

Pierre Bourdieu, 1930–2002

David Macey

With his large head perched upon the stocky body of a peasant, he did not look like the identikit French intellectual, especially when wearing his favourite tweed jackets and open-necked shirts. And in many respects Pierre Bourdieu, who died of cancer, aged seventy-one, on 23 January 2002, was not the typical mandarin. He was a sociologist and not a professional philosopher, did not write fiction, and until the mid-1980s did not stray outside his own discipline, rarely pronouncing on the world at large, carefully avoiding the stance of the ‘universal intellectual’ and what he saw as the Sartrean illusion that knowledge is omnipotent. He led a very conventional family life and was never the subject of rumour or scandal. For much of his life, he was not a fashionable thinker, being as distrustful of existentialist subjectivism as he was of structuralist intellectualism. He remained firmly attached to a rationalism derived from both the sociological tradition and the historical epistemology of Bachelard and Canguilhem. He was no enthusiast for talk of postmodernism.

Bourdieu’s personal history and career seem almost to refute the theses of *The Inheritors* (1964) and *Reproduction* (1970), both written in collaboration with Jean-Claude Passeron. These major contributions to the sociology of education argue that, far from promoting social equality, the school system reproduces inequality because of the value it accords to a cultural or symbolic capital that cannot be accumulated in the classroom. Although it pays lip service to the values it inculcates in the classroom and through its examinations, the system actually works in favour of those pupils who have been exposed to a much broader culture – music from beyond the pop charts, galleries and exhibitions, films from outside the commercial circuit and so on – and to values shared by those who teach them. *The Inheritors* caused a scandal at a time when even left-wing teachers’ unions were thinking in terms of individual ‘gifts’ and ‘emancipation through education’. During May ’68, in which Bourdieu himself did not play any significant role, the book caused a lot of uncomfortable soul-searching on the part of good leftists who suddenly realized that their role in life was actually to reproduce the very culture they thought they opposed. On a rather different register, recent debates over the admissions policies of Oxbridge colleges demonstrate the continued relevance of Bourdieu and Passeron: an inner-city comprehensive is no place to learn how to pass the port.

The young Bourdieu was no inheritor, but a ‘scholarship boy’. Born in the southwest of France in 1930, he was the son of a peasant farmer turned postman who had left school at fourteen and of a mother who enjoyed only two more years of education than her husband. He followed the classical and arduous route taken by many a provincial boy, from a grim-sounding lycée in Pau to Paris and the *École Normale Supérieure*, whence he would return home to realize that he was ashamed of his own parents.

Yet there was always something of the provincial southwest about him. The accent remained with him, and he would deliberately use it as a rhetorical weapon to disconcert Parisian mandarins with accents to match their pretensions. He also retained a love of rugby, the game that has its heartland in the 'Ovalie' ('land of the oval ball') of his home area. The central concept (or perhaps it is a metaphor) in Bourdieu's cultural analysis is that of the 'field', and it is tempting to see the original field as a rugby pitch, and Bourdieu as a tough little scrum-half. Southern rugby is played hard, and Bourdieu played a hard game of academic and intellectual politics, estranging many and intimidating some but eventually emerging as the most powerful figure in French sociology.

Although his *agrégation* was in philosophy, his chosen subject was of course sociology. In the late 1940s this was not a glamorous discipline, and the heirs to Comte and Durkheim were very much overshadowed by the philosophers – and most French intellectuals have always been philosophers. For Bourdieu, they were a 'super-elite', resistant to change and fearful of losing their hegemony to the encroaching social sciences. If philosophy was a way of interpreting the world, sociology was a way of understanding it in order to change it, and of understanding how one's most 'subjective' tastes are always overdetermined by the social and the political. The tone could be minatory: you think that your liking for classical music, for visiting museums and galleries, for seeing the latest films, is a matter of personal taste or even a personality trait, but you are



in fact acquiring the signs of your social distinction, accumulating the symbolic capital that permits the exclusion of those not in its possession. Bourdieu was heavily influenced by Marx and Althusser, but was never a communist. At times, however, his writings on culture seem to echo with the most dread phrase in the entire communist vocabulary: 'Objectively, comrade, you are...'

Although it was his work on education that brought Bourdieu to public notice, his first studies in sociology concerned something very different. In 1955, he was called up for military service and shipped out to Algeria, where the situation was worsening and growing more violent by the day. He was a reluctant conscript, convinced that France's policy of so-called 'pacification' was futile and that the herding of 'terrorist suspects' into regroupment camps would both strengthen the hand of the insurgent

FLN and destroy what was left of Algeria's traditional peasant culture. After military service, Bourdieu taught for two years at the University of Algiers and did fieldwork in the mountains of Kabylia that combined sociological method with an insightful variety of social anthropology. Apparently recognizing a kinship between the French peasantry, on which he also wrote, and the Kabyles of the mountain regions east of Algiers, he wrote sympathetic and detailed studies of what remained of the proud culture of these dispossessed and deracinated peasants, analysing the structure of their beliefs and their houses in essays that gave birth to the notion of the *habitus*. A *habitus* is a system of durable and transposable 'dispositions', which functions as the generative basis of structured objectified practices. Bourdieu was to apply it to a whole host of 'fields', ranging from photography to the high art of museums and galleries, in order to explore

how what appears to be free or consensual behaviour results from the internalization of objective structures.

Sociologie de l'Algérie appeared in 1958 in the series of little *Que sais-je?* books and has remained in print ever since. It was the first of the many books published over more than forty years and accompanied by countless articles. The idea of a 'field' in which agents compete for symbolic (and real) power and economic dominance was now applied to culture, the arts, and the labyrinth that is known as the French academic world, with Bourdieu fighting sociology's corner with all his considerable energy. By 1964, he was both a director of research at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales and a lecturer at the École Normale Supérieure, and had established an impregnable power base; in 1982 he was elected to a chair in sociology at the Collège de France. He accumulated further power by becoming a series editor at Éditions de Minuit from 1964 onwards and the editor of the prestigious *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales* from 1975 to his death. The final academic accolade came in 1993, with the award of the Conseil National de Recherche Scientifique's Gold Medal – the highest honour that institution can award.

In the 1980s, a rather different Bourdieu began to emerge and to deploy his cultural capital in a more public domain. Together with Michel Foucault, he strove to defend the cause of Solidarity in Poland. By the end of the decade he was active on many fronts, supporting demonstrations by the unemployed, trying to defend the rights of the *sans-papiers* (immigrants in an 'irregular' situation and therefore without the all-important papers), and the homeless. His actions and positions inevitably caused controversy and sometimes bitter laughter. His colleague and rival Alain Touraine was by no means the only one to find it ludicrous that a militant Bourdieu – who was always terrified at having to address a public meeting – should tell the striking railway workers who brought France to a halt in 1995 that they were the last defenders of civilization, and the only alternative to a choice between barbarism and neoliberalism; they were striking for earlier retirement and the enhancement of pension rights that were already good by anyone's standard. Feminists did not take kindly to an analysis of 'male domination' (1998) written by a dominant male who seemed to have no understanding or knowledge of the previous forty-plus years of feminist research. He ignored the criticisms – if, that is, he read them – and continued to criticize globalization, the dumbing down of television and journalism, the McDonaldisation of French food; reserved a particularly venom for the Blair–Jospin–Schröder troika; and spoke out against the depredations of both fundamentalism and dictatorship in Algeria.

The press coverage of Bourdieu's death has been extraordinary. Both *Libération* and *Le Monde* devoted five-page supplements to the man and his work. There was a general consensus that, having already lost Sartre, Althusser, Lacan, Barthes and Foucault, France had once more lost its Intellectual Laureate and was unsure where – and if – it would find a replacement. Criticisms were of course made of aspects of his work, but journalists, trade unionists, academics and politicians across the political spectrum were in agreement about its overall value. With one exception. The weekly *Nouvel Observateur* also published a lengthy dossier on Bourdieu, and it is highly controversial. The inclusion of an unpublished autobiographical piece – apparently part of the 'socio-self-analysis' begun in the last lectures at the Collège de France – resulted in claims of breach of copyright and infringement of intellectual property rights. Other contributions smelled strongly of sour grapes. Bourdieu and the '*Obs*' had long been at loggerheads. For Bourdieu, now cast in the role of 'true leftist', the journal was the epitome of the 'pseudo-left' culture of a modernist bourgeoisie, and the promoter of a particularly risible style of distinction. Bourdieu's criticisms are by no means unjustified; what was once the flagship of the nonconformist Left now often looks like a Parisian style mag. Its constant lists of what one 'must see', 'must read', 'must wear' and 'must buy' were

easy targets for Bourdieu, and the criticisms seem to have hit home. In his leader, editor Jean Daniel – not noted for being the most modest of men – damned Bourdieu for his ‘arrogant’ politics, suggested that his distrust of the media masked a secret desire to be the editor of a paper, and argued that his Manichaean conception of a world of *dominants* and *dominés* simply ignored the complexity of the real world. Columnist Jacques Julliard spoke derisively of Bourdieu’s ‘rehash’ of Marx, Weber, Gramsci and Mannheim, and opined that it was only the absence of Sartre, Foucault and Althusser that made him look like a ‘great intellectual’. His explanation for the ‘culturalist neo-Marxism’ of *La Distinction* was brutally simple: it was all a matter of ‘social jealousy’ and the whole intellectual enterprise was a ‘failure’. The croppy boy from the southwest was being told to lie down again. At the time of writing, Bourdieu’s family was contemplating taking legal action for breach of copyright and defamation.

Pierre Bourdieu and the revival of social critique

Alex Callinicos

There are multiple ways in which Pierre Bourdieu might be assessed. Most obviously he wrote, from the end of the 1950s onwards, a series of monographs that represent major contributions to diverse intellectual fields. Think, for example, of *Sociologie d’Algérie* (1958), *Reproduction in Education* (1970), *Distinction* (1979) and *The Rules of Art* (1992). Bourdieu’s vast body of writing traces a complex intellectual itinerary. For the purposes of this symposium, however, it may be better to focus on what are, in my view, the two main respects in which – beyond all the compelling specialized studies that Bourdieu produced – he should be of interest to those committed to practising a genuinely radical philosophy.

To appreciate the first aspect, we need to consider the contemporary intellectual scene. The most obvious thing to strike one is that postmodernism is history. Baudrillard’s effusions on 11 September simply illustrate how *vieux jeu* this intellectual genre has become. Considered more positively, the past few years have seen a phenomenon whose philosophical impossibility it was one of Baudrillard’s main aims to establish: the revival of social critique. Take the case of Bourdieu’s native France. In the early 1980s, in the wake of the intellectual collapse of Marxism precipitated by the attacks of the *nouveaux philosophes* and of Foucault and his followers, Perry Anderson could write: ‘Paris today is the capital of European intellectual reaction.’ Nearly twenty years later, this sentence can no longer be asserted with truth. Paris today, as a result of the explosive growth of the activist coalition around *Le Monde diplomatique* and ATTAC, is one of the main centres of the movement against capitalist globalization. Bourdieu’s ex-collaborator Luc Boltanski and Eve Chapiello have devoted a monumental study to, among other things, documenting what they call ‘the renovation of social critique’ in France since the early 1990s, *Le Nouveau esprit du capitalisme* (Gallimard, Paris, 1999). The French contribution has been a major factor in the emergence of the World Social Forum – held in Porto Alegre, Brazil, in 2001 and 2002 – as a counterforce to the neoliberal ideological hegemony.

Bourdieu made a critical contribution to this process. He seems always to have regarded postmodernism with cheerful contempt. In one splendid passage in his

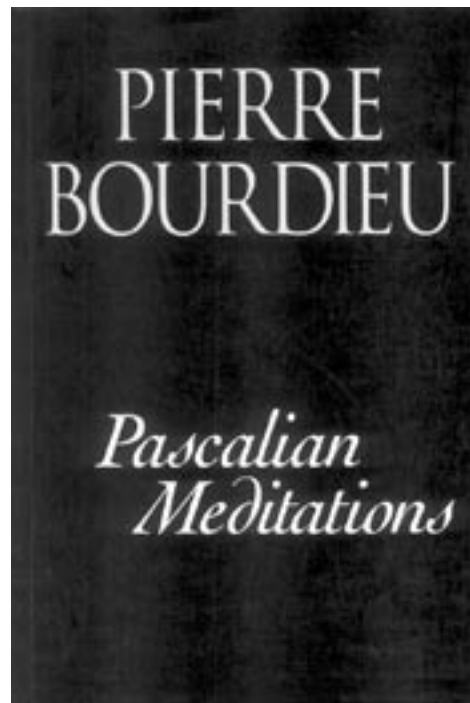
Pascalian Meditations (1997; trans. 2000) he disposes of the supposedly cutting-edge theorists comfortably ensconced at the University of California, Santa Cruz: ‘How could one not believe that capitalism has dissolved in a “flux of signifiers detached from their signifieds”, that the world is populated by “cyborgs”, “cybernetic organisms”, and that we have entered the age of “informatics of domination”, when one lives in a little social and electronic paradise from which all trace of work and exploitation has been effaced?’

Implicit in all Bourdieu’s work was an identification with the plight of the oppressed and exploited. In the early 1990s this began to become explicit. *The Weight of the World* (1993) exposed the different kinds of social suffering generated by neoliberal policies. From the public-sector strikes of November–December 1995 onwards Bourdieu became actively involved in rallying the opposition to these policies. With a group of collaborators he formed *Raisons d’agir*, which produced a series of short, cheap texts – most notably Bourdieu’s own *Contre-feux* (1998) and *Contre-feux 2* (2001) – that sought systematically to dismantle the free-market *pensée unique* and to expose the social interests it harboured.

His political interventions transformed Bourdieu into the latest instance of a figure whose historical formation in late-nineteenth-century France he himself analysed in *The Rules of Art* – the intellectual who employs the symbolic capital he has accumulated in a specialized field to take up political causes. They also made him the target of vehement attack for, among other things, ‘sociological terrorism’. No wonder that his friend the philosopher Jacques Bouveresse expressed his anger at the hypocrisy with which the French establishment – including even the Elysée – heaped Bourdieu in praise after his death. In a climate in which Marxism had been marginalized as part of a larger evisceration of critical thought, Bourdieu used the immense prestige that a great French intellectual can still command in Western culture to denounce the manifest injustices of the world and to assert the legitimacy of resistance. ‘His contribution was decisive’, Pierre Khalfa of the left trade union SUD said after Bourdieu’s death. ‘He legitimized a fight against the surrounding economism’ (*Libération*, 25 January 2002).

The second respect in which Bourdieu’s work should be of particular interest to radical philosophers concerns his preoccupation, most systematically pursued in the superb *Pascalian Meditations*, with situating socially, philosophically, one might even say ethically, intellectual work itself. ‘I do not like the intellectual in myself’, he wrote. This reflected his sense of the ‘*fundamental ambiguity* of the scholastic universe and of all its productions – universal acquisitions made accessible by an exclusive privilege – [that] lies in the fact that their apartness from the world of production is both a liberatory break and a disconnection, a potentially crippling separation.’ For Bourdieu the secret of scholarship is revealed by the etymology of the word itself – ‘*skhole*, the free time, freed from the urgencies of the world, that allows a liberated relationship to those urgencies and to the world’.

In *Pascalian Meditations* Bourdieu fulfils a promise made in *Distinction* and undertakes what he calls ‘the most radical historicization’ of reason, hoping thereby to avoid the two false polarities of abstract rationalism and postmodernist relativism. He argues that the social logic of the scientific field compels researchers – competing, as Bourdieu believes human actors do more generally, for social recognition and the symbolic capital this creates – to seek to produce works that can validly claim to be more accurate representations of the world than those of their rivals. Epistemic progress is thus, in these highly specific conditions, generated by social competition:



The fact remains that, despite everything, the struggle [within the scientific field] always takes place under the constitutive norms of the field and solely with the weapons approved within the field, and that, claiming to apply to the properties of the things themselves, their structures, their effects, etc., and therefore to have the status of truths, the propositions engaged in this struggle recognize each other tacitly or explicitly as amenable to the test of coherence and the verdict of experiment.

This is an intriguing argument that merits careful philosophical interrogation, which it has yet to receive. Beyond the epistemological issues it raises, Bourdieu seems to have been struggling to forge a new conception of the political role of the intellectual, one that would take full advantage of the opportunities offered by the detachment of the scholarly life from everyday preoccupations, while at the same time avoiding a relapse into claiming mastery on the basis of privileged access to the 'Truth'. In the immediate aftermath of the great demonstrations at Seattle in November 1999, Bourdieu called for 'scholarship with commitment, that is to say of a politics of intervention in the political world that obeys, as far as possible, the rules in force in the scientific field' ('Pour un savoir engagé', in *Contre-feux 2, Raisons d'agir*, Paris, 2001). Whatever the faults of *Raisons d'agir*, it represented a serious effort on the part of Bourdieu and his collaborators to develop a new form of 'scholar-activist'.

Bourdieu's comments on Marxism do not generally show him at his best: he tends to bracket it with neoliberalism as twin examples of the economic fatalism that he sought in his last years politically to resist. It is hard not to regard the claim of an originality for his own work with respect to Marx (and indeed other figures such as Durkheim and Weber) as a case of what Harold Bloom calls the anxiety of influence. Yet the problems that he addresses in *Pascalian Meditations* concerning the relationship between intellectual work, scientific knowledge, and emancipatory politics are ones with which leading Hegelian Marxists such as Lukács and Gramsci also grappled. Many of the claims that Bourdieu made to have transcended traditional oppositions – between rationalism and relativism, for example, or individualism and structuralism – are easy enough philosophically to deconstruct. But this seems less important than the way in which he helped to recreate a space in which genuinely critical thought – and practice – can once again be pursued.

The sociological ambition of Pierre Bourdieu

Frédéric Vandenberghe

The French media have buried Pierre Bourdieu, one of the greatest sociologists of the twentieth century, in a typical – almost predictable – way, with a mixture of admiration and resentment for the man, his work and his politics on the left of the Left. By stressing the last decade of his life, foregrounding his political interventions in the public sphere (in defence of the railwaymen, the unemployed, illegal aliens, gays and lesbians; against the neoliberal politics of globalization and the war in the Balkans) and his critique of the media (pleading for a 'corporatism of reason' and 'committed scholarship' against fashionable postmodernist and other 'fast thinkers' like Bernard Henri Lévy, Alain Minc and Régis Debray), they have almost systematically

discarded the grand sociological theory of cultural production and social reproduction that underlies his multiple empirical studies of the fields (and subfields) of science, philosophy, art, education, politics, economics, law and journalism.¹ Notwithstanding the extreme disparity and apparent frivolity of the objects of his empirical analyses – from the Berber house and comic strips to Heidegger, from the bodily posture of women and the linguistic hypercorrection of the petty bourgeoisie to the time-consciousness of the Algerian subproletariat, from celibacy and cultural taste to the sociological self-analysis with which he finished his last course at the Collège de France – his œuvre displays a remarkable unity and a degree of systematicity that can easily match that of a Habermas or a Luhmann.

Field, habitus, cultural capital and symbolic violence – those are not simply tools of a loosely integrated theoretical toolkit; they are genuine master concepts that are so crafted and interrelated as to form a total theory of the social world. Having moved in the 1960s from the dominant discipline of philosophy to ethnology and from there to the dominated and stigmatized discipline of sociology, Bourdieu was only in his mid-thirties when he developed, at the highest level of abstraction and with the greatest conceptual precision, the interrelated theories of ‘fields’ and the ‘habitus’ that form the backbone of his progressive research programme. Although the series of theoretical articles and books culminated in 1978 with the publication of *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, his masterwork and already a classic of sociology, it took the sociological genius more than forty years fully to spell out the implications of his early intuitions and to make a ‘symbolic revolution’ in sociology, comparable perhaps to the one Manet made in the field of painting, or Flaubert in the field of literature.²

Heavily influenced by Bachelard and Cassirer, Bourdieu’s mode of thinking is resolutely dialectical and relational. His work can be understood as a rewriting of the infamous Hegelian dictum into ‘The real is relational.’ Its main concepts are defined in terms of relations, such that they can only be understood in terms of each other. Both the ‘field’ and the ‘habitus’ designate bundles of relations, analysed structurally in the first case as *opus operatum* and phenomenologically in the latter as *modus operandi*, to borrow Panofsky’s scholastic distinction of which Bourdieu was so fond. The field consists of a network or configuration of objective relations between social positions in which the positions and their interrelations are determined by the distribution of different kinds of capital (economic, cultural and social); while the habitus consists of a set of historical relations ‘deposited’ or ‘incorporated’ within individual bodies in the form of mental and corporeal schemata of actions, evaluations and perceptions. The habitus is thus the internalization of the field, whereas the field is the exteriorization of the habitus.

These concepts are not only defined relationally, but are also designed with the explicit intent of overcoming the age-old oppositions between objectivism and subjectivism, collectivism and individualism, determinism and voluntarism, externalism and internalism that have marred sociology since its double foundation by Comte and Dilthey in the nineteenth century. Dialectically defined as ‘systems of durable and transposable dispositions, structured structures which are predisposed to function as structuring structures’, Bourdieu put to new use the old and venerable Aristotelian concept of *hexis*, which Boethius and Aquinas translated as habitus, by conceiving of it as a theoretical construct that mediates between the field (by which actions are shaped) and the actions (that structure the field). Produced by the objective structures of relations that make up the field, the habitus produces the practices that reproduce the field. Although the theory of practice was outlined to overcome the opposition between objectivism and subjectivism, there nevertheless remains a strong objectivistic

bias in Bourdieu's theoretical practice. Indeed, if the habitus functions in principle as a productive principle of action, it tends as a matter of fact to reproduce the social world by which it is produced, giving a strong deterministic slant to the analysis of the social world, in stark contrast to the critical intention that animates the theory and the voluntaristic quality of Bourdieu's political interventions in the public sphere. However, given that the topology of the space of possibilities of sociology which maps out the possible positions and oppositions of the discipline is perfect, and that Bourdieu has always encouraged voluntarist readings of his work, nothing should stop us from trying to 'twist the stick in the other direction', as Chairman Mao used to say, in order to see this theory of reproduction as a preamble to an encompassing critical theory of society that is able to conceptualize both structures of domination and practices of emancipation.

Importing philosophical concepts into sociology and exporting sociological methods into philosophy, Bourdieu aimed at an ethno-philosophical reappropriation of the sociological tradition. Not unlike the early Frankfurt School, but by consciously practising 'methodological polytheism' (ethnography, statistical analysis, Proustian descriptions of everyday life), he wanted to tackle the great philosophical questions by means of concrete empirical research. This can be gathered simply from a glance at his books, where one finds long heavily articulated sentences and complex socio-philosophical propositions next to pictures, interviews, graphs, statistics and correspondence analyses. Thanks to his incomparable theoretical culture and his creative reinterpretation of classical texts, he was able successfully to integrate authors and intellectual currents that are opposed by the canonic tradition and to propose an original synthesis of neo-Kantian (or Leibnizian) epistemology (Bachelard and Cassirer, but also Poincaré, Panofsky and Lévi-Strauss), sociology (Marx, Weber, Durkheim and Mauss, but also Elias, Mannheim and Goffman), phenomenology (Husserl, Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty) and linguistic philosophy (Bakhtin, Wittgenstein and Austin).

Bourdieu was not only a great analyst, however, but also a great catalyst. Inheriting and prolonging the sociological project of Durkheim and Mauss, seeking to reintegrate and unify the social sciences, he developed a scientific paradigm for the sociological analysis of the fields and subfields of cultural production, distribution and consumption; founded a research centre (Centre de sociologie européenne) which functioned like a school (and even like a sect, if we are to believe his critics); launched an innovative scientific journal (*Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*) to escape expropriation by the establishment; and edited a series of books, first at Éditions de Minuit (*Le sens commun*) and later at Seuil (*Liber*), in which he published the work of Cassirer, Panofsky, Sapir, Finley, Hoggart, Skinner, Bakhtin, Labov, Bateson, Goffman and Cicourel, to name but a few of those whose work he introduced to the French public. Deprovincializing French thought, the intellectual from the provinces opened up the field of French social sciences to foreign influences and developed a cosmopolitan social theory with universal ambitions that travels well (but not lightly) and that, no doubt, will stand the test of its time.

Notes

1. For an excellent introduction to the social theory of Bourdieu, see L. Wacquant, 'Toward a Social Praxeology: The Structure and Logic of Bourdieu's Sociology', in P. Bourdieu and L. Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1992, pp. 1–59. Some of the best secondary analyses of Bourdieu's work are collected in three volumes in D. Robbins, ed., *Pierre Bourdieu*, Sage, London, 1999.
2. On Flaubert, see *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field* (1992), Polity Press, Cambridge, 1996. For years, Bourdieu had been working on a book on Manet, but unfortunately the manuscript is unfinished.