

## *France's Philosophe Impolitique* *Richard Shusterman*

Recent French philosophy has been most passionately loved and hated for its militant radicalism. Figures like Jean-Paul Sartre and Michel Foucault defined it through an intoxicating blend of subversive theory and progressive praxis that deployed academic erudition to wage war and wield influence in arenas of social struggle far grander than those of campus politics. As Diderot and Rousseau had done two centuries earlier (inspiring the French Revolution), so Sartre and Foucault made philosophy seem not just daringly chic but socially momentous. Through stirring acts of philosophically inspired protest, widely reported by the media, they gave the lay public a concrete (if distortedly one-sided) idea of how exciting and politically potent the work of progressive philosophy can be. But the more Sartre and Foucault became familiar icons for radical causes and inspirational gurus for the lumpen ranks of oppositional culture, the more suspicious they became to philosophers honed on ideals of analytic rigor and academic purism. Even if one shared the same left-wing causes, one's politics (as we learned at Oxford) should be kept separate from one's philosophical work, which could only be corrupted by the vulgarizing effects of media attention.

Many, therefore, hoped the subversive wave of militant French theory had finally (even shamefully) consumed itself when Foucault, after shifting his focus to aesthetic self-fashioning and the celebration of consensual S/M, died of AIDS in 1984. Pierre Bourdieu has proved them wrong. Even from the most reluctant quarters, there is growing recognition that Paris has a new "master thinker" worthy of the militant mantle of Sartre and Foucault. While Jacques Derrida, François Lyotard and Gilles Deleuze always seemed far too slippery and cryptic to have real political impact, Bourdieu has shown that he can mobilize trade unions and social movements, not just graduate seminars. His views on society command particular authority through his distinctive specialist expertise. Having supplemented his philosophical education by retooling himself as a social scientist (initially to explore the culture and political struggles of Algeria), Bourdieu now speaks as the chairman of sociology at the prestigious Collège de France, where Foucault also taught.

Bourdieu's wide-ranging corpus spans the fields of philosophy, sociology, anthropology, aesthetics, linguistics and political theory. Densely written and replete with complex graphs and statistical tables, his major works make demanding reading for even seasoned academics. Refusing to compromise scientific substance for slickness of style, Bourdieu is equally reluctant to risk the claim to objectivity by combining his research with political polemic--at least in academic texts. Politics, for this Frenchman, requires other kinds of

papers and audiences, those rarely imported by our university or commercial presses. But thanks to the publication of *Acts of Resistance: Against the Tyranny of the Market* (deftly coupled with the paperback issue of last year's *On Television*), American readers can now be properly introduced to the political Bourdieu; they can even get an inkling of some of his major theoretical ideas (like "field," "habitus" and "reflexivity") without toiling through weighty tomes of academic writing.

They can see, for example, how the "field" of journalism, as "a structured social space" constituted by power relations and the values these relations establish, implicitly instills these values into all ambitious members of the field, thus defining the basic perceptual habits that determine what journalists see as newsworthy. This habitual way of seeing (and not seeing) results in a form of collective, unconscious censorship that, in turn, poses a higher-level burden on intellectuals who want their research to be socially productive. They need to think not only of the knowledge they provide but further, and more reflexively, of the means to anticipate, avoid and counteract its mediatic muzzling or distortion.

*Acts of Resistance* is a collection of short, hard-hitting texts essentially culled from Bourdieu's past five years of activism against government policies that damaged social welfare and encouraged racism under the pretext of protecting the French economy from the pressures of globalization. Ranging from polemical Op-Ed pieces and interviews to speeches at rallies for striking workers and the unemployed, these texts mount a ferocious attack on what Bourdieu's original French subtitle calls "the invasion of neoliberalism," a political program that stresses free-market economics as the necessary means for achieving progressive social aims and protecting individual freedom. How much this ideology pervades the current US politics of Clintonism and the centrist "third way" can be gauged by noting the central neoliberal myths Bourdieu targets for critique: that economics defines the most essential reality; that the free-market system is both objective necessity and the democratic expression of individual choice; that competition promotes real diversity of products (instead of uniformity through pressured copying); that globalization and market trends are irresistible impersonal forces rather than products of willful political agendas; that any resistance to the prevailing Western model of scientific rationalism must be irrationalist fundamentalism; that neoliberal thought is a hiply progressive revolution rather than a slickly repackaged restoration of old robber-baron thought, replete with the social Darwinist "ideology of competence" that defines those unable to raise themselves above poverty as inherently inferior and undeserving.

On Television (which began as two televised lectures) mounts a scathing critique of the main vehicle through which these myths are disseminated. Dominating other journalistic media through its greater power and market share, television imposes its distorted, profit-hungry vision of the world by stealthily secreting consensus through a relentless, distracting "dripfeed" of selective news and views that only serve to reinforce received opinion. In "manufacturing consent" (as Chomsky aptly puts it), our TV-dominated media induce what Bourdieu calls "permanent amnesia." Do we remember that only twelve years ago it was a commonplace that democracy and freemarket capitalism were essentially in conflict? So obviously in conflict that even a market fanatic like Gordon Gekko (villain of the movie Wall Street) could insist: "You're not naïve enough to think we're living in a democracy; it's the free market!" By now, through ever-increasing media attention, the market has become such a familiar symbol of everyday American life as to be equated with democracy. To resist this equation by reminding us of its devastating social consequences is the not uncommon strategy Bourdieu deploys.

Protesting French government slashes of social services, he decried the media's collaboration in making public compliance seem the only sanity. By earning the counterattacks of political leaders and media stars, Bourdieu became a surprise celebrity, though a very reluctant one, for the celebrity "media intellectual" is perhaps the most detested *bête noire* in Bourdieu's bestiary of the enemies of progress. To reach the media public by voicing the clichéd ideas and soundbites it is ready to understand, such "negative" intellectuals not only betray the cognitive rigor of their disciplines; they add a counterfeit seal of expert authority to the conventional terms and issues of public debate, which have been self-servingly defined by neoliberalism's ruling ideology and its political, financial and media moguls.

But how, except through the media, can expert critics reach the public to challenge this manufactured consensus that ravages social welfare and even threatens the integrity of intellectual and artistic culture by reducing all values ultimately to the economics of profitability and market share? Bourdieu offers both direction and example. The reign of neoliberalism, he argues, rests as much on its symbolic control of our minds as on its economic success, which itself, of course, depends on psychologies of market confidence. Insufficiently attentive to this "symbolic dimension," progressives lag woefully behind conservatives in wielding "the power of theory" by using media muscle to instill their views among the general public. To thwart the "authority effect" of neoliberalism's media-endorsed ideology and to fight its multinational networks, Bourdieu prescribes new "intellectual and cultural weapons." We "need to invent new forms of communication" among researchers, activists and their appropriate publics to create "a

structure for collective research, interdisciplinary and international," that can "communicate the most advanced findings of research" in digestible modes to aid "the work of contestation."

It is easy to profess this pious "ideal of the collective intellectual" making "common cause with others" to resist the entrenched dogmas of domination.

But Bourdieu translates this seemingly quixotic preaching into effective practice. Having issued his critique of mainstream TV through the television facilities of the Collège de France, he then used the bestseller profits of *On Television* to finance an independent book series, *Liber Raisons d'Agir*.

Initiated with *Acts of Resistance*, it seeks to implement his program of bringing collaborative expert research to bear on urgent civic issues through texts whose style and price are accessible to a wide reading public. Refusing the traditional choice between ivory-tower purity and pamphlet popularization, Bourdieu has also launched a parallel series of academic books (titled *Liber*) in the hope that this combined program will raise the cognitive standards of public debate while bolstering the vitality of autonomous research--a remarkably ambitious publishing enterprise to support a forceful attack on neoliberal ideology. But what is the philosophy behind it all?

In large part, we find the classic role of philosophical critique, subversively exposing dogma by a deeper probing of reality. "What I defend above all," Bourdieu avows in explicit defense of Marx, Nietzsche, Sartre and Foucault, "is the possibility and necessity of the critical intellectual, who is firstly critical of the intellectual doxa secreted by the doxosophers." This Platonic pejorative for those "technicians of opinion who think themselves wise" suggests the profoundly Socratic dimension of Bourdieu's project. As Socrates struggled against an Athenian orthodoxy reinforced by the mesmerizing power of Greek art, so Bourdieu must battle established neoliberal ideology together with the enthralling media powers that serve it. His ideal of the critical, collective intellectual seeking truth through common dialogue with all kinds

of people strives to recall "the Socratic mission in all of its glory," as he disputes entrenched dogma by revealing deeper realities.

One pivotal dogma is that economics defines the most decisive human truth and should therefore be the ultimate perspective in governing society.

Bourdieu's refutation claims the primacy of the social, because it alone provides the conditions for "the functioning of the economic order."

Enthralled by respect for mathematical science, we forget that economic equations are abstractions that ignore vital realities, erecting "the accountant's view of the world" as the final truth and "supreme form of human achievement." But human flourishing cannot be measured in dollar terms of productivity and profitability. We need, says Bourdieu, an "economy of happiness" where "social cohesion is as important a goal as stable exchange rates," and the individualist logic of competition and growth is tempered with

social aims of equity and security.

This evokes a second key dogma that Bourdieu's Socratic sociology endeavors to dislodge: the robust reality of the independent individual (in contrast to the presumably abstract or "fictional" nature of social groups).

"Under the banner of individual freedom," neoliberalism pursues "a programme of methodical destruction" against "all the collective structures capable of obstructing the logic of the pure market"--atomizing union workers, citizens of the nation-state and even family members through the competition for profit. Deplorable poverty and anxiety are demonstrable by-products of this individualistic race for riches. Job insecurity increasingly plagues our most economically advanced countries, while the conditions of real individual freedom are being eroded. For individuals are always the products of social structures (which form one's language and ideas, but also one's habits, tastes and desires). By destroying the social fabric of solidarity that ultimately supports the individual's security and self-confidence, neoliberalism is actually weakening individual freedom. Likewise, by erecting market values as the universal criterion of worth, it corrodes the autonomy of intellectual, artistic and other associative fields that can display alternative facts and values through the "rational pursuit of collectively defined and approved ends," "in particular of truth."

In such earnest invocations of truth, autonomy and consensual rationality, Bourdieu sounds very different from his admired progenitors Nietzsche and Foucault. For they were keen to put these notions (and their own thought) sharply into question in the exemplary Socratic tradition of reflexive selfcritique (the wisdom of knowing that one does not know).

Is there a troubling tension between the "critical" and the "collective" intellectual? On the critical side, Bourdieu tells us, "thought, by definition, is subversive," a "taking apart" of accepted ideas. But how, on the other hand, can collective projects of scientific and artistic culture be advanced without relying on some accepted ideas to structure inquiry? And how can we effectively criticize the distortions of television without invoking some solid sense of truth beyond suspicion? Bourdieu's solemnly unconditional appeals to scientific knowledge in these popular books need to be seen in the context of his more subversive scholarly analyses of the autonomous fields of intellectual and artistic culture, which reveal competitive power struggles, unholy alliances and mendacious practices that seem not so very different from what he deplores in the media. But we cannot be effectively subversive toward everything at once.

Perhaps our complex, imperfect world demands the double standard implied in Bourdieu's dual publishing project. Though the critical ideal demands that scientific truth itself be put in question, such subversions are more effective in the ivory tower than in the public sphere of political struggle. Scientific truth seems a notion too politically potent to be abandoned to the enemy or

to doubt. For Bourdieu it is one of the few terms of resistance we still have that can match the pervasive symbolic power of profit, or the spellbinding motto of the market that threatens to enthrall us all.