, inequalities stem not only from economic capital (wealth, income), but also from cultural capital (school credentials), social capital (effective social ties) and symbolic capital (prestige, recognition). Stir and you have the recipe for a flexible and dynamic agonistic sociology, capable of tracking the material and symbolic struggles through which we produce history.

What are we to make of Bourdieu's political engagement, especially his interventions after the social unrest of 1995 [when millions of French people took to the streets to protest government plans to roll back the welfare state]?

LW: In truth, Bourdieu's political “engagement” goes back to his youthful works during the Algerian

crisis triggered by the nationalist uprising against continued French rule in 1955–62. The freshly minted graduate of the *École normale supérieure* converted from philosophy to anthropology, that is, from pure reflection to empirical investigation, to absorb the emotional shock of this horrific war and to deploy a clinical gaze on decolonization, which rocked and eventually toppled the fourth Republic.

Making social science was always for Bourdieu a way to contribute to civic debate. His major books all tackle and reformulate major socio-political issues of the day. This is true of *Reproduction in Education, Culture, and Society* ([1970] 1977), which uncovers the meritocratic myth of the “liberating school”, as it is of *The State Nobility* ([1989] 1996) which discloses the mechanisms of legitimation of technocratic rule and, of course, of the team field study that led to *The Weight of the World* ([1993] 1998), published two years before Bourdieu's famous speech to the train strikers protesting public spending cutbacks at the Gare de Lyon in December of 1995.

What changed over time is the manner in which his civic commitment manifested itself. At first, it was entirely sublimated in and through his scientific work. Then it gradually assumed a more discernible form, eventually leading to concrete actions visible to the general public. This is for two reasons. First, Bourdieu changed: he aged, he accumulated scientific authority, and he gained a better grasp of the functioning of political and journalistic universes, and thus a greater capacity to produce effects in them. But the world also changed: in the 1990s, the dictatorship of the market came to directly threaten the collective gains of democratic struggles, and intervening became a matter of social emergency. What remains constant is Bourdieu's consuming passion for research and his devotion to science, which he defended tooth and nail against the encroachment of “magazine philosophy” and the irrationalism of the so-called postmodernists.

What are the differences between the reception of his work in France and the United States?

LW: In foreign countries, one reads Bourdieu without political interference and without the distorting prism created by his media image, as a classic author who forged powerful and innovative tools for thinking about contemporary societies and as a major figure of intellectual action extending the lineage of Émile Zola, Jean-Paul Sartre and Michel Foucault. In the Paris crab-basket, prejudices die hard and some have continued posthumously to wage the petty academic clan wars that muddied the reception of his work during Bourdieu's lifetime. It's too bad for France...

In your own research work, what do you take from and do with Bourdieu?

LW: I extend and revise his teachings on three fronts: the body, the ghetto and the penal state. In *Body and Soul: Ethnographic Notebooks of an Apprentice Boxer* (2004), I

effect a double test of the concept of habitus. First as an empirical object: I disentangle how one assembles the mental schemata, kinetic skills and fleshly desires that, put together, make the competent and appetent prize fighter. Second as a method of investigation: I acquired the pugilistic habitus via a three-year apprenticeship in a boxing gym in the black ghetto of Chicago to pave the way for a carnal sociology that treats the body, not as an obstacle to knowledge, but as a vector of its production.

On the front of ethnic and urban inequalities, my book *Urban Outcasts* (2008) deploys Bourdieu's models to show how, by its structure and policies, the state shapes the forms assumed by marginality in the city at century's turn, leading to the emergence of the 'hyperghetto' in the United States and of the 'anti-ghettos' of France and Western Europe. Lastly, my research on the global diffusion of the law-and-order thematics of 'zero tolerance', summed up in *Prisons of Poverty* (1999, expanded edition 2009), reveals that the return of the prison marks the advent of anew regime for the management of poverty that weds the 'invisible hand' of the deregulated labor market with the 'iron fist' of an intrusive and hyperactive penal apparatus. Neoliberalism brings about not 'small government' but the shift from welfare to workfare on the social policy side and the massive expansion of 'prisonfare' on the criminal justice side.

Conversely, what do find to be less useful or relevant in Bourdieu?

LW: The assumption that there exists a close correspondence between one's objective chances and subjective aspirations is no longer as valid today due to the universalization of secondary schooling and generalized disruption of the strategies of reproduction of working-class households faced with the shrinkage and degradation of labor. The national framework within which Bourdieu built his analyses must be broadened and supplemented by an analysis of transnational phenomena, for which he happens to provide crucial conceptual tools -as attested by the recent development of a strand of international relations theory derived from his work. As with all scientists, we must take the postulates of Bourdieu's sociology and push them to their breaking point. Bourdieu would be the first to incite us to do so.

His lecture course at the Collège de France from 1989 to 1992 has just been published under the title *On the State* (Editions du Seuil/Raisons d'agir, 2012). What does this voluminous tome add to Bourdieu's sociology and to political sociology more generally?

LW: As regards its form, this major posthumous book, the first of a series to come, allows us to see Bourdieu the teacher in action, groping his way toward this "cold monster" decried by Nietzsche that seems so familiar to us that we no longer realize that it has in

fact made itself well-nigh invisible. By clarifying why he poses problems the way he does (approaching the state by starting from mundane acts, such as filling out a bureaucratic questionnaire or signing a medical certificate), by pointing to the traps he sidesteps, by revealing his fumbling and errors, his doubts, even his anxiety, Bourdieu invites us into his sociological laboratory and offers us a sociological propedeutics in action.

As regards its contents, Bourdieu reinvigorates the theory of the state by characterizing it as the 'central bank of symbolic capital': the agency that monopolizes the legitimate use, not just of physical violence with the police and the army (as proposed a century ago by Max Weber), but also of *symbolic violence*, that is, capacity to inculcate categories and assign identities, in particular through the school system and the law, and thus the power of veridiction of the world. The book retraces the astonishing series of historical inventions through which the 'house of the king', founded on the private appropriation and dynastic transmission of powers gradually morphed into the 'reason of state', founded on academic credentials and reproduced through bureaucratic means. The state thus emerges as a Janus-faced institution: on one hand, it is the vehicle through which those who construct and control its levers divert the universal for their benefit; and, on the other, it is the possible means to advance the universal and thus to push justice forward.

What would Bourdieu think of the current economic crisis roiling Europe and the threat it poses to its conception of the state as regulator and protector?

LW: With its perspective of the *longue durée*, *Sur l'État* provides precious tools to better capture the stakes and import of the political struggles induced by the financial and monetary crash that is shaking the world today. It reminds us that it is states that build markets and, therefore that states can rein them, provided that those who direct them muster the collective political will to do so. Bourdieu's analysis suggests that the seemingly scientific utterances (such as the assessments of debt rating agencies) in which the established economic order enwraps itself are so many symbolic *coup d'états* that rest on nothing more than the collective belief in them accorded by those who submit to them (starting with the mainstream media).

Here one can profitably reread the chapter of Bourdieu's short book *Firing Back* ([1998] 2000), originally subtitled *Statements to fuel the resistance against the neoliberal invasion*, in which he slams what he christened 'Tietmeyer-thought' (Tietmeyer was then the president of the Bundesbank and the leading apostle of the euro), which has since become 'Trichet-thought' and then 'Draghi-thought', which presents the dictatorship of finance as ineluctable when it is fundamentally arbitrary and endures only by dint of the voluntary servitude of political leaders.

What do you miss the most since Bourdieu's passing and what are we to retain from him?

LW: Personally, his phone calls at two in the morning in Berkeley, which often started on a note of anxiety and invariably ended with laughter, and which infused me with electric energy. The breakfasts we used to have together in his tiny kitchen, during which everything became intermingled, research work, political discussion, and life advice, all of it lathered in sociology. Although he denies it in *Sociology is a Martial Art*, the movie that Pierre Carles made about him, Bourdieu never took his sociological lenses off.

But the author of the *Logic of Practice* ([1980] 1990) is still present and alive among us through the myriad works that his thought stimulates around the planet. Bourdieu is now the name of a collective enterprise of research that cuts across the boundaries between disciplines and between countries to fuel a rigorous social science, critical of the established order and bent on broadening the spectrum of historical possibilities.

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*This interview, conducted with Mark Maguire, Mary Gilmartin and Gavan Titley on the occasion of the publication of Pierre Bourdieu's new book, *On the State* (Seuil/Raisons d'agir Editions, 2012), is appearing in multiple languages and countries in 2012.