

***Bourdieu, Science and Democracy: A Reply to Bridget Fowler and David Inglis***  
**Jeremy F. Lane, University of Nottingham**

I should like first all of to thank both the editors of this website for affording me the opportunity to respond to my critics and those critics themselves, David Inglis and Bridget Fowler, for having taken the time to read and respond to my brief remarks on Bourdieu's theories of language and social scientific reason. In what follows, the majority of my comments will be addressed to Bridget Fowler's piece since, and I hope he'll forgive me for saying this, David Inglis's remarks seem heavier on rhetoric than on actual substance.

**David Inglis as Don Quixote**

What David offers us is an entertaining kind of *chanson de geste*, in which he figures himself as some latter-day Don Quixote tilting at the windmills of 'North London *Guardian* readers', in the name less of outdated chivalric values than of a strange combination of Maoism and what he himself characterises as 'naughtiness'. Far be it from me to disturb what Lacan would have termed David's 'fundamental fantasy', except to ask one simple question of him. Supposing, David, that I, as a non-sociologist, were to suggest that the collocation 'North London *Guardian* reader', which plays such a pivotal role in your analysis, seemed to me to constitute less a valid sociological classification than a lazy journalistic cliché, if not simply a barely euphemised form of name-calling. Would this suggestion be dismissed as an example of my own 'practical' reasoning 'contaminating' your scientific discourse? Or would my suggestion, on the contrary, be acknowledged as one expression of my inalienable right as the citizen of a democracy to intervene as your equal in any and all debates bearing on the social world, despite not being a professional sociologist? (For the record, I should declare at this point to David, in his role as self-appointed chair of the HUBAC (House Un-Bourdieuian Activities Committee), that although I do regularly read the *Guardian*, I do not now nor have I ever lived in North London.)

**Bridget Fowler and Bourdieu's 'Monopoly of Truth'**

Let me turn to Bridget Fowler's rather more substantive and interesting intervention, interesting because, despite her trenchant defence of Bourdieu, one senses a willingness to acknowledge that he may, at times, go too far, both in his dismissal of the testimony of the young student in *The Weight of the World* and in his disparaging characterisations of popular culture throughout his work. These seem to me to offer potentially fruitful openings for further debate but before exploring them, I'd like to comment on Bridget's opening sentence, in which she states: 'Lane's basic argument might be best summed up as the claim that Bourdieu reserves for sociology *a monopoly* of critical reason ...'. I would like to make clear that this is in no way *my* claim, as Bridget suggests here. On the contrary, it is Bourdieu's explicit claim that sociology *should* enjoy a 'monopoly of truth' about the social world and his lament that this is not so because of the way in

which ‘practical reason’ and the ‘democratic order’ constantly undermine that legitimate claim to a monopoly of truth by a process of ‘contamination’. There is no debate about this point since it is something Bourdieu himself states quite explicitly and clearly in, for example, *Science of Science and Reflexivity*:

[T]he social sciences, and especially sociology, have difficulty in imposing this ambition of monopoly, although it is inscribed in the fact that "the truth is one", because, in the name of, among other things, a contamination of the scientific order by the principles of the political order and of democracy, people like to believe that truth is “plural”, as the current phrase goes, and the different powers, particularly with symbolic, political, religious and above all journalistic dimensions, are socially armed to claim, with some chance of success, the right to utter the truth about the social world. (Bourdieu 2004, 73; trans. mod.)

The questions that this statement raises for the defenders of Bourdieu are the following: 1) Do they share this belief that sociology, or any other academic discipline, could or should legitimately claim the right to a ‘monopoly of truth’ about the social world? 2) How can sociology’s ‘ambition’ to exercise this ‘monopoly of truth’ be reconciled with the fundamental democratic principle according to which every adult citizen has an inalienable right to participate, *as an equal*, in all and any debates that bear on the functioning, management, and future evolution of that social world? 3) How can Bourdieu’s lament here, to the effect that sociology’s ambition to possess such a ‘monopoly of truth’ is thwarted by the ‘democratic order’, be anything else but elitist, since it rests on the *a priori* assumption that a social and intellectual elite, composed of professional sociologists, enjoys access to a level of truth about the social world that is threatened by ‘contamination’ by the interventions of ordinary citizens from other positions in the social world?

Now, I could go further at this point, citing chapter and verse from those passages, particularly in *Pascalian Meditations*, where Bourdieu explicitly states that the universal or scientific truths sociology produces are contingent upon ‘the exclusive privilege’ enjoyed by professional sociologists as relatively wealthy members of the dominant classes (Bourdieu 2000, 15), or that only such relatively privileged individuals have the capacity to ‘articulate the truth of those [ i.e. the ‘dominated classes’] who have neither the interest nor the leisure nor the necessary instruments to re-appropriate the objective and subjective truth of what they are and what they do’ (Bourdieu 200, 191). However, I have already examined the unintended forms of elitism, the unresolved tensions and contradictions contained in Bourdieu’s theorisation of the sources of sociology’s alleged scientificity on a number of occasions in print and see little point in repeating myself here (Lane 2000, 181-93; 2006, 141-61). I will only add that my remarks on these issues in no way imply ignoring or overlooking those numerous occasions, alluded to by Bridget Fowler, on which Bourdieu explicitly states his commitment to extending and deepening democracy. On the contrary, my point is that there is an unresolved

contradiction running through Bourdieu's work, particularly from the late 1980s on, between this sincere commitment to democracy as goal, on the one hand, and a theorisation of sociology's alleged epistemological privilege that is quite explicitly socially exclusive, on the other. The onus is on Bourdieu's defenders to explain how this contradiction might be resolved, for I can find no clear resolution of this contradiction within Bourdieu's published works.

### **Bourdieu's Research Subjects**

Let me turn then to the question of Bourdieu's rather peremptory dismissal of the young student's testimony in *The Weight of the World*. Bridget Fowler is clearly as uncomfortable as I am at the tone of Bourdieu's dismissal here. Nonetheless, she seeks to defend Bourdieu on two principal grounds. First, she implies that I have misrepresented Bourdieu's analysis by not mentioning that his criticisms are equally directed against this young woman's interviewer. I am afraid I find this rather unconvincing. The fact that Bourdieu does *also* criticise the interviewer involved here in no way detracts from or mitigates the peremptory fashion and contemptuous tone with which he dismisses the young student's testimony and opinions as valueless from a sociological point of view. Fowler's second line of defence takes the form of the suggestion that Bourdieu 'surely has a point. The trope of being "between two worlds" and the pleasures of skilful manipulation of a literary style may well have allowed the actor to *misrecognise* other social currents'. With respect, I fear Fowler has completely missed my point here. I do not question for a moment that this trope of 'being between worlds' or of 'bi-culturalism' is a common one or that, as such, it is open to possible criticism. However, as I made clear in my original remarks, what is troubling about Bourdieu's approach to this testimony is precisely that *he does not subject it to any kind of critique*; he offers no proof or substantiation in support of his claim that this is a case of misrecognition or 'false objectification'; he does not engage with the *content* of what this young woman says at all; he dismisses its validity purely on the basis of the position from which the woman speaks, of her social status or identity as a young literature student, a status Bourdieu assumes allows him to know, in advance, that anything she says can be dismissed *a priori*.

Let me be as clear as possible about what I am arguing here. To my mind, it would have been perfectly legitimate for Bourdieu to question the validity of this young woman's testimony by pointing to its internal contradictions and logical weaknesses and/or by drawing on research he himself had conducted into questions of ethnicity and identity in France to demonstrate why and in what specific ways he believed the young woman to have gone wrong. Such legitimate criticisms might also have involved an engagement with the work of those French sociologists, such as Azouz Begag for example (Begag & Chaouite 1990), who have argued cogently that bi-culturalism *is* a significant socio-cultural phenomenon and have presented extensive sociological data to substantiate such claims. However, Bourdieu does none of this. He presents no actual sociological evidence to refute the young woman's claims, not least because he never undertook any

significant sociological research into the issues raised by that testimony. Instead, he dismisses the testimony's validity purely on the basis of the social position occupied by its author and the epistemological privilege he assumes, *a priori*, to possess on the basis of his own more privileged social position as a professional sociologist.

### ***A Priori* Assumptions or *A Posteriori* Justifications?**

The distinction to be made here is between the *a posteriori* appeal to specialist sociological knowledge, on the one hand, and the *a priori* assumption of intellectual or epistemological superiority, on the other. In the first instance of legitimate critique, the sociologist works from the *a priori* assumption that all adult citizens are equal and hence that their accounts are all potentially of equal validity. Such a sociologist only appeals to his or her professional status and knowledge *a posteriori* and then in substantiation of criticisms addressed to the *substance* of what his or her interlocutor says. This, in turn, leaves open the possibility for that interlocutor to respond to the sociologist's criticisms, to object to aspects of them or contest their validity. In such an instance, the potential validity of the sociologist's specialized knowledge is recognized, even as the founding principles of democratic debate are respected. In the second instance, however, the process is reversed; Bourdieu's appeal to his status as sociologist is *a priori* rather than *a posteriori* and his appeal to that status does not involve demonstrating that he has arguments with which he can rebut the claims of his interlocutor. Rather it involves asserting that he enjoys an epistemological privilege over that interlocutor, a privilege which means that his arguments are always and *a priori* correct and her arguments can be dismissed *a priori because of the inferior social position she occupies*. Once again, for those defenders of Bourdieu who find my account here unconvincing, the onus is on you to explain why, if I am wrong, Bourdieu dismisses the validity of this testimony without offering any proof or substantiation for his claim that it is not bi-culturalism but other, unidentified 'objective factors' that account for this young woman's sense of malaise.

### **A Glimpse of Concord**

I was interested to note that Bridget Fowler made a passing reference to Abdelmalek Sayad's contributions to *The Weight of the World* in her remarks, suggesting that his approach to his research interviewees was markedly different from Bourdieu's. I could not agree more and am pleased to find such a point of agreement here. Sayad after all, unlike Bourdieu, had genuine expertise where these matters of ethnicity and identity are concerned and it seems to me that his approach to his research interviewees, particularly those with whom he clearly disagrees, is exemplary in its contrast with Bourdieu's peremptoriness. If sociology be a science, in the strong sense of that term (and that's a big 'if'), then it is surely through close reading of Sayad's work that we might move towards an understanding of how that science might be reconciled with the principles of a genuine democracy.

**Contact details: [Jeremy.Lane@nottingham.ac.uk](mailto:Jeremy.Lane@nottingham.ac.uk)**

## References

- Begag, Azouz and Abdellatif Chaouite. *Écarts d'identité*. Paris: Éditions du seuil, 1990.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. *The Weight of the World*, translated by Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1999.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. *Pascalian Meditations*, translated by Richard Nice, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. *Science of Science and Reflexivity*, translated by Richard Nice, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004.
- Fowler, Bridget. "Simon Susen's 'Bourdieuian Reflections on Language: Unavoidable Conditions of the Real Speech Situation' — A Rejoinder." *Social Epistemology* 27, 3-4 (2013): 250-260.
- Fowler, Bridget. "Jeremy Lane's Comments on the Bourdieu and Language Debate: A Brief Reply." *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 3, no. 1 (2013a): 1-4.
- Inglis, David. "Bourdieu, Language and 'Determinism': A Reply to Simon Susen." *Social Epistemology* 12, 3-4 (2013): 311-18.
- Inglis, David. "Twisting the Stick: A Reply to Jeremy Lane." *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 2, no. 12 (2013a): 66-68.
- Lane, Jeremy F. *Pierre Bourdieu: A Critical Introduction*. London and Sterling: Pluto Press, 2000.
- Lane, Jeremy F. *Bourdieu's Politics: Problems and Possibilities*. London & New York: Routledge, 2006.
- Lane, Jeremy F. "Bourdieu's Theory of Linguistic Exchange: Realistic Description or Exclusionary Prescription?" *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 2, no. 12 (2013): 60-65.