

# Bourdieu's activism and his utility for university workers

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# Bourdieu's politics 'as rich and ambiguous as his theory is' (Van Zanten, 2005: np)

- What were Bourdieu's own late political interventions (late 1980s-2000s)?
- Are they a useful model for those of 'activist scholars'/'academic activists'/politically conscious university workers?
- Taking the long way round: from the struggles of intellectuals to intellectuals in struggle.



## Personal context for the paper

- Involvement in national wave of strikes in UK universities (2022-23), now local struggles against redundancies.
- Branch president of University and Colleges Union at Durham University 2021-2024: writing on the politics of work and university workers.
- Leider bin ich nicht in Wien! Aus zwei guten Gründen... So miss you all!

# The very long road to a more activist orientation to social science?

- 'his later years of public political activism seem to contrast with the earlier years following a professional career as a social scientific researcher' (Swartz, 2003: 79)
- '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 hoping for some time that it could lead to concrete reforms, especially in higher education. **Increasingly disappointed [...] 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.' (Van Zanten, 2005: np)

# The defence of intellectual autonomy

- **'far from there being an antinomy between the quest for autonomy (such as characterizes art, science and literature described as pure) and the quest for political effectiveness, as is ordinarily believed, it is by increasing their autonomy – and hence, among other things, their freedom of criticism towards the powers that be – that intellectuals can increase the effectiveness of a political action whose ends and means find their origin in the specific logic of the field of cultural production.'** Pierre Bourdieu 1989, For an international of intellectuals.

# An international of artists/scientists/intellectuals

“My dream would be to create **an *international* of artists and scientists which would become an independent political — and moral — force capable of intervening, with authority and with a competence founded on their autonomy, about problems of general interest** (such as nuclear power, education or the new bio-technologies). They would not rule but, while remaining in their place, they would constitute **a very serious control over rulers, especially in those domains where they know a great deal**, if only by saying that we do not know enough.”

(My emphasis. Wacquant and Bourdieu, 1993: 39)

# Intellectual attempts to hold back structural change in higher education

- Founding of the *Association de Réflexion sur les Enseignements Supérieurs la Recherche* 1992:
  - *Document gathering, publishing texts, holding roundtables, entering into public debate over higher education.*
- Did this achieve anything? This is a question for French university workers/academics to answer.
- What did this organisation actually do to organise and build the power of university workers in universities?
- Similar organisations of pre-eminent professors in the UK (Council for the Defence of British Universities, est. 2012) have not really achieved much and arrived far too late.

# Academics as university workers

- Why are we so incapable of thinking of ourselves as workers and taking this as our starting point?
- 'academics isolate their work and fetishise it as an intellectual craft' (Winn 2015, p. 9)
- Despite the precarity of the neoliberal university we still feel we can be 'paid in pleasure' (Osserman, 2021, p. 65).
- Most academics (probably still) believe that they as individuals alone control '[t]he[i]r tools product... the image of solitary self-possession remains potent' (Harney & Moten, 1999, p. 165).
- The 'vulgar system of stardom' (Moten & Harney, 1999, p. 27) for a few rests on a culture of 'omertà' where exploitation and forms of domination, over both other academic education workers and other workers in the university, are silent or unspoken (Hall, 2018, p. 139).
- We don't see ourselves as workers and this means we simply don't ask ourselves what it means to build and take power as workers.
- Small cliques of elite academics will not achieve much



# Contradictory positions/he got there in the end

- “The dichotomy between scholarship and commitment reassures the scholar of his good conscience, as he receives the approval of the scientific community [...] This reserve, this flight into purity, has very serious social consequences. Should people like myself, paid by the state for their research, carefully keep the results of this research for their colleagues?”

Pierre Bourdieu, ‘Scholars and the social movement’ May 2001 at a meeting of Raisons d’Agir Greece.

- What would happen if we all took 40+ years to get to this position?

# Important not to downplay his role

- Widespread attention to The Weight of the World – 80,000 copies
- Bourdieu's public support for the 1995 general strikes and the Raisons d'Agir collective:  
'to give practical embodiment to the kind of 'collective intellectual' for which I had been calling for many years, was born out of a concern **to produce instruments for a practical solidarity between intellectuals and strikers'** and 'graduates constitute a kind of great international popular encyclopaedia in which activists from all countries will be able to find the intellectual weapons needed for their struggles'

# Organising within European Social Movements

- On the occasion of the entry of the FPÖ into government in Austria in 2000:
  - **“We can certainly struggle symbolically**, in particular by working collectively to deepen our analysis of the phenomenon, and invent, with the aid of artists, new forms of effective symbolic action. **But we can also establish new structures of resistance, and in particular oppose to these foolish nationalisms a new internationalism, an international political resistance.** Two months ago we launched the idea, with a certain number of trade unions and movements in various European countries, of bringing together all such movements – trade unions of course, but also movements in support of the unemployed, illegal immigrants, the homeless, etc. – around the elaboration of a Charter for a European welfare state. **We then hope to hold a big meeting in Athens, which would be – these are the words ... – something like a general assembly of the European social movements.**
- *‘For an Austria in the forefront of Europe’* IG Kultur Österreich, Vienna, 31 March 2000
- Links to the European Social Forums/Fora of the early 2000s? We do certainly need this again.

# Reflecting on this later period

- Three questions:
  1. Does knowledge not come from and through struggle?
  2. Is there a political problem in assuming there is a division between 'intellectuals'/academics/the professional-managerial class?
  3. What would happen if academics took the first question literally and actually started organising in their own workplaces/communities (some do but most do not)
- We need the spirit of the European Social Forums/Fora again
- One of the strengths of university workers is that we have spirit of internationalism – can it be tied more closely to the struggles we all need to be fighting?

# Conclusions

- Powerful but contradictory politics and work as a public intellectual
- He took his time! Is he a good role model for the politically engaged university worker? Possibly not.
- What about knowledge that comes through struggle and develops from the bottom up?
- Wider questions about what Bourdieu has done to class analysis and struggle (for another day!)
- We need to think about what our role is as education workers both in our own workplaces and in wider social movements and struggles.

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# Unused quote

- What then should this scientist do in the social movement? First of all, he will not give lessons – after the fashion of certain organic intellectuals who, being unable to impose their wares in the scientific marketplace, where competition is harsh, go and play the intellectual vis-à-vis non-intellectuals, even while saying that intellectuals don't exist. The scientist is neither a prophet nor a *maître à penser*. He has to invent a new role, and a very hard one; to try and assist those bodies that take as their mission – even the trade unions, though ever more weakly, I am sorry to say – resistance to neoliberal policy; he has to take on the task of assisting them by providing them with instruments.