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“Postcolonial Bourdieu”: Notes on the Oxymoron

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The notion of a postcolonial Bourdieu presents us with an oxymoron – a contradiction in terms – that points to a set of conditions which have informed the international translation of Bourdieu’s work as well as certain tensions existing both within and towards the field of postcolonial studies.

Colonial contexts, as well as competing anti-colonial positions, have been a part of the social environment that has generated much of the social theory we present to our students. Yet these contexts are rarely given due consideration. Moreover, Manichean presentations and receptions of theory that have reduced various intellectual fields to a series of ‘isms’ lack the subtlety that is necessary for an understanding of the complex, interwoven and shifting nature of social thought (Puwar & Sharma 2007).

International Receptions

Sociology is a Martial Art (2002), Pierre Carles’ biographical film about Bourdieu, opens with Bourdieu, based in France, sitting in a satellite-linked room at the start of his keynote address to the MLA (Modern Language Association) in Chicago, which Edward Said, the President of the Association, had invited him to give.

The subject of the lecture was the concept of a transnationally committed scholarship. In the lecture, subsequently published as a small booklet entitled *Firing Back: against the tyranny of the market 2* (2003), Bourdieu argues against a purely scholastic point of view. His more overtly political interventions, including his allegiances to trade unions and social movements, made life uncomfortable for scholars wanting to employ the radicalism of his analytical tools but without identifying with the outspoken positions he began to adopt in political campaigns. For them, these took away from his intellectual grace. However, in his final book, *Humanism and Democratic Criticism*, Edward Said builds directly on the work of Bourdieu via the notion of the 'collective intellectual', involved in 'collective invention' in a way that "enables intellectual performances on many fronts, in many places, many styles that keep in play both a sense of opposition and the sense of engaged participation." (2004: 140). Said goes on to note that:

> Part of what we do as intellectuals is not only to define the situation, but also to discern the possibilities for active intervention, whether we then perform them ourselves or acknowledge them in others who have either gone before or are already at work, the intellectual as look out. Provincialism of the old kind – for example, a literary specialist whose field is early-seventeenth century England – rules itself out and, quite frankly, seems uninterestingly and needlessly neutered. The assumption has to be that even though one can't do or know about everything, it must always be possible not only to discern the elements of a struggle or tension or problem near at hand that can be elucidated dialectically, but also to sense that other people have a similar stake and work in a common project.

So, what does it mean to work with the notion of a postcolonial Bourdieu? Simply castigating Bourdieu for being a Eurocentric thinker is counterproductive, not least because this method of working with received theory would result in most European theory being consigned to the scrap heap. It is perhaps much more fruitful to consider the kinds of contexts, alliances and commitments – as well as the readings and ideas – that informed the development of Bourdieu's thought. This requires us to pay attention to Bourdieu's references and citations in, for instance, his writings on Algeria, many of which were orientalist. Consequently, one must work out how much of this historical thought was carried over into his own analytical tools; one must also, however, do more than simply gauge the influence of other authors and theorists on a particular thinker. For instance, there has recently been a growing interest in locating the influence on Bourdieu of Husserl and phenomenology. Yet even this exercise, which is often treated as a purely text-based task, does not preclude a consideration of Bourdieu's political commitments and personal associations.

Bourdieu's personal position on colonial France as well as on the FLN undeniably informs his approach to the Algerians whom he photographed and featured in his research. The friendships he formed in Algeria, most notably with Adelmalek Sayad, and his attention to the consequences of racism, the loss of personal value and of opportunities in France carried over into the analyses he conducted in Algeria. The impact of migration, movement, displacement and forced exile continued to mark his work. Thus it is not surprising that during the last few years of his life, he had returned to work on the photographs he took in Algeria before independence for the exhibition 'Pierre Bourdieu in Algeria: testimonies of uprooting'. It was Bourdieu who had sat at Sayad's

hospital bedside, taking notes on how Sayad wanted his essays and research to be compiled in the book *The Suffering of the Immigrant* (2004). These kinds of lifelong personal and intellectual associations are easily overlooked by British students, particularly as it is not how their lecturers and textbooks have presented the work of Bourdieu to them. To put it rather bluntly, he is presented primarily and overwhelmingly as a theorist of class *per se*. He is placed in a particular camp of sociology, however solid it might be, that does not tend to consider class, colonialism/postcolonialism and racism together. A textured reading of texts and intellectual relations and the complicated ways in which they are interwoven, across time and specific subjects, is likely to shed more light on the social conditions of production of what we count as knowledge, including what we see as postcolonial knowledge.

In the UK, Bourdieu is chiefly received as a theorist of class, who has very little awareness of racism or postcolonial conditions in France. While anthropology students are usually made familiar with Bourdieu's work in Algeria in relation to discussions of kinship and structure, the colonial context of his work is rarely investigated. There is of course a wider context to the reception and translation of European social theory. Despite an emphasis on the reading of basic texts as vehicles for a history of ideas, the actual context for these ideas is all too often overlooked. Hence the importance of the colonial context to Durkheim's work on suicide and the practice of *sati* (widow burning), for example, is not a feature of how students are encouraged to read and decode his works. And this erasure – often carried out in an unconscious rather than a deliberate way – operates across the board, whether one is reading Locke, Derrida or Bourdieu. Thus in the specific case of Algeria, to approach French theory as an evolving entity developed to a very large extent in colonial situations and conflicts

is, unsurprisingly, *not* a matter of course (Le Sueur, 2001). Cixous, Althusser, Derrida, Levi-Strauss were all strongly affected by Algeria (Young 2001).

In sociology or cultural studies – the chief disciplines of most scholars or 'fans' of Bourdieu – students are likely to be more accustomed to the concepts of cultural and social capital than to racism or Algeria and certainly not to postcolonialism. Some of this limited reception is no doubt linked to the fact that a considerable number of works on racism in France, written by Bourdieu and his colleagues, have not been translated into English. The key reason, however, has more to do with the predominance of class in British sociology and its treatment of racism – even to this day – despite the battles fought in *Empire Strikes Back* as an epiphenomenon. Even today, some theorists of class have difficulty considering racism both within and outside of the class context, such is the meta-status of class. To consider postcoloniality alongside class is an even more unlikely prospect. The postcolonial is often blamed for creating splits, for being concerned with minutiae rather than the real grit of life. This distanced position vis-a-vis postcolonial studies is not entirely mistaken, despite a relationship to the field that is heated and yet disengaged.

Nonetheless, we know that even the leading theorists of postcolonial studies – Spivak and Said – have in their different ways distanced themselves from the *doxa* of this discipline. They have often not recognised themselves in the circular and self-referential intellectual moves of scholars who merely look for ambivalence and hybridity in every human gesture, for instance, without any sense of the inequalities and the distribution of resources. And there is no doubt that the failure to consider questions of class and economic inequalities has become a comfortable position within the *doxa* of postcolonial studies. Thus

those who are 'hardcore' class theorists, usually at some remove from the field itself, go to great lengths to distance Bourdieu from postcolonial scholarship. In general, though, this is a view taken from a distance. Similarly, postcolonial theorists are likely to take the easy route of characterising his work – without, it must be said, reading much of it – as failing to take sufficient account of postcolonial conditions in France or elsewhere. Hence the oxymoron.

A particular article that Bourdieu co-authored with Wacquant (1999) has often been referenced as a case where Bourdieu is against multiculturalism. However, this is a misreading. The central concern of the article is the predominance of North American publishing circuits and academics in the production of knowledge, with the result that quite specific and situated understandings of multiculturalism and race are transferred uncritically to other very different international contexts. Class is also identified as an example of this particular monopoly and flow of information, which then impedes careful comparative analysis in the use of concepts, and reproduces what is rhetorically termed 'imperial reasoning'. The underlying analytical point, however, is overlooked in favour of a reading that situates Bourdieu against multiculturalism and considerations of 'race' and difference. An appreciation of this point, which has very much been lost in the critique and counter-critiques, does not mean that Bourdieu and Wacquant can be excused for overlooking the detailed work undertaken on Brazil.

Post/Colonial Textures

If we take migration as a colonial/postcolonial issue, it is not difficult to detect the degree to which migration was a theme close

to Bourdieu's personal concerns, from the moment when he left his Béarn home to acquire an education in Paris. His own experience of migration was marked by class and the culturally marked move was so acute that it sensitized him to the issue, leading him eventually to a reworking of the philosophical concept of *habitus*. Bourdieu's research in Algeria focused on forced migration resulting from French colonial policies. Dislocation, loss of esteem and disintegration of communities are all aspects of his understanding of how people construct a 'home' under severe conditions. The coupling of new work with the inventive use of trades, as a response to the erosion of skills is, linked to the new cities and the compounds in which people found themselves. The concept of leaving, under duress as well as voluntarily, particularly to allow for economic improvement, is undoubtedly a part of Bourdieu's intellectual sensibility (1963). All these observations can be evidenced in the photographic exhibition 'Bourdieu in Algeria: testimonies of uprooting'. The figures – traders, beggars, children – and the landscapes – camps, farms, bars, destroyed huts, journeys – all convey what it means to be uprooted.

One of the photographs in the exhibition features Abdelmalek Sayad, whom Bourdieu met at the university in Algeria. Sayad accompanied and guided Bourdieu on his first field trip and continued to work with Bourdieu until his death. Reflecting on the importance of cross-cultural border contacts for his own intellectual development, Bourdieu notes:

> I think, among many others, of Leila Belhacène, Mouloud Feraoun, Rolande Garèse, Moulah Hennine, Mimi Bensmaïne, Ahmed Misraoui, Mahfoud Nechem and Abdelmalek Sayad. These Algerian friendships, no doubt born of affinities of habitus, helped me to elaborate a representation of Algerian reality that was at

> once intimate and distant, attentive and, if I might say so, affectionate and warm, without for that being naïve or fatuous. (2004b: 433).

Bourdieu and Sayad continued their close working relationship in Paris. It is perhaps important to note that Sayad's involvement was extensive – by the end of his life, he had produced almost a hundred publications, including eight books. He worked on everyday life in Algerian slums in post-war Paris, as well as on the destruction of Algeria's traditional peasantry at the hands of French colonialists. He observed in minute detail the dynamics of migration chains from Kabylia to France, the impact of decolonization on the reception of Algerian workers in Marseilles and the veritable odyssey of those workers and their children through the layers and institutions of French society. Indeed, soon after Sayad arrived in Paris with Bourdieu, he published *Le Déracinement. La crise de l'agriculture traditionnelle en Algérie* (1964).

We know that the questions raised during the fieldwork in a period of conflict in Algeria led Bourdieu not only to carry on trying to understand Algerian emigration to France, but also to turn his attention to his own birthplace and upbringing in the Béarn region in the fifties and early sixties. Soon after Algeria, he also articulated the concepts of *habitus*, predispositions and honour in the Béarn. Bourdieu spells out the interwoven relationship – the two-way traffic – between his research in the Béarn and Algeria, and his own personal development in an interview with Franz Schultheis:

> ...Algeria is what allowed me to accept myself. With the same perspective of understanding of the ethnologist with which I regarded Algeria, I could also view myself, the people from my home, my parents, my father's and

> my mother's pronunciation, reappropriating it all in a totally undramatic manner – for this is one of the greatest problems of uprooted intellectuals when all that remains to them is the choice between populism and, on the contrary, shame induced by class racism (2001).

There has been a recent critical discussion of how this research was underlined by Bourdieu's own sense of nostalgia (Reed-Danahay; Silverstein 2004). It is, however, equally important to note that Bourdieu himself became reflexive regarding the conditions of production for his intellectual nostalgia in the Béarn. This rather productive working-through of nostalgia, as an aspect of research situations, allows an engagement with this emotion rather than a straightforward dismissal of it as a 'bad' emotion. In his last book, *The Bachelor's Ball* (2007), he returns to his home village in the Béarn to consider the difficult economic and social predicament – encapsulated in a village dance designed to attract young women – of those men who have remained tied to the land as opposed to those who have severed or loosened these links by leaving for a life in the city. In this book, some of which is based on essays published earlier, he is acutely aware of the objectifying gaze of the objectifier as well as his own affective involvement with the participants of his research. The men he observes at a Friday night dance standing around, not dancing because they are "unmarriageable", were the neighbors and friends he had grown up with, after all.

Bourdieu befriended several postcolonial intellectuals and shared their concerns. They were part of his intellectual trajectory and key to an understanding of what entered his terrain of thought as well as how he conducted himself as an intellectual (Yacine, 2004). In 1985, Pierre Bourdieu supported Mouloud Mammeri in founding the Berber Studies journal, *Awal*, at the Centre for the Study of

Amazigh Culture (CERAM) in Paris. It was thus with good reason that when Mouloud Mammeri died in a car accident on 25 February 1989, it was Bourdieu who wrote his obituary in *Le Monde* (1989). In an homage to Mammeri, Bourdieu closely observed the postcolonial odyssey of his fellow intellectual traveller. He remarks:

> ... the history of the relation of Mouloud Mammeri to his originary society and culture can be described as an odyssey, with a first movement of distancing towards shores unknown and full of seductions, followed by a lengthy and slow return dotted with traps, toward his native land. This odyssey is, in my view, the path that all those who are issued out of a dominated society or a dominated class or region inside dominant societies, must tread in order to find or recover themselves. It is in this sense that the itinerary of Mouloud Mammeri is for me exemplary. (2004:618)

Bourdieu positions – one could even say identifies – himself with Mammeri's writings and research on the basis that he sees it as a "work that leads to a re-appropriation of one's culture of origin, through a victory over cultural shame, [as] a veritable socio-analysis" (2004:619)

Proximity and distance have been a constant research strategy for Bourdieu. How he expressed the proximity was no doubt shaped by his intellectual environments and influences. In the latter part of his life, Bourdieu even noted that his association with and support from Raymond Aaron in the early part of his academic career steered him away from 'non-scientific' forms of expression. Literary and novel forms of communication, which might have allowed more space for the affective qualities of his research, were curtailed

in favour of an academic style that offered authority and legitimacy via a form of sociology dominant at the time in North America. He had, however, started to free himself from this straitjacketed form of presentation. *The Bachelor's Ball* (2007) is clearly different in this regard.

Bourdieu can be seen to exercise a practised proximity and distance vis-à-vis the world into which he was inaugurated and in which he made his livelihood – the academy. Aside from publishing *Homo Academicus* (1990), he had no fear of politics tarnishing his intellectual credentials: quite the contrary. Towards the end of the film, *Sociology As a Martial Art* (2002), with which this article began, there is a scene when Bourdieu discusses his work at a racially mixed radio station where he is questioned by youths, as well as another very heated scene of a discussion forum held in a large hall within an estate. In both of these situations, Bourdieu seeks to get his ideas across in terms that are not confined to an academic mode of expression or a style that is aimed solely at communicating with other academics. He found it both important and productive for academic research to move both within and outside of the ivory tower, without displaying a moral attitude of what he called 'anti-intellectualism" (2003).

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