

## BOOK REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

**Bourdieu, Pierre and Roger Chartier, *The Sociologist and the Historian*.** Translated by David Fernbach. Cambridge, UK, and Malden MA: Polity Press, 2015. 82pp. \$15.95 paper (9780745679594).

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“*The sociologist is insufferable...*” – Pierre Bourdieu

Unlike conversations with politicians or celebrities that appear in magazines, interviews with academics very infrequently convey any sense of the person being interviewed. Leaving aside Slavoj Žižek, who very easily caricatures himself in interviews and other public appearances, it is a rare thing to gain personal insight into the scholars of our times through their recorded conversations. To me, this is why *The Sociologist and the Historian* is such a refreshing book, not so much because one gains any deep insight into Pierre Bourdieu the person, but rather because one can genuinely *hear* Pierre Bourdieu and Roger Chartier in these texts.

*The Sociologist and the Historian* comprises the transcripts of five discussions between Bourdieu the sociologist and Chartier the historian that were broadcast on the radio network France Culture in 1988 in their series *À voix nue* (“With Bare Voice”), which in its current form advertises itself as an “*Entretien à deux voix, cinq demi-heures pour écouter les confessions de ceux qui marquent notre époque: philosophes, artistes, créateurs...*” (“[A] conversation between two voices, five half-hours to hear the confessions of those who mark our epoch: philosophers, artists, creators...”) (<http://www.franceculture.fr/emissions/voix-nue>).

The topics covered in this collection range across Bourdieu’s *oeuvre* to that point, including his most widely-known concepts such as habitus, field, and culture, and serve as a kind of public introduction to Bourdieu’s key theoretical contributions to sociological work. Chartier, an historian and admirer of Bourdieu, is able to tease out clarifications of these ideas in terms that are more raw, more clear, more immediate and unmediated by the exigencies of academic writing than readers of Bourdieu are normally accustomed. He pulls Bourdieu beyond the “structured structures predisposed...” definition of habitus that comes out of *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (1977:

72) and brings it to bear more directly on lived experience, getting Bourdieu to converse about the ideas and not simply to restate them. So, when posed with the question of the genesis of the habitus and the idea of “society” it contains, Bourdieu lays it out in just the way one would expect over a glass of wine: society exists objectively in social structures and institutions and in human brains; “society exists in the individual state, in the incorporated state; in other words, the socialized biological individual is part of the individualized social” (55).

These, though, are but the first layer of what is a fundamentally thought-provoking text, even, and perhaps especially, for Bourdieu scholars. This collection is not simply a set of interviews on key ideas or concepts, but rather an exercise in interdisciplinarity, a conversation between the two disciplines on the ways in which each operates or moves differently in the world. One learns much more about the craft of disciplinary (or disciplined) thinking through these interviews than from many philosophy of social science books or courses. There is a great amount of attention paid in these conversations to the differences in epistemological moves made by history and sociology respectively, to the different modes of analysis and writing in each, and to the ethical responsibilities demanded of the practitioners of sociology and history. As well, the reader gets a better sense of how and why Bourdieu moved through the variety of topics he chose -- as a methodological experiment on himself, making sure that what is as good for the goose of society is also as good for the gander of the sociologist.

Chartier’s preface provides the outer layer of the text. Here, Chartier outlines the historical context of the interviews – 1987 to 1988, when the Bourdieu who had just hit the main stage of public intellectualism in France with the publication of *La Distinction* was beginning to face major criticism for the constitution of his major concepts and his analyses of the practices of French culture and society. Bourdieu’s explications of his fundamental conceptual apparatus take on a deeper richness in light of the discussion Chartier provides here.

It is this contextualization that makes this book so valuable, even today. The death of a major figure in any discipline yields a kind of cottage industry wherein everything left unpublished about them or their work appears fairly rapidly. Bourdieu’s death in many ways created a need for that kind of industry, particularly given the ways in which his works have been arguably misinterpreted as overdeterministic, caricatured in ways that do not do justice to the nuanced concepts that his work offered sociology, or just treated as “theory” and left out of discussions about the practice of sociological research and

analysis. The importance of this book, breezy and short as it is, is that it provides us with a vigorous defense of Bourdieu's *oeuvre* in his own words and his own voice. Perhaps it will lead our discipline to a better understanding of just what Bourdieu was on about.

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