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FRENCH SOCIOLOGISTS AND THE MEDIA: ONE PROBLEM, TWO INTERPRETATIONS

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Sociologists, more than other scientists, are frequently torn between the requirements of good scholarship and the lure of quick success through the media. Some decades ago, Ralf Dahrendorf seemed to believe that the responsibility for such an uncomfortable position lay solely with the naive expectations of journalists and the public at large.¹ “Like an angry creditor,” wrote Dahrendorf, “the public pursues the sociologist’s every move in order to lay its hands on every penny he may produce. Is it surprising that under these conditions many a sociologist has begun to forge currency? The public deserves no better ...” (1961, vii). This statement may reflect Dahrendorf’s experience in the 50s. In the following decades, however, no prodding was needed to convince numerous sociologists that the “pedestrian path of science”² was indeed long and boring. Many of them began to seek recognition, no longer through the usual channels of their scientific community, but through the shortcut provided by the media. This phenomenon took on greater proportions in France than in any other Western country, partly under the influence of the cultural model of the *intellectuel*, heir to the Enlightenment philosophers.

Two prominent French sociologists, Raymond Boudon and Pierre Bourdieu, have given some thought to the strategy of seeking the attention of a broad educated audience through the media rather than submitting to the normative forum of scholarly discipline. Recently, the matter came to the fore again when Bourdieu published a short pamphlet warning against the power of television in our societies (Bourdieu, 1996). Although both Boudon and Bourdieu have identified basically the same phenomenon, they analyze it in two different ways.

For Boudon, the origin of the phenomenon is to be found in the degeneration of the French University as an institution. Very often, according to Boudon, French universities are neither first-rate higher education agencies nor centers of high-quality research; they fail on both counts (Boudon, 1979, 87). As a consequence, the temptation is great for both students and professors to look for adaptive solutions such as “retreatism” or “innovation” as defined by Merton

1 See the preface to the first (German) edition of *Class and Class Conflict in an Industrial Society* (1961, vii).

2 To borrow from Dahrendorf once more (*ibid.*).

(1968, 193–211). “Innovation”, in the case of a French university professor, can mean reducing his involvement in university life to a minimum and turning more and more to the *Tout-Paris* of the intellectuals (Boudon, 1979, 88).³ The sociologist teaching in a French university will seek from the *Tout-Paris* the symbolic rewards he can no longer obtain from the university system. He will have to adapt to a different audience than that of academics. In other words, he will have to present his intellectual wares in another market. In fact, he will neglect the academic market and make himself available in the “second market” of intellectuals (Boudon, 1990). This whole line of reasoning is based on a certain form of utilitarian rationality. The individual scholar feels entitled to some rewards. If he no longer receives them within the academic community, he will look for a substitute outside. The goal is to reach an audience. The media are just a tool, as are the specialized journals for the academic market. While Boudon obviously favors that first market and its classic rules of good scholarship, he recognizes that the process of opening up to the second market has not produced only negative consequences, as one might be tempted to think. Alluding to Terry Clark’s thesis that ever since Durkheim the main feature of institutionalized sociology in France has been a kind of “closed shop” imposed by a few prominent figures on their dependent followers (Clark, 1973; Thompson, 1993)⁴, Boudon acknowledges the fact that using the second market may have been a way of substituting an oligopolistic structure to a monopolistic one. He fears, however, the emergence of a new monopoly in the form of a star system (Boudon, 1979, 90 ff.). When the intellectual seeks a form of recognition by direct contact with the public through the media, he tends to forget the basic rules of serious scholarship (Boudon and Bourricaud, 1982, 318). But whoever is on the winning side – the mandarins officiating in the first market or the gurus performing in the second market – Boudon clearly takes the characteristics of the modern university as *explanans* of the growth of the “second market”. It is because the university system no longer offers the symbolic rewards it once provided that the temptation to seek notoriety and prestige through the media has grown stronger.

Although Bourdieu has also provided an analysis of the crisis of the French University (Bourdieu, 1984), his starting-point in his recent critique of the role of television is different. He focuses on the structure of the media system – in his own terms “the journalistic field” – giving of course special attention to television, in order to understand what is required to cooperate with it. Bourdieu’s starting-point has to be different in this regard since he views cooperation with the media not as an escape but as a duty; according to him, scholars actually

3 It is indeed “innovation” in the Mertonian sense. But we can see it as “retreatism” as well; the more so since Boudon describes the process as “*la fuite vers le Tout-Paris*” (1979, 88).

4 For an inside view, see also: Mendras, 1995.

have the task of transferring knowledge to the public at large (Bourdieu, 1996, 12). In our time, the transfer of knowledge, to be successful, must employ the channels offered by the media, particularly television.

This leads to an analysis of the relations between the social world of television and the producers of cultural goods, including artists, intellectuals and social scientists (Bourdieu, 1996). The world of television is viewed as part of the “journalistic field” and the characteristics of this field clearly become the independent variable in the analysis. This is quite consistent with Bourdieu’s view of a “field” as a structured social space with its own rules of the game.⁵ These “rules of the game” as described by Bourdieu lead to an emphasis on the trivial which can provide the broadest possible audience and to an obsession with the “scoop”.

The journalistic field, it is argued, has enormously increased its importance by holding a monopoly on the means of production and dissemination of information (Bourdieu, 1996, 52). In other words, it may be said to have acquired a kind of gate-keeping function, producing an inversion of the balance of power between the various fields. Thirty years ago, too strong a presence in the media world could compromise an academic career and we are reminded here of the example of Raymond Aron (*Ibid.*, 69). Today, the opposite is true: everything incites those who can do so to combine internal academic approval with recognition by the public at large. The journalistic field can effectively penetrate other fields by the strategy of the “Trojan horse”. Of course, the more a field is autonomous, the more it can resist invasion by the norms of the journalistic field. A very autonomous field is a field in which the producers have as customers only their competitors; mathematics is a case in point. Conversely, the more a field is heteronomous – open to various sets of norms, sometimes imported from the outside as in the social sciences – the more it is vulnerable to the “Trojan horse” of the media (*Ibid.*, 68). This means that the more a cultural producer is autonomous, rich in “capital” specific to his field, the more he will resist acceptance of the heteronomous norms of the “journalistic field”. On the other hand, cultural producers who are less committed to the norms of their own field and who find it difficult to secure recognition within that particular field, acquire a vested interest in its heteronomy.

Why, according to Bourdieu, are there reasons to “resist” the norms of the journalistic field, particularly the television system? Because access to television, nowadays, implies the acceptance of censorship. To be sure, that censorship has nothing in common with the crude censorship of authoritarian regimes; nevertheless, it is a variant of real censorship. Political and economic influences

5 A point that he made again recently (Bourdieu, 1997, 117).

are a reality and play a role. But more than that: there is a kind of self-censorship practiced by both television producers and participants in their programmes which amounts to a form of “symbolic violence” on people who are unaware of its power (1996, 15–16).

If we compare the two analyses, we find some interesting paradoxes. Boudon, as is his wont, takes the point of view of the individual actor who faces various possible courses of action. And indeed, on the basis of Boudon’s description of the facts, one can understand the behavior of the individual academic and imagine the good reasons he has to choose one possibility or another. But it is quite clear that Boudon relates the whole process of “reaching out to the media” to the structural constraints which define the options for the individual. And these constraints are unanticipated consequences of events of the 60s. Had there not been an institutional degeneration of the French University, there would be less incentive to seek recognition through the media. Bourdieu, quite in line with his structural approach, always refers to the totality of the “field”. His description of the “journalistic field” places so much emphasis on the systemic logic of the field that the individual actor seems to be exonerated of any responsibility for the “Trojan horse” attacks on other fields.⁶ But in the end, it is the individual actor who is supposed to “resist” and to refuse certain forms of cooperation with the media. And Bourdieu’s hope rests with the individual or with associations of individuals.

Resistance is supposed to benefit the underdog: those who suffer most from the “symbolic violence” inflicted by television, though they may not realize it. But, in a relatively heteronomous field such as that of the social sciences, who will be able to resist? Bourdieu would say: those who possess the greatest amount of capital specific to that field. Boudon might prefer to say: the most talented and the most committed to academic norms. The choice of words does not seem to make much difference in this particular line of reasoning.

Obviously, both Boudon and Bourdieu see the increasingly powerful influence of the media on intellectual life as a threat. Boudon relates the current situation to the weakness of academic institutions. He laments the current state of the French University and views the attractions of the “second market” as a by-product of this institutional degeneration. Bourdieu reverses the argument and describes an overall situation marked by the enormous power of the media. It seems fair to say that the order of the sequence – academic weakness contributing to the power of the media or the power of the media contributing to academic weakness – is in no way determined by theoretical assumptions. On the other

⁶ That, by the way, could explain why Bourdieu’s indictment of television was generally well received in journalistic circles.

hand, the setting in which the two scientists operate may have an influence on the way they prefer to present their diagnosis.

There seems to be broad agreement at present that a realignment of French academic institutions has taken place in recent decades (Rieffel, 1993, chap. II). The universities, including the old *Sorbonne*, have lost much of their prestige and a transfer of legitimacy has been observed in the direction of other institutions previously considered as peripheral, such as the “*Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales*” (EHESS) and the “*Collège de France*”.

The classic university, of which Raymond Boudon is a prominent representative, was a quite autonomous field, to use Bourdieu’s terminology. While operating in such a system⁷, one cannot but see hasty recognition by the media as a sign of institutional degeneration. On the other hand, in the EHESS, or at the “*Collège de France*” for that matter, relations with the world of the media have become more symbiotic. Jean Lacouture’s coverage of the inaugural lectures of the “*Collège de France*” on behalf of “*Le Monde*”, or the frequent contributions by historians of the EHESS to “*Le Nouvel Observateur*” illustrate this symbiotic situation. This type of symbiosis is something the EHESS can certainly afford: indeed it has in the meantime acquired the reputation of an outstanding intellectual forum worldwide. Some of its prominent members such as Alain Touraine no longer hesitate to treat the media as legitimate channels of dissemination of the results of their work and no longer bother to seek the recognition of academic bodies. In this setting – the one in which Bourdieu operates – the question is no longer whether one should seek recognition through the media, but how to use the media. And that seems to be one of Bourdieu’s main concerns at this stage in his scientific career. The distinction between the academic market and the second market of intellectuals has lost its relevance. He does not perform in an “autonomous field” exposed to invasion by the “Trojan horse” of the “journalistic field”. He is engaged in an ongoing transaction with the media people in order to set the rules of the game; the rules are therefore neither autonomous nor heteronomous: they have become bargaining rules. According to some critics, Bourdieu’s pamphlet on television may even be seen as a strategic move in his dealings with the media.⁸

In short, the two prominent sociologists mentioned here – Raymond Boudon and Pierre Bourdieu – are both very much part of the institutional system described by Terry Clark. In the oligopolistic structure which has replaced the

7 Even with the additional prestige conferred by membership of the “*Académie des Sciences Morales et Politiques*”, as is the case with Boudon.

8 This was strongly suggested by J.-L. Fabiani, Director of Studies at the EHESS, in a comment published by the influential French daily “*Le Monde*” (1997). See also: Fabiani, Ethis and Pedler (1997).

old academic power structure, they obviously tend to maintain monopolistic strategies. Each may be seen to be responding to the structure of opportunities offered by the institutions in which he is active. In the venerable *Sorbonne*, the response will be to uphold the norms of serious scholarship and to voice fears for the future of cognitive activities. In the context of the EHESS and the “*Collège de France*”, it will be to blur the very distinction between the “two markets” and to reach for the best-sellers list. This, more than any paradigmatic orientation, may account for the different ways in which the two authors perceive the problem of the relations which French sociologists entertain with the media.

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