

## **Bourdieu en Afrique; Cultural Studies in the Colonies**

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**Abstract:** This paper looks at Bourdieu's attack on Cultural Studies from a double perspective: an unpublished interview with the author in which he traced his own intellectual background, and the relative influence of Bourdieu and of Cultural Studies in South Africa.

Bourdieu, late in his life, attacked Cultural Studies as one form of Imperial Cunning and globalising publications con trick for a would-be discipline with no proper place in the intellectual field (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1999). The English translation, in fact, seemed to represent a hardening of tone of the original French version of the article (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1998) – the relatively neutral (or even positive!) implications of Cultural Studies as a 'domaine hybride' gave way to the openly pejorative description of Cultural Studies as a 'mongrel domain' and there is a damaging addition to the note on the success of publishing studies. Someone saw fit to 'durcir le ton'.

Yet many would see Bourdieu's position and intellectual trajectory as very similar to that of Cultural Studies and many in Cultural Studies have used Bourdieu as some kind of honorary founding figure, as representative of dominated traditions in high academe, as the inheritor of post-Marxist legacies, and so on.

Bourdieu's attack seemed particularly surprising, given an interview the author conducted with Bourdieu shortly after the publication of *Distinction* in 1981, in which Bourdieu set out his view of his own intellectual trajectory. He stressed his own intellectual eclecticism, his arguments with Lucien Goldmann and what he referred to as the Germanic 'philosophical method', talked of the shortcomings of the questionnaires on readership in *Distinction*, and commented at some length on the difficulties of applying the concept of the intellectual field in a post-colonial setting such as Algeria.

In his discussion of his own background as anthropologist, Bourdieu said: 'En anthropologie, ...je suis parti de la tradition, au fond, culturaliste, anglo-saxonne'. [In anthropology, I started from the Anglo-Saxon tradition which is, basically, culturalist.] He went on to say that his next major influence was Levi-Strauss and how much he had owed to him, though he had never been Levi-Strauss's student.

He defended his sense of intuition and added, with a sardonic mix of self-praise and self-mockery: 'On peut dire qu'il n'y a pas plus éclectique que moi.' [One can say that nobody is more eclectic than me.] He added that 'C'est très difficile de ne pas commencer par se critiquer soi-même, quand on travaille dans ma logique.'

C'est ça, je pense c'est la seule, enfin, la seule originalité réelle de ce que je fais, c'est ça! [It is very difficult not to start by criticising oneself, when one works in my logic. That, I think, is the only, well, the only real originality of what I do, it's that!] So far, one might say that the impression of Bourdieu's similarities, elective affinities almost, to Cultural Studies seem justified.

Part of Bourdieu's resistance to Cultural Studies may emerge in his delight at being at what he saw as the Galilean moment for sociology, a moment when it was its most challenging and exciting as a discipline. He said that the best he could say about himself was that: 'J'ai fait mon métier. La sociologie est un métier très difficile...' [I've done my job / I've learned my trade. Sociology is a very difficult trade / craft / profession.] Perhaps some of his hostility to Cultural Studies was that he felt that it lacked the rigorous craft and practical elements which he saw as part of the sociological tradition and imagination.

From a South African perspective, does this quarrel matter? How have the complementary and/or rival perspectives of Bourdieu and Cultural Studies contributed to studies of South African culture and media in the new South Africa?

While some work in recent South African studies has explicitly or implicitly taken a Cultural Studies label or approach (Nuttall & Coetzee, 1998; Nuttall & Michael, 2000; Wasserman & Jacobs, 2003), it is unclear what the intellectual affiliation or genesis of current practitioners is. Sarah Nuttall, probably the single most prominent current cultural studies academic, does not see the background to Cultural Studies in, for example, the Centre for Cultural and Media Studies (CCMS) at the University of Natal in Durban (now the University of Kwa-Zulu Natal) or the practice of its most prominent members, Keyan Tomaselli and Ruth Teer-Tomaselli, but in the English Department at the University of Cape Town and the enlargement of literary studies to include cultural and historical contexts (Nuttall in Nuttall & Michael, 2000).

With the benefit of hindsight, it seems that Nuttall and Michael read the institutional mood wrongly as the disciplines struck back against interdisciplinary programmes in most South African universities, or favoured more overtly career oriented developments. Cultural studies ran and runs the risk of becoming, as one international colleague cruelly put it, an intellectual 'hobby'. It may be that cultural studies fitted better with a culture of resistance readings or cultural readings of resistance and a funding model based on NGOs than with the new official disciplines and inquiries of state intellectual practices, even if the power in place were a former left-wing resistance movement.

Whatever the background, it would be fair to say that Cultural Studies has not made a strong institutional home for itself in South Africa. There is no department of Cultural Studies in any South African university and the CCMS and its journal, *Critical Arts*, suffered, as did much of the University of Kwa-Zulu Natal, from the difficulties attendant on an academic merger that produced one of the largest universities in the country.

There are obvious weaknesses in the body of cultural studies work in South Africa: it is linguistically and culturally limited; theoretically derivative; and completely unsystematic. In a country where 80% of media consumption is not in

English, it is difficult to find material that is not in English and about English material. The focus of many publications is methodological ground-clearing and of prefatory tussles, hampering the sense of a substantial shared body of work.

Worse, perhaps, is that it now seems to lack ambition. In a country where there have been seismic technological and cultural shifts with a new dominant Black Republic coming into being, cultural studies practitioners have, for the most part, studied minor counter-cultural forms and epiphenomena or produced claims about dominant cultural trends on thin and often impressionistic evidence. (See Glenn, 2004.) Cultural studies seems indifferent to major changes in media consumption over time, or the rapid growth of cell phone culture and interactive media, though it may be that many of the insights of Cultural Studies are now located in places like Media Studies or Communications departments.

While Bourdieu has not had much influence on South African cultural analysis either, his ambitious attempts to map the patterns of cultural consumption as a related whole offer ways to rival influential current accounts of what is happening in South Africa from marketers and political sociologists. In particular, two recent developments – the rise of tabloid newspapers aimed at African and ‘Coloured’ readers and the growth of a newly affluent black middle class that marketers have called ‘Black Diamonds’ – can best be analysed from a perspective drawing on Bourdieu. (See Glenn & Knaggs, forthcoming.)

In South Africa, in particular, the presence of large data-bases of media material and marketing and consumer information have led to it being seen as a prototypical developing market open to analysis by marketers and advertisers (see, e.g. Burgess & Steenkamp). There is an alternative and sophisticated way of analysing media and general consumption in latent class analysis and at present marketers seem to be studying new cultural and media developments and their consequences more seriously and with more resources than critical cultural analysts. Much of this material lends itself to critical social analysis but calls for models of cultural analysis able to make sense of detail in a larger picture. The challenge for Cultural Studies, as for Bourdieu, is whether it can help produce understandings that match those of marketers.

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