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# Bourdieu as education policy analyst and expert: a rich but ambiguous legacy

Agnès van Zanten

This article focuses on Bourdieu's contribution to the analysis and transformation of the field of education. It shows that, when closely examined, Bourdieu's writings on education reveal not only one but at least three competitive or complementary policy theories. There is a common principle to all of them, that is the invisibility of policy, which is embedded in the cognitive classifications and everyday activity of institutions. Nevertheless, while the first theory is strongly deterministic, the other two leave some room for political and pedagogical action. This article also shows that Bourdieu has exerted an important influence, both directly and indirectly, on collective representations and collective dynamics of educational politics and policy in France. This influence has lasted despite the extremely varied positions he took throughout his life and work on the relation between science and politics from strong reluctance to commit himself at the beginning of his career to academic radicalism at the end.

## Introduction

Analysing Bourdieu's contribution in the area of educational policy appears at first sight a strange undertaking. We know that though he was intensely interested in, indeed fascinated by, the role of schools in advanced capitalist societies, he actually wrote very little on what is usually thought of as policy. As Wacquant (1997) noted in the Preface to the English translation of Bourdieu's (1989) *La noblesse d'état*, and this applies even more to his earlier major works on the educational system, *Les héritiers* (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1964) and *La reproduction* (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1970),<sup>1</sup> there is little reference in his work on educational institutions to official state structures, policies or personnel. And even if we move from the level of policy formulation to policy enactment, i.e. what actually occurs inside educational institutions and class-rooms (the main focus of Bourdieu's analyses), there is once again little analysis of the micropolitics of schooling: agents' reinterpretations, negotiations and resistances

(Ball, 1987). Should we then conclude that it is irrelevant or uninteresting to examine this major French sociologist's work on education from a policy perspective? I will argue that it is neither, for two main reasons.

The first is that, when closely examined, Bourdieu's writings on education reveal not one, but two or three competitive or complementary policy theories. Their common principle is the invisibility of policy as, in Bourdieu's view, the influence of the state and dominant classes in education is embedded in the cognitive classifications and everyday activity of institutions, and policy is thus a never-ending encoding process (Ball, 1994). These theories differ, however, in the room they leave for policy action, and they have led to diverging political and pedagogical interpretations. The second reason is that Bourdieu not only wrote, if indirectly, on educational policy, but engaged in policy action. Although strongly reluctant to commit himself politically, he was invited to participate as a kind of special expert in the process of policy formulation. And at the end of his career, although he had stopped doing research on educational institutions and moved on to analyse other social fields, education still occupied a central place in his critical writings, political stances and radical public action.

### **Bourdieu as educational policy analyst: the production and reception of an ambiguous concept, 'relative autonomy'**

The school, which in Bourdieu's view had replaced the church as the major agency for socialization and legitimation in modern societies, appeared to him to play an essential role in the symbolic reproduction of the social order; the school's institutional frames acted as both imposition and acceptance frames (Wacquant, 1997). However, in order for schools to exert this influence, they have to develop specific forms of classification, segregation and evaluation and thus enjoy 'relative autonomy' from other institutions, the state and dominant social groups. The status of this 'relative autonomy' remains ambiguous in Bourdieu's work, however. And this ambiguity has led in turn to strikingly different interpretations of the political impact of his work.

#### *School autonomy as an illusion*

From *Les héritiers* (1964) to *La noblesse d'état* (1989), Bourdieu's writings on education have developed a coherent, evolving theory on school autonomy as a deceptive device that helps legitimize domination by dissimulating the relation between school processes and the aims of the state and dominant groups. In this sense, 'relative autonomy' must be taken to mean that instead of reflecting society's divisions in the mechanical way of Marxist 'correspondence' theories (Baudelot & Establet, 1971; Bowles & Gintis, 1977), schools take over those divisions in complex, creative and frequently imperceptible ways. From this point of view, Bourdieu's sociology of education is a sociology of power relations centred on the specific contribution of symbolic forms such as education to the functioning, conversion and naturalization

of those relations. Schools are a material and symbolic support of the social order; they consecrate social divisions by inscribing them in objective material distributions and subjective cognitive classifications (Wacquant, 1997).

That school autonomy masks the relationship of school forms to social forms of domination may be discerned, according to Bourdieu, in educational expectations concerning language, verbal ease and style. Academic language is a historical product, an amalgam of different traditions, and in that sense a specific school form, but—and this is the essential point—it is not equally distant from the languages of different social classes. Bourdieu insists on the dependence of school style on the style of dominant social groups. According to him, the style still dominant in higher and secondary French education institutions was inherited from the Jesuits, who transposed the aristocratic vision of society and its ‘cult of glory’ into religious and educational institutions. Today, the privileged classes still find legitimation of their own cultural privilege in a style that can be called ‘charismatic’ because of the value it attributes to ‘grace’ and ‘talent’; it allows them to disguise their social heritage by transforming it into personal merit.

The schemes that structure perception, appreciation, thought and action in socially oriented ways are also imposed through structuration, organization and evaluation of learning. Following a perspective similar to the one proposed by Michael Young in *Knowledge and control* (Young, 1971), where one of his first papers on education was republished in English, Bourdieu also insisted on the intertwining of the intellectual and social hierarchies of disciplines. The structuring stylistic opposition between ‘brilliant’ and ‘serious’ students corresponds in fact to the opposition between dilettante upper class students and hard-working lower class students. This same opposition is transposed to the disciplines. French, philosophy and mathematics are thus associated with a capacity for abstract thinking and talent, while other disciplines, such as geography or the natural sciences, are associated with a sense of the concrete, work and study. This opposition is also at the basis of most evaluations, especially in oral examinations, where professors use the institutional freedom they enjoy to apply personal evaluation criteria that are in fact social criteria.

Legitimate symbolic violence through school mechanisms reaches its highest degree, however, in the conferring of credentials. Credentials are clearly a mark of school autonomy and give to their possessors a legal monopoly protected by the state. They are privileges, but privileges that imply some kind of technical competence, which means that pupils must submit to the demands of schools, demands that increase and grow more extensive as pupils move to the upper, most selective parts of the system. However, although the basis for credential conferring makes it appear a fair process of technical selection, credentials in fact validate a long series of acts of social segregation and aggregation in school contexts, as well as multiple ways of matching school requirements with class distinctions. And while credentials make reproduction more costly and uncertain for the dominant groups, they give strong legal, political and pedagogical legitimation to processes of social reproduction.

*School autonomy as a historical reality and a result of class struggles*

Looked at through these lenses, school autonomy may be said to ensnare both students and teachers. Nevertheless, Bourdieu's writings allow for two other competing, less deterministic interpretations. Although he himself never provided a comprehensive presentation of the internal basis for school autonomy, if we assemble various passages from his major books on education we can see the importance he gave to Durkheim's (1938) principle that schools have 'a life of their own'. An important concept here is 'inertia' or 'conservatism', the tendency of schools, like all other social institutions, to remain the same by replicating themselves and retranslating external influences into traditional forms. Modern schools were a church creation first and gradually became a church substitute. According to Bourdieu, who here takes his inspiration directly from Durkheim's (1938) *L'évolution pédagogique en France*, they have maintained a number of features of the Jesuit colleges which invented the school 'form' (Vincent, 1980). Professors imitate priests and, influenced by Jesuit values, give pre-eminence to style over content and overvalue ranking and competition (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1964, 1970). The lasting influence of religious features in modern education is made even more salient in *La noblesse d'état* (Bourdieu, 1989), where frequent reference is made to Durkheim's *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse* (Durkheim, 1912). Bourdieu analysed the process of elite formation in the 'classes préparatoires aux Grandes Ecoles' (for a small minority of students, the 'classes préparatoires' are the first two or three years of higher education in France, in preparation for admission to the most prestigious higher education institutions) as a process of 'ordination'. First comes a period of seclusion during which students are cut off from their normal environment and integrated into an all-enveloping educational community where they learn the values of asceticism, self-possession, competition among peers and docile obedience to institutional rules. Then comes 'consecration' through credentials, which are boundaries that segregate those who will occupy important social positions from everyone else, while simultaneously creating collective faith in the legitimacy of a new form of class sovereignty.

Two other dimensions contribute to the internal autonomy of educational institutions. One has to do with their bureaucratic nature. The development of a school bureaucracy, especially a sophisticated examination system, is for Bourdieu strongly linked to demands for social and technical selection generated by the overall process of rationalizing social and state activities as analysed by Weber, whom Bourdieu cites as a source for his thinking here. Although in contrast to the Mandarin system examined by Weber, the examination system in contemporary schools has not been able to make society accept the hierarchy of school values as the official principle of every social and value hierarchy, it has succeeded in creating a new principle that competes with other principles of social ranking. The second is teachers' corporatism. According to this view, examinations were developed by professors who, as members of the petite bourgeoisie and intellectual fractions of the bourgeoisie, were initially opposed to birth privileges and the pre-eminence of favouritism and nepotism in accession to desirable social positions. At the same time, however, meritocracy and examinations

have become autonomous school forms and substitutive principles of power for a 'government of scholars', whose will is to have educational institutions submit all acts of political and civil life to their control.

The autonomy of the school also has an external basis in the dynamic nature of the class system. In *Les héritiers* (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1964) and *La reproduction* (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1970), Bourdieu and Passeron speak mainly about the dominant classes as a whole and implicitly present the relationship of these classes to the state as static, allowing for smooth reproduction of the social order. In *La noblesse d'état* (Bourdieu, 1989), however, written after *La distinction. Critique sociale du jugement* (Bourdieu, 1979) and *Homo academicus* (Bourdieu, 1984) and other books and articles on class, culture and intellectuals, Bourdieu adopted a very different view. He analysed this part of the educational system as strongly conditioned by power relations between two main upper class fractions, the economic bourgeoisie, represented primarily by managers, and the cultural bourgeoisie, whose emblematic representatives are professors. A careful analysis of the internal organization of this part of the education system and professor–student relations within it shows a particular form at work, very different from the one characterizing universities as analysed in *Les héritiers* and *La reproduction*. Here, professors are no longer priests and prophets but mere trainers, whose role is to create the conditions favourable to massive, intensive preparation for competitive examinations. Lectures yield to exercises and tests, and pupils are expected not so much to acquire a general culture and pose as intellectuals as to use formulae and short cuts to get a pragmatic grip on a wide variety of specific knowledge and skills. In fact, the work of teachers and students of and around the 'Grandes Ecoles' seems totally dependent on their function. These institutions work as 'schools for managers'; students here are preparing to exercise power rather than to conduct scientific research or embark on literary and artistic careers. In Bourdieu's view, this kind of training corresponds in a general sense to the reproduction and legitimation needs of the elite.

Nevertheless, the dominant pole, managers, and the dominated pole, intellectuals, have not developed the same relationship to these elite institutions, and this has important consequences for both social reproduction and school autonomy. Holders of economic capital long relied on a domestic mode of reproduction and on private schools as an extension of the family. The transition from domestic to bureaucratic firms led them to turn to a school-based mode of reproduction and rely on credentials acquired in elite state institutions as a way of controlling access to firms and building internal cohesion among managers and high level employees. However, locating themselves on the side of efficiency and pragmatism in contrast to intellectuals, company heads and managers remain distrustful of credentials. This leads them to send their children to elite institutions such as the Haute Ecole Commerciale (HEC) or the Ecole Nationale d'Administration (ENA), where a concentration of students from similar economically oriented backgrounds, together with the curriculum and teachers' profile, reinforces inherited habituses rather than further inculcating a distinct school culture. On the contrary, members of the culturally oriented pole of the bourgeoisie have developed a much more intrinsic relationship to the kind of

knowledge and world view promoted by schools and a higher respect for teachers as agents for the transmission of a valuable cultural heritage. They are also much more dependent on credentials for joining the elite than members of the economically oriented fraction of the bourgeoisie. That is why they tend to choose more meritocratic 'Grandes Ecoles', such as the Ecole Normale Supérieure (ENS) and Polytechnique.

This split has important consequences for the autonomy of schools and school agents. In the case of managers, school autonomy is limited because the school submits to worldly demands and agrees to validate earlier, extra-school acquisitions. Nevertheless, the need to attend elite institutions creates new problems and tensions in families as the reproduction of each individual family member's position is not guaranteed and requires major educational effort from both students and parents. Moreover, in the case of intellectuals, elite schools enjoy much greater autonomy. This is related to the nature of the knowledge required by the cultural fractions of the bourgeoisie, which cannot be acquired without specific teaching and learning. It is also related to the importance of credentials, which give schools the power to create a 'state nobility', i.e. an elite who can serve its own interests in the very act of serving the superior interests of the state. And although Bourdieu shows the relative decline of culturally oriented elite institutions that promote quasi-autonomous intellectual values, he concludes that the fact that elite schools have become one of the main fields for the struggles between different fractions of the bourgeoisie has two implications not just for school autonomy, but also social change. The first is that diversifying the fields where the main struggles between different fractions take place (the family, schools, work, politics, etc.) actually protects against tyranny, if tyranny is understood as the encroachment of one power on another or the intrusion of a power associated with one field into another. Another consequence is that struggles in the educational arena around the creation of new credentials or new institutions are much more likely to entail the universalizing of particular interests than are struggles in the family arena. This means that their results have implications for other social groups, including, to some extent, disadvantaged groups.

### *Relative autonomy and the reception of Bourdieu's work*

Bourdieu and Passeron's first works on education have exerted a very powerful influence on the French vision of action and policy in the field of education and beyond. This influence is very difficult to assess, however, since it has had quite diverse and contradictory effects. On the one hand, the works widely diffused the idea that inequalities existed both in access to schooling and school success and failure as related to institutional and pedagogical processes. This definitively shattered the social beliefs prevalent at the time that the school functioned or should function as a neutral tool for modernization or a liberating force for working class students (Masson, 2001). At the same time it enriched the French 'passion for equality' inherited from the 1789 Revolution with a more sociological perspective. It is certainly to a large extent thanks to these two major sociological works that the existence of

education-related social inequalities has remained firmly at the fore of political and intellectual debates in France, much more so than in countries without such landmark sociological analyses. This has been so regardless of the political orientation of the French government and public leaders. A second, no less important, effect, however, has been to instil the belief that the influence of schooling is so powerful that it is impossible to do anything about it. Bourdieu and Passeron's works were perceived from the outset by many intellectuals, especially those directly concerned with educational reform or radical transformation of the educational and social system, as profoundly deterministic and pessimistic, and they were associated with the nihilist discourses of such authors as Ivan Illich (Prost, 1970; Snyders, 1976).

The influence of Bourdieu's works went beyond intellectual circles. Although many other historical and social processes must be taken into account to explain the strong distrust of policy and policy-makers in the French field of education, Bourdieu and Passeron's critical theory of education has played a key role in the formation of this point of view in the recent period. And this theory is also partly responsible for the scarcity of French research on education policy (van Zanten, 2004). The first, more common interpretation of their analysis of school autonomy as an illusion whose main function is to legitimize domination has in fact helped discredit all discourse on the 'common good'. Indeed, in this perspective any discourse or action can be suspected of concealing particular interests and power relations, leaving no room for any decision-maker to justify changes in one direction or another on moral or political grounds. At the same time, policy changes seem extremely unimportant, and thus of little social and scientific interest, when weighed against structural processes. Bourdieu and Passeron's interpretation has also had an impact on teachers' and educational reformers' beliefs that pedagogical action is strictly limited in its ability to bring about change. This, in turn, is currently used by advantaged social groups such as middle class parents to justify and legitimate strategic individual action, such as school choice in socially and ethnically mixed urban contexts (van Zanten, 2003). And, at the other end of the social spectrum, it has fostered discourses among youngsters from lower status and immigrant backgrounds in which they are much more likely to present themselves as 'victims of the system' than to try to contest it (Martucelli, 2002).

Bourdieu and Passeron's books, however, were also perceived as radical and subversive, and ignored or rejected as such. The perception and reaction of teachers unions and some leftist political groups, especially the Communist party, still very influential in educational circles and in French society in general in the 1960s and 1970s, were particularly ambiguous. As Bourdieu himself pointed out, this was related to the trajectories, vision and political strategy of these political and educational militants. Many Communist leaders inside either the party or teacher unions were themselves school 'miracles', i.e. individuals from working class backgrounds who had succeeded in and thanks to school. They thus tended to ignore or minimize the importance of social determinants on school careers and to support the myth of the 'liberating' school. Moreover, the vision of the school that became dominant in the Communist party from the 1930s on was an essential element in the organization of the proletariat,



its class education and ability to mobilize. This position was reinforced in 1947, when Communist intellectuals participated in developing the Langevin–Wallon education plan, which in turn became the basis for developing a comprehensive educational system, conceived as a remedy for educational and social inequality. Bourdieu and Passeron's work was perceived as undermining these central beliefs and, therefore, as a threat to the coherence of the Party line, especially since criticism from teachers could ruin the Party's political strategy of allying itself with teachers at both the local level, particularly in the municipalities of the Parisian 'red belt' periphery, and the national level (van Zanten, 2001; Matonti, 2004).

Bourdieu and Passeron's research was nevertheless used by student unions and leftist political groups to justify their own analysis of the educational system and played an important role in the debates and protest action of the May 1968 student movement. This in turn encouraged right-wing intellectuals and politicians to read their works, especially *Les héritiers*, as political pamphlets that had contributed to the development of a new form of generation-based social consciousness and fuelled political radicalism. This was one of the main factors in the break between Bourdieu and his former master Raymond Aron, a centre-right, classic liberal sociologist who had integrated Bourdieu into his research group, the Centre for European Sociology, which was largely funded at the time by the Ford Foundation. And it led Bourdieu to create his own first research group, the Centre for the Sociology of Education and Culture. Members of this group participated in the student movement in two distinct ways. In May 1968 they launched an appeal to organize an Estates-General of Teaching and Research whose general aim was to allow the entire population, especially the working classes, to debate on and contest educational matters and reform. They also prepared several written recommendations, based on Bourdieu's work, for changes in the organization and content of teaching and learning in schools and universities.

### **Bourdieu as policy expert: reforming educational institutions or radically transforming them?**

To assess Bourdieu's contribution to policy studies we need to go beyond his academic work and take into account his voluntary or involuntary involvement as an actor in debates and decisions concerning educational institutions. The two dimensions interact in ways that are not always familiar to academic readers, especially non-French ones, and examining this interaction sheds new light on what he conceived as educational policy, the possible manoeuvring room for educational policy action and how intellectuals should intervene in educational policy-making.

#### *A reformist parenthesis*

Bourdieu's political attitude during the university crisis and student movement of 1968 is presented as ambiguous by some of his closest colleagues and friends, such as Robert Castel and Jean-Claude Passeron. In recent texts written in homage to Bourdieu after his death, both comment on his suspicion of any kind of political

engagement during the 1960s and 1970s. Although he was sympathetic to the student movement, he was in fact extremely distrustful of the most activist groups, whom he reproached for having a petit bourgeois ethic and being politically irresponsible (Castel, 2003). His own engagement in the student movement was extremely discreet and he only signed collective appeals and petitions. More generally, he distrusted all intellectuals who presented themselves as 'May leaders' and all sociologists who manifested their political engagement in intellectual circles or universities and in the press, radio or television. As he saw it, they were only expressing their own resentment and social fantasies and defending their social and academic interests, not participating in radical contestation of the social order. He was also extremely critical of the reforms that took place as a result of the May 1968 movement. They appeared to him as geared to eliminate the more visible authoritarian dimensions of the school and university system but not the authoritarian structure of the pedagogical relation and its power to legitimate educational inequalities (Poupeau & Discepolo, 2002; Passeron, 2004).

Bourdieu was, however, tempted by some reformist endeavours in the 1980s. Their content can be directly linked to his and Passeron's defence of a 'rational pedagogy' at the end of *Les héritiers*. Both authors believed at the time that one of the main vectors of inequality reproduction in French universities and secondary schools was the absence of explicit mediations between knowledge and learners, the existence of what Basil Bernstein (1975) called an 'invisible pedagogy', accessible only to students and pupils from privileged social backgrounds. Both saw the continuous and systematic clarification of educational expectations, content and methods by teachers recruited and assessed on the basis of their technical competence rather than their social attributes as a way of reducing the communication gap between teachers and working class students and limiting the advantages of middle class ones. Although it was totally unclear how a system devoted to the perpetuation of a cultural elite would introduce these changes, there was a definite attempt to link sociological descriptions and interpretations to pedagogical recommendations. However, despite these proposals for reform, Bourdieu seemed for more than 20 years little concerned with whether or how his analysis might be applied in educational policy.

Two factors seem to account for his transition from retreat to moderate engagement in reformist action in the 1980s. The first is related to the important changes in educational politics and policy that followed on the election of Socialist president François Mitterrand in 1981. The new government launched a series of social and educational initiatives, including a policy of 'Zones d'éducation prioritaires'. This policy was inspired by the English 'Educational priority areas' and the American compensatory education programs set up in the 1960s, but its focus on positive discrimination and specific pedagogical support for disadvantaged children was also directly linked to Bourdieu and Passeron's work. Moreover, the Socialist political elite, composed to a significant extent of university professors, also tried to create new relationships between policy-makers and researchers. Long reluctant to engage in reform and very rarely appealed to by government to do so, researchers were suddenly asked to participate in different educational commissions and working

groups, prepare individual reports and, more generally, provide new ideas and new analysis for educational policy-making (van Zanten, 2000). The second factor seems to be Bourdieu's 1982 recruitment into the Collège de France, an immensely prestigious institution, reserved to a very small elite of university professors and researchers who occupy personal lifelong chairs. It was from this institution that President Mitterrand himself commissioned two successive reports on education, and Bourdieu declared in interviews that he interpreted this appeal to the most prestigious representatives of science as 'a first order political act'. In fact, he thought he could use the collective intellectual reputation capital of this institution and the collective intellectual autonomy of its scholar members to promote change.

The first report, entitled *Propositions pour l'enseignement de l'avenir* (Collège de France, 1985), and published as a collective contribution of professors from the Collège, details nine principles oriented toward developing rationality and justice in the educational system. Two of these principles, 'the diversification of forms of excellence' and the 'multiplication of educational opportunities', were directly inspired by Bourdieu and Passeron's analysis of educational inequalities, and in interviews Bourdieu insisted on their connection to two important negative education effects: hierarchization and definitive evaluations. Others, such as 'the unification of knowledge', implying a common core curriculum that all pupils should systematically acquire at each level, or the reinforcement of teachers' competence and engagement in educational activities are clearly influenced by the authors' vision of a rational pedagogy. Yet other principles, such as the need to reconcile the universal vision promoted by the natural sciences and the relativistic understanding of the human sciences, relate more to intellectual conceptions of knowledge.

More surprisingly, the report puts forward a principle much more in line with classic liberal thinking: the need for competition between autonomous, diversified educational institutions, which would be given a label of quality to guide users in their choice, while preserving disadvantaged individuals and institutions from segregation as a result of unfair competition. This point pertained first and foremost to higher education institutions, but could be extended experimentally, the report specified, to secondary schools. The underlying idea seemed to be that overt institutional autonomy linked to overt school choice could limit existing covert forms of competition and selection operating through cost, distance and limited access to information and that replacing competition among individuals by competition among groups and local powers could have beneficial effects (Léger, 1986). As Bourdieu himself declared in interviews, the idea was in fact to propose a balance between state control and a classic liberal approach (Poupeau & Diecepolo, 2002). The sources of this position are probably two-fold. One has to do with the political climate of the period, in which policies of decentralization, diversification and school autonomy could be justified as progressive in reaction to the authoritarian centralization and standardization of previous policy orientations. The other is more related to Bourdieu's belief that to guarantee a rational and just social order, the intellectual and scientific field—and therefore higher education institutions—had to enjoy broad autonomy.

The second report, entitled *Principes pour une réflexion sur les contenus d'enseignement* (Bourdieu & Gros, 1989), published in 1989 by an ad hoc commission working under the direction of Pierre Bourdieu and François Gros, focused more on the intellectual organization of curricula and, to a lesser extent, the intellectual and material organization of teaching and learning. It restates some of the principles of the previous report, such as the need to reconcile universalism and relativism and to instate periodical revision of curricula so as to include new knowledge produced and required by scientific progress and social change. It also introduced new ideas, such as the importance of interdisciplinarity and both horizontal coordination between disciplines and vertical progression within them from one year to the next. The links between these proposals and Bourdieu's analysis of educational inequalities and suggestions for a 'rational pedagogy' are much more tenuous than in the previous report. As Bourdieu himself acknowledged in some interviews, there is no reference to reproduction or democratization. He justified this position as a pragmatic one: the impossibility of changing the educational system in depth meant that the best course was to make only modestly ambitious proposals to prevent that system from aggravating inequalities. In fact, closer examination of the content of the report and subsequent discussions bring to light Bourdieu's growing interest in the role of knowledge as an intellectual construction, in turn related to his thinking about science as a guiding principle for policy and action. This had somewhat superseded his concern about the social conditions of learning.

### *Academic radicalism*

At first sight, these moderate reformist attempts seem to contrast starkly with Bourdieu's strong engagement in the public and political spheres in the 1990s and his public support of the major French strikes of December 1995. But while there are important discontinuities between these two positions, there are also significant continuities. Bourdieu's engagement had always been related to his vision of the crucial role of ideas in social struggles. This became particularly visible in his public engagement in the 1990s against neo-liberalism. He saw neo-liberalism as a symbolic force that intensified the material economic realities it started from and sought to develop; through their neo-liberal theorizing, researchers and policy-makers were the agents of this symbolic force. The increasing importance given to theory led Bourdieu to rethink his earlier understanding that there was no real connection between struggles internal to the intellectual field and external political struggles (Swartz, 2003).

He became, in fact, convinced that while it was essential to protect the autonomy of the scientific field from political influence, it was also essential, in societies where science is to a large extent used by dominants to reinforce their domination, to allow the dominated to appropriate scientific results and instruments. Bourdieu's public engagement is also related to his professional trajectory. Passeron (2003) suggested that for many years he did not feel his intellectual power was solidly established enough to be able to use it in the political field. However, toward the end of his extraordinarily productive and influential career, which included international

consecration of his work, he felt it possible to use his scientist status to develop and support new forms of expression aimed at producing powerful symbolic effects in the public arena.

Bourdieu's academic radicalism can be traced back to the publication of *La misère du monde* (Bourdieu, 1993), which represents an important departure from his previous work in terms of the scientific representation of the social world, methodology and political alliances. As concerns theory and the representation of social hierarchies and power relations, a new key concept is introduced, that of 'poverty of position', a relative kind of poverty, distinct from but no less powerful than 'poverty of condition', i.e. massive poverty associated with social class and labour conditions. According to Bourdieu and the co-authors of the book, neo-liberalism, the dismantling of public services and ineffective policy attempts to reduce inequalities and exclusion have produced a whole new group of individuals who are 'relative failures' of the system and whose suffering is largely ignored. Schools have strongly contributed to this by creating an illusion of democratization coupled with continuous processes of segregation and exclusion that start inside classrooms and schools and accompany individuals throughout their lives. Analysis of these processes led Bourdieu and his collaborators to explore in more depth two main themes already present in Bourdieu's previous research on education: the symbolic violence of schools and the contradictory nature of educational heritage by social situation and individual trajectory. What is new, however, is that teachers and school personnel are no longer presented as deliberate or unconscious agents of social reproduction, but rather as victims themselves of the educational system. This is especially, but not exclusively, the case for those working in the most difficult peripheral urban areas. They share 'poverty of position' with many other state agents directly faced with problems of unemployment, violence and various forms of exclusion.

This new perspective was reinforced by a radical change in Bourdieu's methodological position. Drawing away from the Durkheimian principle of radical separation between subjects' and researchers' points of view that he had developed in *Le métier de sociologue* (Bourdieu et al., 1968) and put into practice in his previous work, Bourdieu stated in *La misère du monde* that analysis of 'difficult' places and 'poverty of position' supposes a comprehensive perspective. The researcher must abandon his god-like point of view in order to grasp and assist in the expression of the subjects' own self-analyses, thus allowing the expression of plural, frequently competitive points of view. As Lapeyronnie (2004) suggested, this radical change seems strongly related to a new form of political alliance between academic radicals such as Bourdieu and his collaborators and what they present as the middle class intellectual public service victims of liberalism, i.e. teachers, journalists, young researchers. Developing an alliance with these groups, for whom *La Misère du monde* can be seen to furnish a new social philosophy, appears crucial for at least two reasons: as representatives of public service these groups are the last bastion against liberalism and as intellectuals they are particularly likely to support the idea of rational political governance.

Consistent with this new radical perspective, Bourdieu developed new modes of communication in the 1990s aimed at making his theories more understandable and

accessible, but also at substantiating the idea of a 'collective intellectual' capable of bringing together science and politics (Swartz, 2003; Mauger, 2004). After the success of *La Misère du monde*, which has even been adapted for the stage, Bourdieu created his own European journal, *Liber*, published until 1998. In a new European collection, *Raisons d'agir*, which he created just after the 1995 strikes, he published essays and articles mainly on neo-liberal public policies. Written by him and other social science researchers, these studies were attractive to larger audiences because of the style, length and journal price. He multiplied public appearances with protest leaders and artists and gave more and more speeches and conferences to highly diverse audiences. He also gave interviews and wrote short articles for opinion columns. These texts, frequently signed by a group entitled the 'Association de Réflexion sur les Enseignements Supérieurs et la Recherche' (ARESER), created in 1992 with Bourdieu as its president, often concerned education and research. They express a strongly critical view of all reforms proposed by government leaders on both the right and left, repeatedly pointing out the lack of real consultation with students and teachers, lack of resources, segmentation of users, excessive adaptation to the need of firms, limitation of curriculum content and the like. As Lapeyronnie (2004) judiciously pointed out, under the general accusation of liberalism, all types of reformism are denounced, including some that Bourdieu himself had promoted in the 1980s.

## **Conclusion**

As underlined by Robert Castel (2004), Pierre Bourdieu's work and action, both generally and in relation to education, were characterized by constant tension between a sense of the power of social constraint and political voluntarism. In France his brilliant analysis of the educational process was perceived by many professional or lay readers as deterministic and was therefore understood to leave no room for political or pedagogical action. There are strong arguments in favour of this reading, and Bourdieu himself reinforced it in his oral presentations and interviews. He was profoundly conscious of social constraint and the crucial problem of the dominated's consent to domination. This led him to emphasize the force of reproductive mechanisms, visible and invisible, as well as the powerlessness of dominated groups and the more or less conscious exercise of privilege by dominant groups. In the coherent, all-encompassing theory he finally built on the foundations of an initially quite diverse set of research pieces the force of these mechanisms appears almost unlimited, as each social field makes its own specific contribution to domination and the legitimation of domination. However, a more detailed examination of Bourdieu's work in education shows that while the unveiling of processes of domination remained a priority for him, he could present those processes in a nuanced and sophisticated manner that leaves some room for autonomy and thus for policy action.

Bourdieu's political engagement was as rich and ambiguous as his theory is. For a long period he seems to have expected that his labour of gradually unmasking even the subtlest mechanisms of domination would almost magically create a broader and

deeper social consciousness. He was also hopeful for some time that it could lead to concrete reforms, especially in higher education. Increasingly disappointed on these two points, and increasingly convinced that his theory had become a universal scientific and moral cause, he decided to step forcefully into the public sphere. Conscious that politics is not an individual but a collective process, he sought to build new alliances, both with other scholars—he had become much more assertive than he was early in his career about the scientific community's independence and capacity for sound political judgement, and he now worked to build a 'collective intellectual'—and at least potentially with all victims of liberalism, either working class or from the public sector intellectual middle class. Still, his position remained paradoxical until the end, as he tried to develop an emancipatory political line on the principle that only an elite of scholars can have access to universal truths and a radical political movement against economic forces that was based essentially on the symbolic power of words.

Although Bourdieu's intellectual career is atypical in terms of productiveness and influence, it exemplifies some classical crucial dilemmas of sociologists as intellectual workers and citizens. Most sociologists are both attracted to dissecting social mechanisms and processes of inequality and injustice in minute detail and trained to do so. This intellectual orientation leads them to emphasize social determinism or the unexpected, frequently negative consequences of social and political action (Hirschman, 1991). They are thus more likely to contribute to a kind of social cynicism than to provide solutions and guidelines to action (Martucelli, 2002). Many sociologists and intellectuals are also likely to hypertrophy the power of words and culture and to minimize, misinterpret or demonize economic processes; this in turn leads them to adopt insufficiently informed and strategic political stances. At the same time, although they tend to be morally and politically on the side of the 'victims' of society, as intellectuals, they are by profession and status on the side of power and the state. This means that they can always be suspected of confiscating the power of expression of the otherwise powerless groups they mean to represent.

## Note

1. Reference throughout the article is to Bourdieu's initial publications in French but the English translations are indicated in References when relevant.

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