

**Review: Political Interventions: Social science and political action, by Pierre Bourdieu**

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**Pierre Bourdieu**

**Political Interventions: Social science and political action**

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This book brings together numerous texts previously unavailable in English, drawing together speeches, letters, interviews, petitions, and other forms of political intervention undertaken by Bourdieu over the course of his forty-year career – from just after he returned from Algeria in 1960 until just before his death in January of 2002. The texts were edited by Frank Poupeau and Thierry Discepolo, based on an earlier project Poupeau had originally conceived for publication in Latin America. The book is translated by David Fernbach.

The book is organized both chronologically and thematically, following the ebb and flow of Bourdieu's shifting political concerns, including the war in Algeria from 1961-63, the Polish Solidarity movement in the 1980s, and resistance to the policies and rhetoric of globalization (carefully distinguished from globalization itself) in the nineties. Some themes remain ever present throughout Bourdieu's career: the role of the social scientist in politics, the false coin of universalism, the complicity of the media, and inequality in education. A section from the late nineties contains texts on other social struggles, including those of immigrants, homosexuals, and the unemployed. In total there are a total of twelve such thematic groupings – divided between seven time periods, each with a brief introduction by the editors.

The editors express a desire to explore the "articulation between scientific research and political intervention" (xiv) in Bourdieu's life and work, but because only the political texts are collected here, the reader is expected to be familiar with Bourdieu's academic work. And while the brief introductions and scattered footnotes do provide some helpful context, a proper analysis of Bourdieu's role as a public intellectual would require a much deeper knowledge of the events and times in which he so eloquently intervened. Nonetheless, in collecting these materials and bringing them before the English-speaking audience for the first time, the editors have done an invaluable service.

More than anything else, this book provides us with insight into Bourdieu's unique "way of 'talking politics'" (xiv), as well as Bourdieu's own thoughts about the role of intellectuals in politics, a topic which he discusses in great detail. Bourdieu comments that "doing politics means exposing oneself to a loss of authority," because once the scholar "commits themselves to politics in this way... anyone can attack his scholarship, using political weapons to do so" (386). So, how can the social scientist best participate in the political realm? Not, Bourdieu tells us, by giving lessons (he is very dismissive of so-called "organic intellectuals," whom he sees as little more than failed intellectuals). Rather, he suggests, academics can provide social movements with the tools they need to dismantle the

"symbolic effect exercised by the 'experts' engaged by the big multinational companies" (381). Indeed, Bourdieu goes so far as to claim that the "sole power" intellectuals "have a right and a duty to claim" is precisely that of making "rigorous use of reason" to exercise "ceaseless and effective vigilance" against the language of technocrats (219).

Despite his call for intellectuals to be politically engaged, Bourdieu was deeply suspicious of the concept of a "total intellectual" who pursues "an idiosyncratic understanding of the human" in order to claim a privileged status for the knowledge they produce (26). What particularly galls Bourdieu is the way this "myth of the intellectual" brings an aura of universality to "motivations that may have nothing universal about them" (28). He is particularly critical of "those professional prejudices that are never put in question," such as "the intrinsic superiority of philosophical language over ordinary language," what Bourdieu refers to as the "prejudice of an absence of prejudice" (151).

While Bourdieu's critique of intellectual disinterest and universalism is already well known from his academic work (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990; Bourdieu 1988), this collection reveals the social life of these ideas as he aggressively defends his ideas from critics, tentatively proposes policy changes, and judiciously comments on student protests. Against critics who say that his theory of social reproduction feels like a "fact of nature," denying human agency, he retorts that "it's precisely the law of gravity that enables us to fly" (52). Rather than proposing policies which would seek out a "leveling" of the educational playing field, Bourdieu suggests "the multiplication and diversification of ground on which difference can be asserted" (165). And in a brief meditation on the events of May 1968, he comments on the absence of those excluded from the educational system in the "discussion between beneficiaries" of that system (41).

Bourdieu can occasionally sound contrite and old-fashioned, such as when he is denouncing the commercialism of new media against the great works of art which he sees as having survived the test of time (343). Or when he denies that television can itself criticize television (333). (What would he have made of *The Daily Show* with Jon Stewart?) Yet his voice has a moral urgency to it which is more often questioning than strident. Speaking at a conference organized by Reporters Without Borders he urges the participants to shift their attention from the Gulf War, a situation over which they have relatively little control, to "those regions of practice that depend on us," that is to say, the role of the media at home (321).

After reading this book, three moral imperatives stand out as central features of Bourdieu's politics: a call to critically examine the underlying premises of the institutional norms and practices which govern our lives, an insistence that we take responsibility for the language and actions of these institutions, and an urge to constantly remember those who are excluded from these institutions, endeavoring to find ways in which we can put the resources of our profession in their service. The texts collected here reveal a remarkable consistency of purpose over Bourdieu's forty-year career, and allow the English speaking world to better appreciate Bourdieu as an activist as well as a scholar.

## References

Bourdieu, Pierre and Jean-Claude Passeron (1990) *Reproduction in Education, Society, and Culture*. London: Sage Press.

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