

The Left Hand and the Right Hand of the State

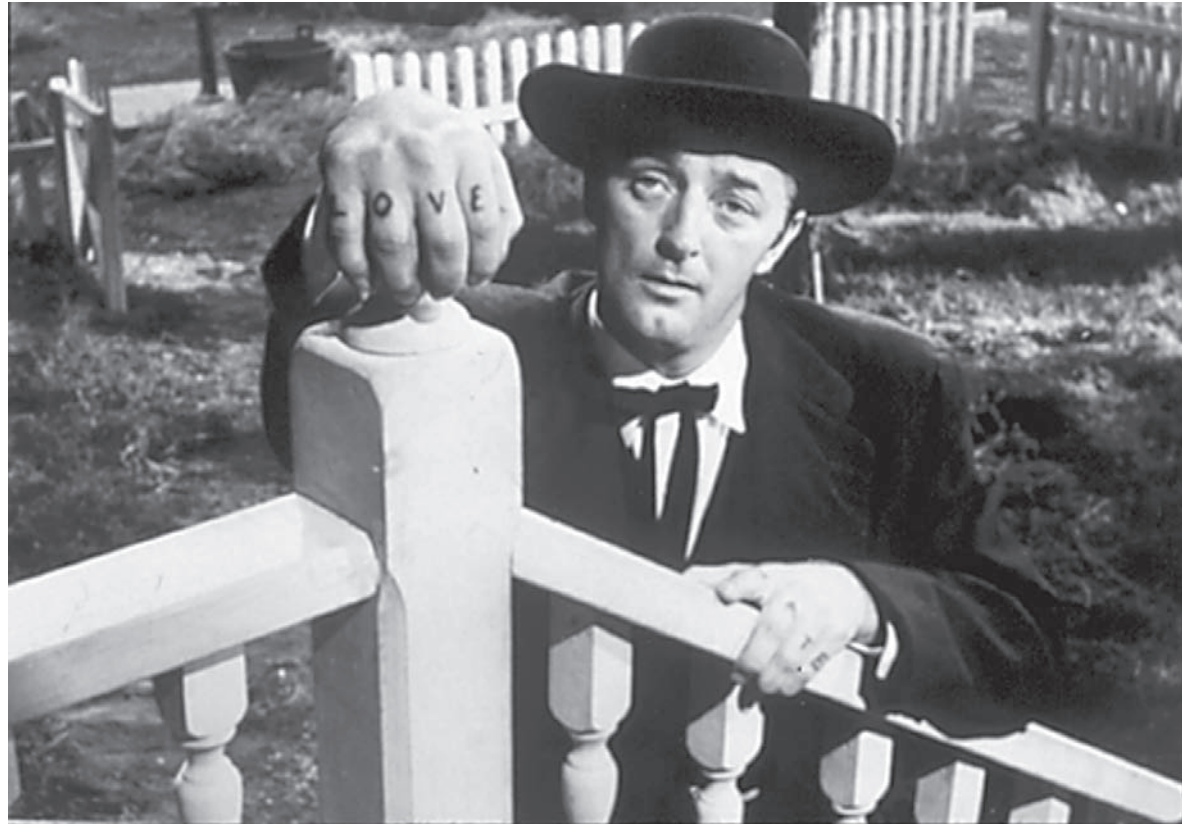
The influential sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1930 – 2002) was interviewed by R. P. Droit and T. Ferenczi in 1992. Their conversation was published in *Le Monde* on 14th January that year. Why choose to reprint this interview today, over a decade and half later? Bourdieu conjures up the useful metaphor of ‘the left and right hand of the State’ and with it he illuminates the devastating impact of neoliberalism on social democracy and points to the willing involvement of the socialist political class in this process. As a consequence, social democratic politics in France and elsewhere were transformed beyond recognition. This was shown for some in the UK by Margaret Thatcher’s greatest victory: New Labour. Moving on from such disappointments, not just in Europe but globally, political hopes are increasingly placed in nationalism, particularly of the small is beautiful variety. But the key issue that remains is how the public interest and the common good can be manifested under the conditions of corporate and financial globalisation which enforce privatisation and cut-backs on the public sector. On this dismal point the proponents of competitive nationalism refuse to give any clear answers whilst launching manifestos for what might be described as cultural rejuvenation in the global marketplace. Does the new breed of nationalist not in fact conform perfectly with the self-seeking political characteristics that Bourdieu saw degrading civic virtues...?

Q A recent issue of the journal that you edit was devoted to the theme of suffering.¹ It includes several interviews with people whose voices are not much heard in the media: young people on deprived estates, small farmers, social workers. The head-teacher of a secondary school in difficulty, for example, expresses his bitterness. Instead of overseeing the transmission of knowledge, he has become, against his will, the superintendent of a kind of police station. Do you think that individual and anecdotal testimonies of that kind can cast light on a collective malaise?

PB In the survey we are conducting on social suffering, we encounter many people who, like that head-teacher, are caught in the contradictions of the social world, which are experienced in the form of personal dramas. I could also cite the project leader, responsible for co-ordinating all the work on a ‘difficult estate’ in a small town in northern France. He is faced with contradictions which are the extreme case of those currently experienced by all those who are called ‘social workers’: family counsellors, youth leaders, rank-and-file magistrates, and also, increasingly, secondary and primary teachers. They constitute what I call the left hand of the state, the set of agents of the so-called spending ministries which are the trace, within the state, of the social struggles of the past. They are opposed to the right hand of the state, the technocrats of the Ministry of Finance, the public and private banks and the ministerial *cabinets*. A number of social struggles that we are now seeing (and will see) express the revolt of the minor state nobility against the senior state nobility.²

Q How do you explain that exasperation, those forms of despair and those revolts?

PB I think that the left hand of the state has the sense that the right hand no longer knows, or, worse, no longer really wants to know what the left hand does. In any case, it does not want to pay for it. One of the main reasons for all these people’s despair is that the state has withdrawn, or is withdrawing, from a number of sectors of social life for which it was previously responsible: social housing, public service broadcasting, schools, hospitals, etc., which is all the more stupefying and scandalous, in some of these areas at least, because it was done by a Socialist government, which might at least be expected to be the



guarantor of public service as an open service available to all, without distinction. . . What is described as a crisis of politics, anti-parliamentarianism, is in reality despair at the failure of the state as the guardian of the public interest.

If the Socialists had simply not been as socialist as they claimed, that would not shock anyone – times are hard and there is not much room for manoeuvre. But what is more surprising is that they should have done so much to undermine the public interest, first by their deeds, with all kinds of measures and policies (I will only mention the media. . .) aimed at liquidating the gains of the welfare state, and above all, perhaps, in their words, with the eulogy of private enterprise (as if one could only be enterprising within an enterprise) and the encouragement of private interest. All that is somewhat shocking, especially for those who are sent into the front line to perform so-called ‘social’ work to compensate for the most flagrant inadequacies of the logic of the market, without being given the means to really do their job. How could they not have the sense of being constantly undermined or betrayed?

It should have been clear a long time ago that their revolt goes far beyond questions of salary, even if the salary granted is an unequivocal index of the value placed on the work and the corresponding workers. Contempt for a job is shown first of all in the more or less derisory remuneration it is given.

Q Do you think that the politicians’ room for manoeuvre is really so limited?

PB It is no doubt less limited than they would have us think. And in any case there remains one area where governments have considerable scope: that of the symbolic. Exemplary behaviour ought to be *de rigueur* for all state personnel, especially when they claim to belong to a tradition of commitment to the interests of the least advantaged. But it is difficult not to have doubts when one sees not only examples of corruption (sometimes quasi-official, with the bonuses given to some senior civil servants) or betrayal of public service (that word is no doubt too strong – I am thinking of *pantouflage*³) and all the forms of misappropriation, for private purposes, of public property, profits or services – nepotism, cronyism (our leaders have many ‘personal friends’ . . .⁴), clientelism . . .

And I have not even mentioned symbolic profits! Television has probably contributed as much as bribery to the degradation of civic virtue. It has invited and projected on to the political and intellectual stage a set of self-promoting personalities concerned above all to get themselves noticed and admired, in total contradiction with the values of unspectacular devotion to the collective interest which once characterized the civil servant or the activist. It is the same self-serving attention seeking (often at the expense of rivals) which explains why ‘headline grabbing’⁵ has become such a common practice. For many ministers, it seems, a measure is only valid if it can be announced and regarded as achieved as soon as it has been made public. In short, large-scale corruption which causes a scandal when it is uncovered because it reveals the gap between professed virtues and real behaviour is simply the extreme case of all the ordinary little ‘weaknesses’, the flaunting of luxury and the avid acceptance of material or symbolic privileges.

Q Faced with the situation you describe, how, in your view, do the citizens react?

PB I was recently reading an article by a German author on ancient Egypt. He shows how, in a period of crisis of confidence in the state and in the public good, two tendencies emerged: among the rulers, corruption, linked to the decline in respect for the public interest; and, among those they dominated, personal religiosity, associated with despair concerning temporal remedies. In the same way, one has the sense now that citizens, feeling themselves ejected from the state (which, in the end, asks of them no more than obligatory material contributions, and certainly no commitment, no enthusiasm), reject the state, treating it as an alien power to be used so far as they can to serve their own interests.

Q You referred to the considerable scope that governments have in the symbolic domain. This is not just a matter of setting an example of good behaviour. It is also about words, ideals that can mobilize people. How do you explain the current vacuum?

PB There has been much talk of the silence of the intellectuals. What strikes me is the silence of the politicians. They are terribly short of ideals that can mobilize people. This is probably because the

professionalization of politics and the conditions required of those who want to make a career in the parties increasingly exclude inspired personalities. And probably also because the definition of political activity has changed with the arrival of a political class that has learned in its schools (of political science) that, to appear serious, or simply to avoid appearing old-fashioned or archaic, it is better to talk of management than self-management, and that they must, at any rate, take on the appearances (that is to say the language) of economic rationality.

Locked in the narrow, short-term economism of the IMF worldview which is also causing havoc, and will continue to do so, in North-South relations, all these half-wise economists fail, of course, to take account of the real costs, in the short and more especially the long term, of the material and psychological wretchedness which is the only certain outcome of their economically legitimate *Realpolitik*: delinquency, crime, alcoholism, road accidents, etc. Here too, the right hand, obsessed by the question of financial equilibrium, knows nothing of the problems of the left hand, confronted with the often very costly social consequences of 'budgetary restrictions'.

Q Are the values on which actions and contributions of the state were once founded no longer credible?

PB The first people to flout them are often the very ones who ought to be their guardians. The Rennes Congress⁶ and the amnesty law⁷ did more to discredit the Socialists than ten years of anti-socialist campaigning. And a 'turncoat' activist does more harm than ten opponents. But ten years of Socialist government have completed the demolition of belief in the state and the demolition of the welfare state that was started in the 1970s in the name of liberalism. I am thinking in particular of housing policy.⁸ The declared aim has been to rescue the petite bourgeoisie from publicly owned housing (and thereby from 'collectivism') and facilitate their move into ownership of a house or apartment. This policy has in a sense succeeded only too well. Its outcome illustrates what I said a moment ago about the social costs of some economies. That policy is probably the major cause of social segregation and consequently of the problems referred to as those of the '*banlieues*'.⁹

Q So if one wants to define an ideal, it would be a return to actions sense of the sense and of the public good. You don't share everybody's opinion on this.

PB Whose opinion is everybody's opinion? The opinion of people who write in the newspapers, intellectuals who advocate the 'minimal state' and who are rather too quick to bury the notion of the public and the public's interest in the public interest. . . We see there a typical example of the effect of shared belief which removes from discussion ideas which are perfectly worth discussing. One would need to analyse the work of the 'new intellectuals' which has created a climate favourable to the withdrawal of the state and, more broadly, to submission to the values of the economy. I'm thinking of what has been called the 'return of individualism', a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy which tends to destroy the philosophical foundations of the welfare state and in particular

the notion of collective responsibility (towards industrial accidents, sickness or poverty) which has been a fundamental achievement of social (and sociological) thought. The return to the individual is also what makes it possible to 'blame the victim' who is entirely responsible for his or her own misfortune, and to preach the gospel of self-help, all of this being justified by the endlessly repeated need to reduce costs for companies.

The reaction of retrospective panic provoked by the crisis of 1968, a symbolic revolution which alarmed all the small holders of cultural capital (subsequently reinforced by the unforeseen collapse of the Soviet-style regimes), created conditions favourable to a cultural restoration, the outcome of which has been that 'Sciences-Po thought'¹⁰ has replaced the 'thought of Chairman Mao'. The intellectual world is now the site of a struggle aimed at producing and imposing 'new intellectuals' and therefore a new definition of the intellectual and the intellectual's political role, a new definition of philosophy and the philosopher, henceforward engaged in the vague debates of a political philosophy without technical content, a social science reduced to journalistic commentary for election nights, and uncritical glossing of unscientific opinion polls. Plato had a wonderful word for all these people: *doxosophers*. These 'technicians of opinion who think themselves wise' (I'm translating the triple meaning of the word) pose the problems of politics in the very same terms in which they are posed by businessmen, politicians and political journalists (in other words the very people who can afford to commission surveys. . .).

Q You have just mentioned Plato. Is the attitude of the sociologist close to that of the philosopher?

PB The sociologist is opposed to the doxosopher, like the philosopher, in that she questions the things that are self-evident, in particular those that present themselves in the form of questions, her own as much as other people's. This profoundly shocks the doxosopher, who sees a political bias in the refusal to grant the profoundly political submission implied in the unconscious acceptance of *commonplaces*, in Aristotle's sense – notions or theses with which people argue, hut over which they do not argue.

Q Don't you tend in a sense to put the sociologist in the place of a philosopher-king?

PB What I defend above all is the possibility and the necessity of the critical intellectual, who is firstly critical of the intellectual *doxa* secreted by the doxosophers. There is no genuine democracy without genuine opposing critical powers. The intellectual is one of those, of the first magnitude. That is why I think that the work of demolishing the critical intellectual, living or dead – Marx, Nietzsche, Sartre, Foucault, and some others who are grouped together under the label *Pensée 68*¹¹ – is as dangerous as the demolition of the public interest and that it is part of the same process of restoration.

Of course I would prefer it if intellectuals had all, and always, lived up to the immense historical responsibility they bear and if they had always invested in their actions not only their moral authority but also their intellectual competence – like, to cite just one example, Pierre Vidal-Naquet, who has engaged all his mastery of historical

method in a critique of the abuses of history.¹² Having said that, in the words of Karl Kraus, 'between two evils, I refuse to choose the lesser.' While I have little indulgence for 'irresponsible' intellectuals, I have even less respect for the 'intellectuals' of the political-administrative establishment, polymorphous polygraphs who polish their annual essays between two meetings of boards of directors, three publishers' parties and miscellaneous television appearances.

Q So what role would you want to see for intellectuals, especially in the construction of Europe?

PB I would like writers, artists, philosophers and scientists to be able make their voice heard directly in all the areas of public life in which they are competent. I think that everyone would have a lot to gain if the logic of intellectual life, that of argument and refutation, were extended to public life. At present, it is often the logic of political life, that of denunciation and slander, 'slogozation' and falsification of the adversary's thought, which extends into intellectual life. It would be a good thing if the 'creators' could fulfil their function of public service and sometimes of public salvation.

Moving to the level of Europe simply means rising to a higher degree of universalization, reaching a new stage on the road to a universal state, which, even in intellectual life, is far from having been achieved. We will certainly not have gained much if eurocentrism is substituted for the wounded nationalisms of the old imperial nations. Now that the great utopias of the nineteenth century have revealed all their perversion, it is urgent to create the conditions for a collective effort to reconstruct a universe of realist ideals, capable of mobilizing people's will without mystifying their consciousness.

Notes

1. *Actes de la Recherche en Sciences Sociales*, 90, Dec. 1991, special issue 'La souffrance'; Bourdieu et al., *La Misère du monde*.
2. Alluding to the author's book *The State Nobility: Elite Schools in the Field of Power* (trans.).
3. The practice whereby civil servants move to positions in the private sector (trans.).
4. François Mitterrand (President of France 1981-1995) was often praised for his '*fidélité en amitié*', and a number of personalities appointed to important posts were, according to the newspapers, chiefly noted for being his 'personal friends' (trans.).
5. *effets d'annonce* in the original, produced when a minister reduces his political action to the ostentatious announcement of spectacular decisions which often have no effect or no follow-up – Jack Lang has been cited as an example (trans.).
6. The Rennes Congress (15-18 March 1990), the scene of heated disputes between the leaders of the major tendencies within the Socialist Party, Lionel Jospin, Laurent Fabius and Michel Rocard (trans.).
7. The amnesty that was granted, in particular, to the generals of the French army in Algeria who attempted a putsch against de Gaulle's government (trans.).
8. See Bourdieu et al., 'L'économie de la maison', *Actes de la Recherche en Sciences Sociales*, 81-2, Mar. 1990.
9. Socially analogous to the 'inner cities' but in France implying peripheral housing estates (trans.).
10. As generated and taught in the institutes of political science ('Sciences-Po'), in particular the one in Paris (trans.).
11. Allusion to Ferry and Renaut, *La Pensée 68* (trans.).
12. Vidal-Naquet, *Les Juifs, la mémoire et le présent*.