Radical Academicism, or the Sociologist's Monologue: Who are Radical Sociologists Talking with?

Didier Lapeyronnie

Dans Revue française de sociologie 2006/5 (Vol. 47), pages 3 à 33
Éditions Éditions Ophrys

ISSN 0035-2969
DOI 10.3917/rfs.475.0003

Article disponible en ligne à l'adresse
https://www.cairn.info/revue-francaise-de-sociologie-1-2006-5-page-3.htm
Didier LAPEYRONNIE

Radical Academicism, or the Sociologist’s Monologue: Who are Radical Sociologists Talking with?

ABSTRACT
Since the early 1990s, a very successful approach has developed in sociology in France called “radical academicism”. It involves the sociologist identifying himself or herself with an “objectivity” external to society (and incarnated by the institution), and it leads to a kind of elitism: only an elite made up of “savants” can accede to the lucidity offered by theory and universal values; only its members escape social determinism and can perceive such determinism at work in the lives of others. This elite, then, ends up speaking a monologue and establishing its “self” as the point of intersection between science and the political, meaning –so goes the argument– that it is in a position to “show” the dominated the real meaning of their actions. In addition to the advantages it offers, this position resonates with the social experience of “intellos précaires” [persons working in the intellectual professions in France whose socio-economic situation remains unsure, “precarious”; e.g., adjuncts], who can therefore consider their own “misère” comparable to the “suffering” of the most underprivileged members of society, thereby universalizing their own interests. Radical academicism goes together with sharp hostility to democracy, and its mixture of self-pity and critical distance may also be said to characterize middle-class ideology. At the political level, radical academicism exemplifies middle-class appropriation of what was once the world of working-class demands, and middle-class power to weaken working-class defenses.

Sociologists are constantly questioning sociology and its practices. Approximately thirty years ago, Robert Merton pointed out that “sociology has been in a condition of crisis throughout its history” and that every generation of sociologists thought its moment was decisive for the development of the discipline –adding with humor that sociologists have a strong tendency to prescribe one and the same medicine for the ills: “See things and do things my way!” (Merton, 1976, pp. 21-22). Every sociologist tells a story and stages positions and debates from his/her point of view, which is directly tied of course to his/her intellectual and social context and the current(s) or approach(es) he/she chooses to follow or use. The sense of sociology “in crisis” is due to the recurring impression in all periods that the kind of sociology available cannot account satisfactorily for the cultural developments and social questions of the moment. In the late 1960s Gouldner (1970), among others, denounced theorists who developed systems with cotton in their ears,
deaf to the clamoring voices of the social movements and racial and urban rioting of the time. He called for a reflexive sociology in which there would be no forgetting of the idea that the sociologist was part of society and played a social role. As the commonplace has it, sociology cannot be practiced outside its historical and social context. This is so, of course. But the combination of reflexivity as counseled by Gouldner and Merton’s ironically prof erred remedy has produced what is now the most current tendency among sociologists in France; namely to subject others to their reflexivity and identify their work or brand of sociology with a social context that they are somehow miraculously not implicated in or constrained by. This is supposed to prove, of course, that they’re right and that both scientifically and politically their position is the most correct. Objectifying the subject of objectification enables the objectifier to have the last word, since “sociology of the Other” has been brought down to “context”, thereby liberating the objectifier’s own version of sociology. The reflexivity (“self-socioanalysis”) that such sociologists boast of and the “clear-mindedness” (lucidité) they so vehemently claim they possess lead very easily to an “enchanted”, apologetic narrative of “self” which combines with overt contempt for “the others”, who must be “prevented from doing sociology” and even from speaking altogether. This kind of “reflexivity” favors the “occupational disease of academic milieus”; i.e., “lack of self-distance”, a conception of action as “flight from self” and a “decadent variety of self-love”. (1)

**The logic of radical academicism**

**Reflexivity, science, and political radicalism**

The most recent academic avatar of just this kind of reflexive “self-love” logic is the now widespread version of “social constructivism”, wherein others’ research is said to amount to submission to commonplace thinking and an unconfessed and perhaps unconscious contribution to the dominant “neo-liberal” ideology understood to have invaded the entire social world. Studies of “the poor” and “inequalities”, bringing to light “segregation” processes, the way exclusion works in schools, to take a few examples, are interpreted by radical academics as so many “semi-savant” “constructions” aimed at justifying neo-liberal reforms or implementing a kind of modernization that can only be destructive because it denies the existence of domination and class membership phenomena. All such work –this discourse continues– is nothing more than “fieldwork rhetoric”, in contrast to true science, which is politically just and borne forward by infallible “reflexivity” and extremely rigorous “axiological neutrality” that has nothing to do with the world of “experts” (and of course has no need for fields to work in). By remaining in his

(1) On this theme see Merleau-Ponty (1955).
university office and occasionally going to a conference or colloquium, the radical sociologist is sheltered from all these “semi-savant” constructions produced by “journalist sociologists”, constructions that “take pride in their symbiotic relation to the actors ‘point of view’”.(2)

Though I am caricaturing somewhat here, there is a segment of sociology in France that is increasingly marked by such “academic radicalism”, based on a strong “denial of the social” which enables its practitioners to avoid any “compromises” and preserve the moral advantage of their position while necessarily exempting themselves from all content, since they must both “judge” and denounce while escaping all critical scrutiny themselves. The “knowledge” thereby produced, or that these academics claim to produce, is “critical” rather than substantive. It is a matter of reading and textual interpretation rather than intellectual confrontation with the social world. In fact, it is an extension of traditional Scholasticism: the matrix for producing scientific knowledge is seminar work and critical reading, and these activities are extended to the entire set of research procedures. Social critique is transformed into a critique of social categories; the first type of critique annexes the second, and the result is that any kind of empirical work becomes suspect. All categories are “denounced” as negative and ideological; even the term “poor” can be considered pejorative.(3) A sociologist who does not perform the prerequisite labor of “deconstruction” and “reflexivity” is accused of submitting to “commonplace thinking” and confusing construction of the sociological object with a “social problem”. He is thus doomed to succumb to the “illusions of immediate knowledge”. Academic radicalism’s answer to this is to make “theory” the source of objective truth, while experience and actors’ words can only be conceived as illusions, destined to be belied by sociological “exposure”. “Taking ‘social debates’ as the point of departure means getting caught up in an intellectual and political conservatism that involves interminably calling everything into question.”(4) Neither savant critique or empirical reality is allowed to call the theory into question: experience and

(2) Titles and dates for “radical academic/academic radical” sociology studies and militant literature are indicated in the notes; complete references are in the Appendix; all other references appear in the general bibliography. Included in “militant” literature are Franck Poupeau, Une sociologie d’État: l’école et ses experts en France (2003) and Sylvie Tissot, Réformer les quartiers: enquête sociologique sur une catégorie de l’action publique (2002). Other examples may be found on the internet site “Les Mots Sont Importants” (LMSI [Words are important]), run by Sylvie Tissot and Pierre Tévanian.

(3) Some years ago, Michael B. Katz (1997) criticized this drift toward “Scholastic” extremes in the social sciences: “Pity the social scientist. Touch any of his categories and they dissolve into the dust of incoherence and ideology. In the study of urban poverty (itself a contested term I use with trepidation), it has befallen the able-bodied poor, the culture of poverty, the underclass and, at last, the ghetto. Attention to the social and cultural bases of language, not to mention an older sociology of knowledge, has exposed virtually all the categories of social science and history as social constructions, serving historically specific purposes, embedded in contexts. No one at all thoughtful or moderately well-read can believe in them seriously as fixed, objective constructs which express some underlying order in the world.”

discourse must be brought back to an understanding in terms of “dispositions” and social structure, these in turn being the key variables of social behavior, which only the sociologist can interpret. Clearly in this understanding sociology does not involve producing analytic knowledge based on an encounter with the social, a kind of knowledge that it is up to social actors to interpret. Even when based on solid empirical surveys and studies, sociology is claimed by academic radicals to be an objective undertaking with a monopoly on the meaning of behavior, a “monopoly on truth”, founded on the sociologist’s reflexivity.

This is idealism: ideas make the world. What’s more, “theory” itself is understood to determine social life. As one radical sociologist put it: “The imperialism that is currently triumphing is a particular type of cultural imperialism, an imperialism of economic reason, carried forward first and foremost by economists and politicians.” (5) Economists have allied themselves with politicians to construct a neo-liberal ideology that has today become “the strongest active force in the contemporary economy”. This alliance, which—the argument goes—works to empty the left of all content and convert it, too, to more or less masked neo-liberalism, was sealed at the university: “Economists and leading political actors are two fractions of the dominant classes for whom school and university strategies have decisive importance, and economic knowledge has a crucial place in these strategies.” (6) Pierre Bourdieu himself strongly stated the same position a few years ago: “[T]oday more than ever this theory [neo-liberalism] has the means to make itself true, empirically verifiable […] The neo-liberal discourse is a strong one […] which has going for it all the composite strength of a world of power relations that it helps to make what it is […] In the name of this program of scientific knowledge converted into a program of political action, an immense political labor is being accomplished (though this is denied, because it appears purely negative), aimed at creating the conditions for realizing the theory, making it operative.” (7) The result of this affirmation is that radical intellectuals or sociologists acquire central importance: the fight against capitalism is no longer an attribute of social classes or social movements but is transformed into an intellectual “struggle” against neo-liberal ideology.

This explains why the “sociological construction” of the “social construction” of “ordinary understanding” cannot be bothered with “empirical” details. A sociological observation can only be read as one of two things, either an essential contribution to scientific progress that is at the same time a defense of “the oppressed”, or, on the contrary, an affirmation made by a “semi-savant” who is trying to exchange his bit of adulterated ideological merchandise for media recognition or a career. Everything depends, in fact, on who makes the observation. Either it is made by a scholar who belongs to

(6) Frédéric Lebaron (ibid.).
the world of “true scientists” who practice uncompromising “reflexivity”, or
an individual whose work furthers research’s subjection to the financial and
ideological interests of the powers-that-be. The American Journal of Socio-
logy recently published a long polemical exchange between the French socio-
logist Loïc Wacquant and three anthropologists who, according to Wacquant,
had done empirical studies that demonstrated a serious regression in Ameri-
can sociology, namely its link with and submission to the construction of a
“neo-liberal state” and an “imprison-and-punish regime” whose purpose was
to manage the poor. (8) After “exposing the neo-liberal unconscious” of these
sociologists and criticizing Elijah Anderson for interpreting the conduct of
young blacks in the ghetto in terms of anomie, he puts forward his own expla-
nation, in terms of the disjunction between social structures and individuals’
mental structures, mental structures that come out of the “chaotic world of the
street” and are reproduced in different environments as well. The result of this
is “broken habitus”, itself the result of immersion in an “entropic” world and
social instability. In other words, as Elijah Anderson points out, the ghetto is
not disorganized, but organized by entropic principles that generate a regular,
internalized variety of social disorganization! Anderson retorts (2002): “Much
of his [Wacquant’s] diatribe involves social and political judgments about
what people who live in the Philadelphia ghetto (which he has never studied)
should be thinking and would think if only they were as smart as he is.”(9)

There is no dearth of examples. When the French sociologist François
Dubet explains the “hellishness” of life for young people living in disadvan-
taged French suburban areas in terms of the “return of the dangerous classes”
idea, unemployment, and the weakening of the workers’ movement, he is
accused –by Sylvie Tissot, who is doing the “exposing”– of trying to fraudu-
lently introduce the notion of anomie in order to make the poor responsible
for their situation, a move then said to be consistent with neo-liberal logic.(10)
Conversely, when Stéphane Beaud and Michel Pialoux (2003), in the conclu-
sion to their solid study, explain the painful difficulties of young manual
workers in terms of the “return of the dangerous classes” idea, unemploy-
ment, and the weakening of the workers’ movement, these authors are accused

(8) See Loïc Wacquant’s “Scrutinizing the Street: Poverty, Morality, and the Pitfalls of
Urban Ethnography,” et “Reponses” by Elijah
Anderson, Katherine Newman, and Mitchell
Duneier in the American Journal of Sociology
(2002, 107, 6).

(9) In the same issue see also Katherine
Newman, “No Shame: the View from the Left
Bank”. Like Anderson, Newman points out that
Wacquant does not really know the “ghetto”,
having instead a superficial, aerial view of it
that leaves no place for its inhabitants, their
contradictions, moral debates, and above all the
actions they engage in to cope with the social
conditions they live in.

(10) See S. Tissot, Réformer les quartiers:
enquête sociologique sur une catégorie de
l’action publique (2002), which makes this
claim even though F. Dubet’s La galère was
written and constructed explicitly to reject that
hypothesis. It is further claimed that when
Alain Touraine (1968) analyzed May ’68 as a
“new class conflict” and a renewed form of the
class struggle, his real aim was to reject the
notion of class, whereas Pierre Bourdieu is
defending that notion when he observes the
frustration of the “petty bourgeois” up against
the falling value of higher education degrees,
etc.
of no such thing but instead praised for doing genuinely scientific work. This thinking can result in total about-faces. In the 1960s Pierre Bourdieu showed how the French republican school system produced its own inequalities. What he underlined at the time was that far from being a mere apparatus of reproduction, i.e., a “capitalist school system”, the French system became proportionally more likely to engender symbolic and practical inequalities the more autonomous and republican it was. In his devastating critique of the French school system and its pretensions to equality, he directly emphasized the action of teachers and their “symbolic violence”, which he claimed turned the experience of working-class groups—an experience to which they were doomed in any case—into personalized humiliation. But according to Franck Poupeau, the sociologists who later tried to specify Bourdieu’s analyses and provide them with more solid empirical foundations only did so with the aim of blurring social inequalities by trying to “explain failure in school in terms of school causes”. Those sociologists, explained Poupeau, were themselves following bureaucratic logic and were seeking advantage from the institution; they had therefore abandoned science and surrendered to “obvious ordinary representations” and the “illusion of immediate knowledge”, and they ultimately sang the praises of dominant neo-liberalism.

Precisely the same kind of logic is applied at the political level. If Alain Touraine attends an anti-neo-liberalism rally, that’s just proof he’s a neo-liberal—and trying to make people forget the fact! When Sophie Body-Gendrot criticized American policy for being obsessed with security, she was trying to legitimate the “criminality-obsessed policy” of the [then] socialist government in France. Moreover, when that same socialist government added new measures for dealing with youth unemployment, that was proof that it was becoming more repressive, as Loïc Wacquant explained, who, in passing, blamed the youth unemployment measures on socialist “supporters of the [economic liberal] Plan Juppé” to reform the French social security system, saying they were “pretty much the same people” as the most reactionary supporters of “clichés” about the importance of law and order. Of course he also saw the “Jospin team” [Lionel Jospin was Socialist Prime Minister from 1997 to 2002] as heir to Socialist “submission-to-the-market” policies: by setting up a youth employment program, they were merely developing “a police-and-imprison means of managing poverty and distress [la misère]”, and that plan was only one more instance of their “submission” to the United States.

(11) Beaud and Pialoux’s conclusions, identical to Dubet’s, lead them to underscore as he does the “defenselessness” of the working classes in France. However, these two sociologists assert that they received “indirect confirmation that the processes analyzed in their book could be found in astonishingly similar forms in other regions in France,” from “many debates throughout France”, “namely thanks to the Friends of Le Monde Diplomatique” (p. 26).
(13) Loïc Wacquant, Les Prisons de la misère (1999). In Mots à maux: dictionnaire de la lepénisation des esprits, Sylvie Tissot and Pierre Tévanian go further (1998), accusing the political analyst Patrick Weil of “opening the way for new Nazis”: “We cannot help thinking that behind words such as ‘zero immigration’, or ‘not one more immigrant’ and even the words of the political analyst Patrick Weil there is another formula lurking: ‘final solution’.” (p. 209).
The radical position

The entire problem with such a position is that it is first and foremost a position: that of the radical academic or revolutionary bourgeois. How to explain the fact that these sociologists belong to the world of the university and yet claim that their rightful position is alongside the oppressed and dominated? All “position-taking” is justified by referring to oneself as “radical”. The debate never pertains to science, to the content of observation and how to interpret it. The only acceptable question and the only concern is to determine who is truly radical and to demonstrate one’s own radicalness. Is there any more effective way of doing this than saying that the others are not radical, or not truly radical? The academic radical’s own position, and therefore his self-justification, requires practicing a kind of “puritan” logic wherein one must continually accuse “the others”; it requires kindling and fueling suspicion, denouncing “false” radicals, false “friends of the people”, anyone who, under cover of being “on the left” or “scientific researchers”, are “really” the most effective agents of neo-liberalism, or even American imperialism: “Cultural imperialism (American or otherwise) is never more effective than when its cause is served by progressivist intellectuals (or intellectuals of color in the case of racial inequality), people whom there seems to be little reason of suspecting of promoting the hegemonic interests of a country against which they wield the sword of social critique.”(14) Likewise, “true” critical thinking must be distinguished from the “false” variety, that of sociologists who, in speaking of “the subject”, “fragmented society”, or “multiculturalism”, are actually inviting us to “subject ourselves” to market forces. (15) The fact that these sociologists are not “neo-liberal” or “conservative”, the fact that they have never written anything that suggests they are, is taken as proof that they are! One explanation that radical sociologists offer for such a paradox is that leftist agents of neo-liberalism are essentially “mystified mystifiers” who know not what they do. But most often the reason given is that they have succumbed to the siren’s of success and the media; “they are more attentive to the wishes of the journalism field than to the complexities of the real”. Frédéric Lebaron suggests, for instance, that “the young neo-classical economics ‘prodigy’ who was hired by MIT at age 20 and elected full professor at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales at age 29” owes his success not so much to his scientific studies of taxes (quite dull) as to his arguments in favor of neo-liberalism in the press and other media. (16) The intellectual, on the other hand, the “great savant” is a “new person”, entirely identified with her “beliefs” and “authenticity” –a radical intellectual makes no compromises. He has not “sold” his knowledge in exchange for social

(14) Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc Wacquant, “Sur les ruses de la raison impérialiste” (1998). The authors explains that the reason the sociologist Cyprien Avenel (1997) criticizes the concept of underclass as irrelevant for France and the United States is that he actually wants to “validate” this notion. Clearly all he had to do was speak of it to be accused of complicity.
position and media or academic recognition. Like the bourgeois revolutionary, he must “make his positions the sum and substance of himself; they become disclosures of him”. Consequently, the “radical” scientist must refuse to open up his “propositions” to discussion because they are the expression of his “stance”, proving that he is “truly as he appears” and that he has his rightful place alongside the dominated. Rather than reflect on the social conditions of change or the collective political action of the oppressed, she affirms her integrity and authenticity, which is a sort of mirror of the absence of such integrity and authenticity in “the others”. In other words, the point is to transform scientific debates and political differences into personal conflicts around the question of who is truly “radical”, who belongs to the truly scientific and radical community. This explains the weight in radical sociological literature of “personal attacks” and direct or indirect insults. The “radical” academic practices the personal attack and is constantly expressing his “radicalness” in order to better fill the gap between his real “social position” and his exemplary engagement. In this way she transforms her “theoretical imperialism into a personal virtue”.

This type of logic is obviously deeply “narcissistic”: Pascalian “hatred” of the self is converted into a genuine “cult of the self”. But this need not be seen as a kind of “personal pathology”. It is first and foremost a logical consequence of the practice and idea of sociology. Here sociology is conceived in terms of its externality, its lofty overview –never as the product of a dialogue with social actors. It is essentially a labor of “exposing” the reasons for and causes of social behavior, a labor of explanation that consists in pulling all social behaviors back to the truth of the social position of their enactor and a set of already constituted “dispositions”. In other words, every instance of behavior is the manifestation of dispositions and a position, the expression of a place. The individual is never anything other than an “agent”, the locus in which the social structure is operating or being expressed. There can be no distance from the norm or position. Though there is a “condition”, there is certainly nothing resembling experience. There is a “working-class condition” but no workers’ experience. The actor is sealed away in illusion or the particularity of his or her point of view and social inheritance. He or she could not possibly accede to the universal or to objective truth. The other side of this is that scientific discourse is likewise sealed away; it cannot be understood by social actors and does not derive from an encounter with the social world. This means that the link between “theory” and “practice” can only be made by the sociologist; the only subject is the sociologist; the sociologist is the only individual capable of mastering social determinations and emancipating himself from the mechanisms of society through reflexivity. In the various radical petitions aimed at defending “science” and intelligence, sociologists claim to be indispensable to any reflecting that society might do on itself. Because the sociologist can reflect on self and society, and is therefore

external to the latter, he understands best and can engage in accurate political action. There must therefore be some kind of perfect correspondence between the individual, the science, and political engagement. This is why the sociologist is radical and no one else can be. This is also why the sociologist has to unmask or “expose” all the “others”, show the social logic at work behind the positions they take. The absence of real reflexivity in the others subjects them to “the dispositions of their habitus”, the latter being “the moving principle of their views and blunders” [“vues et bëvues”]. (18)

Such a position quickly becomes paradoxical, however. The “personal” logic of “position” necessarily implies the opposite of politically manifesting that position. Indeed, if critical radicalness is identified with the sociologist’s external position, if it is identified above all with a kind of “objectivity” that he incarnates rather than makes use of, then not only must he be constantly denying the social –in other words, constantly affirming the neutrality of his own social position while remaining just as constantly ignorant of any reality external to the academy– but he must also and above all protect himself from the permanence of the world. Incarnating revolt and critique presupposes that the world doesn’t change, or that it changes in the wrong way, or that it only seems to change. If the world were really to change, revolt would no longer be meaningful, and the sociologist’s identity and position, his “empire”, would become null and void. This is why the radical intellectual’s “primary” enemy is not conservatism but in fact anyone who really wants to change the world. When in 1975 Jean Genet inquired into his own radicalism, he ultimately called it into doubt: “I’m not all that eager for there to be a revolution. If I’m really sincere, I have to say that I don’t particularly want it. The current situation, the current regimes allow me to revolt, but a revolution would probably not allow me to revolt, that is, to revolt individually. This regime allows me to revolt individually. I can be against it. But if there were a real revolution, I might not be able to be against it... I would like for the world to change so that I can be against the world.” (Genet, [1991] 2004). In 1990 Pierre Bourdieu gave a comparable explanation: “[I]t gives me pleasure psychologically. I was an angry young man, I hope I’ll be an angry old man. It’s a kind of loyalty to the idea I have of myself. There’s surely a little narcissism in it, but that’s how it is. On the other hand, I think it’s at the core of my lucidity [...] The social world is bearable to me because I can be outraged.” (19) What’s more, the validity and stability of this kind of “incarnated” theory also presuppose that the world doesn’t change or that its changes have no meaning. The sociologist personifies a kind of abstract, intemporal truth, of which he is the guarantor. The theory must therefore be

(18) “The dispositions Merton imported into his scientific practice were the moving principle of his views and blunders, against which genuinely reflexive sociology could have protected him.”, Pierre Bourdieu, *Science de la science et réflexivité* (2001, p. 32).

(19) Pierre Bourdieu, *Si le mode social m’est supportable, c’est parce que je peux m’indigner. Entretien avec Antoine Spire* (2002). On Bourdieu’s idea that in policy, “too little is as good as nothing”, see Jacques Bouveresse (2003).
sheltered from the world. The relation between theory and practice is reversed: changes in or of the world have to confirm the theory; they have to reinforce it. The meaning of behavior is all the easier to decipher because it is in fact presupposed. The doubly paradoxical logic of this position can only lead its partisans into a situation of Scholastic enclosure or “Scholastic revolt”. The problem is, how to appear poor when one is rich?

Sartre observed the same contradictions in his analysis of intellectuals’ petty-bourgeois bad faith (1972). The intellectual calls for equality, but because he possesses power that derives from his knowledge, he thinks of himself as and is himself proof of the inequality of human conditions. “This privilege, or monopoly on knowledge, is in radical contradiction with humanist egalitarianism. In other words, he should give it up. But because he is privileged, he can only give it up by abolishing himself, and this contradicts the life instinct so profoundly rooted in most people.” For Sartre, the intellectual condenses in his person the social contradiction between the truth of his science and the ideology of his social position. He concluded that the intellectual must negate himself as a bourgeois and an “ego” and adopt the point of view “from below”, necessarily a “radical” point of view because it is that of “the masses” or the “proletariat”. Making no reference to the historical role of that same proletariat, today’s radical sociologist resolves the “contradiction” between his pure idealism and his pure objectivism by reversing Sartre’s “ultra-Bolshevik” solution—that is, by isolating himself and reinforcing his “ego”. He is homo academicus affirmed as such, and he sees his academicism as the very principle of his incarnated radicalness. He considers the way his institution functions to be the way society in general functions; he sees social life as a classroom and identifies his “self” with social critique. The theory is therefore first of all the theory of his academic position, far from the social world and projected onto that world like an image. (20) In the end the point is to construct not so much a radical vision of the social world-to-be-transformed as a radically academic interpretation of that social world.

The social foundations of radical academicism

The academy vs. neo-liberalism

This way of thinking is probably to be understood in terms of the “clerical” Catholic heritage of French intellectuals. French intellectuals replaced the clergy as arbiters of justice and reason and inherited a secularized version of Counter-Reformation ethics and traditional Scholastic methods. Radical intellectuals continue to profess near-instinctive mistrust of the idea that individuals could govern themselves, and think that because of their own personal commerce with reason they have special access to objective justice and

(20) On this aspect see François Cusset (2003).
ultimately the universal. In this respect, the roots of the position are probably more to be looked for in Durkheim than Marx: it is society, more specifically the state as bearer of the universal, that defines the individual and can awaken him through reason to moral existence and therefore freedom. This is why “intellectuals” who think the individual should learn to become a citizen in order to govern himself have always professed strong hostility to the more Protestant idea that the individual is the sole judge of his interests. Consequently, they have always been quite wary of democracy. In this schema, sociology is set in the center of the scientific and moral system of the French republic. 

(21) Radical sociology takes up this heritage, but gives it a critical dimension. The point is to affirm and defend the “universal” nature of the state, incarnated by the “dominated categories” “belonging” to that state, against the dominant strata of the same state, directly subject for their part to the logic of the dominating classes. Within the intellectual world, the dominated and the dominators are arranged the same way: the dominated categories, who incarnate science, reason, and the universal, are set against the dominating categories, who necessarily follow the logic of the media and career development. An association is then made between defending the autonomy of the “scholastic fields” and their members and struggling against neo-liberalism and the dominating classes. 

(22) In this way the class struggle is brought inside the state “field”, inside the “field of power”, where the intellectual or sociologist, once he has rid himself of all his “democratic” illusions, particularly illusions about the abilities of social actors and the dominated, plays a central role. As Philippe Raynaud points out (1999), the radical sociologist is here quite close to Pareto or Roberto Michels: “A number of historical confrontations regarded as exemplary moments in the ‘class struggle’ have in fact been merely the extension, through the logic of alliances with the dominated, of struggles among the dominant groups within the field of power –struggles which, because, for the purposes of legitimation or mobilization they use strategies of symbolic universalization of particular interests, can nevertheless advance the idea of the universal and therefore at least formal recognition of the interests of the dominated.”

(23) In the absence of any “proletariat” or dominated actor, it’s the intellectuals and the dominated fringes of the middle categories, all linked to the state, who are called upon to carry forward the values of justice and equality and indeed to


(22) “All that is said here applies first and foremost to the State, which, like all the historical gains linked to the relatively autonomous history of the scholastic fields, is marked by a profound ambiguity. It can be described and treated simultaneously as a relay, no doubt a relatively autonomous one, of economic and political powers which have little interest in universal interests, and as a neutral body which, because it conserves, within its very structure, the trace of previous struggles, the gains of which it records and guarantees, is capable of acting as a kind of umpire, no doubt always somewhat biased, but ultimately less unfavourable to the interests of the dominated and to what can be called justice, than what is exalted, under the false colours of liberty and liberalism, by advocates of ‘laisser-faire’, in other words, the brutal and tyrannical exercise of economic force.” Pierre Bourdieu, Pascalian Meditations (2000, p. 127).

incarnate them in defense of their own interests, which thereby become naturally universal.

Sociologists favor radical academicism first and foremost for the advantages it procures them. First, it offers the possibility of “enchanting” one’s own position. All “scientific confrontations” become politically central and immediately transposable in political terms. Marcel Gauchet has shown how “posture stands in for content” here, and how the affirmation of a “break” with the social order passes for intellectual “depth”. Judgment replaces explanation and condemnation replaces all moves in the direction of social transformation, and the whole deal enables the radical sociologist to claim infallible, uncompromising authenticity for himself. He has a privileged relation to scientific truth that allows him to grant himself a moral passport that positions him above all contingencies and most importantly above all “ordinary understanding” and above “colleagues”. The general political climate obviously favors this development. There are correspondences between academic radicalism and the “jet set” radicalism of certain opponents of globalization, intellectuals who identify with “oppressed peoples” and who make moral condemnations in the name of what “we” have been subjected to. (24) To this may be added generational factors: the rapidity with which the memory of totalitarianism was effaced, combined with recent experience of the upsurge of capitalism. Lastly, we should note the consistency and simplicity of the radical position –this is what give it its power. Radicalism’s subjective, idealistic affirmation is combined with a reduction of social life and events to individual and collective wills, personal “dispositions” or thoughts or theories —in other words, to “intentions”: neo-liberalism does not show itself directly but can be exposed if we manage to expose the intentions of those who hold power, intentions that are generally hidden in France because they are fundamentally unmentionable, shameful, immoral, and above all because they are much more effective when hidden. The idealism of the radical position refers back to the idea of a neo-liberal “conspiracy”; perceptions of the world and means of action are then organized in relation to that conspiracy. As an “idealistic” discourse on power, the “conspiracy” thesis fully justifies the radical sociologist’s idealistic position. It allows the person who maintains it to ignore the complexity of the social world; above all, it guarantees him a central position. In this regard, the ideological struggle against the neo-liberal “conspiracy” is a means of conquering and affirming one’s own power. What’s more, despite denials on this point, this can only be seen as a highly effective “commercial” and publicity “strategy” in the market of ideas. As Randall Collins has so rightly observed (1998), idea production follows the two-fold logic of small groups and market scarcity. The number of stances is, by definition, limited. Adopting a radical stance allows for optimum audience identification and offers readily identifiable “merchandise” that can be easily

(24) See, for example, remarks by Arundhati Roy calling for radical action, made in the name of “we the little people”, or “we the oppressed” and condemning all political attempts at reform or change: “It has to be understood –we must understand– that our area is opposition politics, not governance politics.” (Libération, April 3, 2004).
traded on the “market”. A specific language that includes a few words which are more or less obscure for the uninitiated, “theory experienced as armor” that protects one from the social world, and a war waged against “enemies”, especially “traitors” – all these features are effective instruments for conquering “market share”. (25)

The development of a socio-economically “precarious” intelligentsia

It is necessary to look more generally, and in more common social terms, for a possible correspondence between radical academicism and the actual experience of a certain number of “intellectual” social categories. (26) The success of the radical position within the university world may be explained by the difficulties that many young sociologists find themselves up against. They have attained generally higher levels of knowledge and skill than the previous generation but are to a great extent excluded from jobs in teaching or research; they exist in a “precarious” if not outright impoverished situation. They are against the “May ’68 generation”, whose members they accuse of 1) benefiting from positions of power that allow them to take advantage of young researchers’ precarious situation while 2) positioning themselves well on the left in their teaching and discourse. “Progressivist in what it produces, conservative in its behavior – these are the two faces of the university intelligentsia.” (Anne Rambach and Martine Rambach, 2001, p. 314). Researchers in this position are in a situation of dependence vis-à-vis a system that has allowed them to come all the way to its threshold. They can only defend the permanence of that system as they struggle to get through its door. Their critique of the “two-sided language” of tenured academics does not lead them to call for “reforming” the system; on the contrary, it induces them to vehemently reject any such change. Whereas a “liberalization” of the system would be fully in their interests, they denounce “neo-liberal” reforms (reforms that in fact are not neo-liberal at all and actually work to strengthen a “mandarin”-type system), thereby directly allying themselves with a kind of conservatism of which they themselves are some of the first victims.

Whereas Bourdieu was mistaken, deliberately or not, in affirming that sociology in France is a “pariah science” and that he himself was a pariah, his expression does touch directly on the lived experience of a number of young aspiring intellectuals and artists. They feel they are “pariahs” in a France where what is developing may be called a “lumpenintelligentsia”. In 1999, 10,500 new candidates were declared qualified to hold academic positions by the Conseil National des Universités, to whom should be added the 27,000 persons already qualified the preceding year, whereas there were only

(25) This recalls the success of Jacques Lacan and his school in the world of psycho-analysis. Also relevant to the comparison are narcissism and identification with a “persecuted master who has attained glory”. (26) On the link between “radicalness” and “class consciousness” among intellectuals as a specific social group, see Christopher Lasch (1965).
4,200 available openings. \(^{(27)}\) In 2004, twenty positions in sociology were available throughout the French university system for approximately 600 potential candidates. Outside the university, numerous other cultural and intellectual sectors are affected: journalism, the media, theater, the arts, public relations. To take one example, the number of performing artists officially classified as “intermittent” reached 110,000 in 2004, whereas there were 30,000 in 1985. \(^{(28)}\) 18.5% of journalists were freelancers in 1998; i.e., 5,654 persons. The same mechanisms are operative in all these situations. “Precarious” intello get to the door of systems that let them get that far but no further—and they end up defending those systems. As explained, they violently critique those with power inside the system, accusing them of using that power abusively, while militating for the system to stay as it is because it allows them some degree of professional and intellectual participation and above all because they are hoping their turn will come to benefit from the advantages it offers. This means that their collective interest, which actually falls in with system “liberalization”, collides with their “individual” interest, which calls for system reinforcement. Radicalism enables them to resolve this contradiction: denouncing the neo-liberal ideology they attribute to those who hold positions of power in the system is a way of explaining their own precarious socio-economic position, while defending the institution’s “integrity” and calling for more jobs in it offers the prospect of entering the system and benefiting from its advantages. In this way they become the staunchest defenders of institutions that marginalize them. Yves-Marie Labé wrote the same thing with regard to journalists during a strike at the [left-identified] newspaper Libération: “The young journalists who had come for the launching of Libé III, while feeling themselves guardians of the newspaper’s history, express this in their own way—more aggressively and radically… They have quite a new vision of the press, fueled by Bourdieu’s discourse, renewed anti-establishment feeling, reflected in the idea that rank-and-file journalists are exploited or put in a precarious situation by their hierarchical superiors.” \(^{(29)}\) Here as in other movements, we find the same dividing line between those who “dominate” within institutional systems, seeking to defend their privileges, and the “dominated”, who incarnate the highest values of the system they seek to promote—precisely the opposition Bourdieu established between the state’s “right” and “left” hands, a world of experts and technocrats or “state nobility” imposing neo-liberalism on dominated social strata, namely a “state petty nobility” “fundamentally linked to the universal acquis associated with the state and right”, true defenders of the state and therefore of the general interest. In each field, the “dominated” call upon the values of the system to better protect and defend that system from take-over by the dominant strata and destruction by the same social categories, understood to adhere to the logic of neo-liberal ideas (though it is somewhat difficult to understand how and why these elites would support an ideology that seems

aimed to destroy the institutions that made them what they are). “Precarious” intermittent performing artists are thus understood to be the true defenders of quality theater for the many, as against “established” actors who, even if they are on the left, necessarily submit to commercial audience logic; elementary and high school teachers are the true defenders of the school system, against ministry of education technocrats who want to make it profitable and turn knowledge into merchandise; freelance journalists are the true defenders of quality journalism for the many against the commercial logic of the tentacular press empires. (30) Any project of reform or modernization is interpreted as an attempt to destabilize the system; all must be countered by “exposing” the two-sided language of the dominant, who, behind their reformist or leftist talk, are really agents of market expansion.

In general terms, social protest movements such as those of intermittent performing artists and researchers are recent illustrations of the emergence of this “lumpenintelligentsia”. Among both “precarious” young researchers and journalists, we can observe the same institutional “integrity”: theirs is a lofty, punctilious conception of “science” and “truth”, which, as they see it, is flouted by academic mandarins and their two-sided discourse. In the name of “purity” they call for maintaining the institution, strengthening it, and above all they are against any attempt to change or “modernize” it. The Collectif Abélard, for example, is opposed to “modernists” who want to reform the university. In one of their publications they propose “a reading of the implicit content of the reforms that are underway”, whose “underlying logic” they “mean to expose”: the reforms are “Trojan horses that help satisfy purely mercantile, utilitarian interests”; the “reforming frenzy” must be fought because “given the context in which it is operative, it marks new progress for neo-liberal reforms of the sort that have been affecting the French university since the 1980s, though they have never declared openly what they are”. (31)

Likewise, intermittent performing artists have made use of a system that has allowed them to get as far as the door of cultural institutions. The French unemployment insurance system favors an increase in number of intermittents but does not provide more work; it thus automatically plunges them into a worsening situation. Even without taking into account the general injustice of the system, intermittents are induced to desire and defend reinforcement of that system, though it mechanically generates their precarious situation and above all their impoverishment. (32)

(30) “Double consciousness, then, among dominant professionals in the nomenklatura of major journalists linked to each other by common interests and shared understandings of all sorts. Among rank-and-file journalists, drudge reporters, mere freelancers, all the obscure employees, all those condemned to a precarious situation, who do what’s the most authentically journalistic in journalism…” Pierre Bourdieu, Contre-Jeux (1998). Herbert Gans (1967) has shown how this perception of the upper classes “corrupted” by status-seeking and the quest to preserve their status is part of middle-class ideology. (31) Abélard, Universitas calamitatum: le livre noir des réformes universitaires (2003). It is true that the word “reform” carries a strong ideological charge. As Chomsky noted, changes are called reforms when supported by the powers-that-be.

All these movements have given rise to intense ideological production. Numerous militant “reviews” have appeared, to which must be added an increasing number of internet sites offering radical, anti-libéral, and often violently anti-media literature. Not to mention the enormous success of *Le Monde Diplomatique*, a strongly left-identified, anti-American and populist monthly, and the somewhat lesser one of the *Les Inrockuptibles*, which launched the petition against the “war on intelligence”, (33) and the association ATTAC to which a number of “radical” sociologists belong and which pledges to deliver “ideological critique” and counterproposals. Denouncing neo-liberalism and “reformism” while defending the state makes it possible to unify extremely diverse actions; above all, it gives “the petty-bourgeois revolt” of the “petty state nobility” a political and universal dimension. This is expressed in recurrent “manifestos” that are not so much proposals for action as repeated affirmations of the signatories’ “position”. In March 1997, for example, the manifesto “*Nous sommes la gauche*” affirmed: “We are the left, who are fighting and have always fought in the field […] we are the left, who demonstrated in December 1995 against the Plan Juppé […] we are a genuine opposition force […] we are the voters of the left […] We are the left because we make the left.” They reject any form of compromise: “We have to choose between those whom we can and want to oppose and those who have become so impossible that we can’t even talk to them anymore.” (34) In June 2003, the manifesto “The kind of left we want” used the same rhetoric: “We are citizens, elected officials, political, associative, and labor union militants. We are resolutely on the left […] We all share the same set of urgent demands, radical choices […] There must be a return to the original sources of the left.” (35) This is not so much a political strategy as a strategy of conviction; the point is to affirm that they are more authentically “on the left” because more radical, that they really are what they seem, as opposed to the “false” left of the apparatus, which is precisely not what it claims to be. (36)

At the end of his study of court society, Norbert Elias (1985) analyzed the dilemma for the upper strata seeking to change the world without losing their privileges. They are at the origin of “romanticism”: that is, “they seek relief from their present distress in a return to an earlier stage of social development of which they have, precisely, a romantic, an unrealistic picture” (p. 222) Such tendencies, according to Elias, are particular to social elites whose claim to power is not and cannot be satisfied without “jeopardizing the entire social order that secures them their privileged position”. Today, precarious *intello*s and a major part of the “dominated” intelligentsia in France share the cultural activities and ideas of the privileged classes while their living standards

(35) Manifesto published following spring 2003 strikes; see Isabelle Sommier (2003).
(36) Richard Sennett (1979). For Sennett, Jules Guesde is a good example of how “strategic” discussions are replaced by conflicts around the question of what is truly radical, conflicts that can then only become personal. On all these movements and manifestos see Isabelle Sommier (2003).
qualify them as underprivileged. (37) On the one hand they show a certain “overconformity”, which is a way of more forcefully affirming their membership in the intelligentsia; on the other, they display their outright opposition to the world that marginalizes and continues to exclude them. To apply E. P. Thompson’s 1978 analysis, the result is a mixture of intellectual innocence and radical revolt that is more anti-generational than it is truly anti-institutional. Placed in an economically precarious situation and a sort of social void, segregated out by the institutions they support, they would like to be “revolutionaries” whereas in fact they are the product of institutional evolution and a current context that has “broken the circuits between intellectualty and practical experience”. In fact, they are not so much “revolutionaries” as “bourgeois…” able to perform imaginary revolutionary psycho-dramas (in which each outbids the other in adopting ferocious verbal postures” and attached to the elitism of their theory). They are therefore “diversionists (enclosed and imprisoned within their own drama). […] Their practical importance remains, however, considerable in disorganising the constructive intellectual discourse of the Left, and in reproducing continually the elitist division between theory and practice” (Thompson, 1978, p. 195).

The middle classes and radicalism

Science vs. democracy

The radical sociologist’s academic, idealistic vision does not mean that he neglects or ignores the outside world. In traditional fashion, idealism designates a “self-generated” conceptual or theoretical universe that imposes its own meanings on social reality without dialoguing with it. As Thompson pointed out, “the conceptual structure hangs above and dominates social being” (ibid., p. 205). Confined to her academic and theoretical world, the radical sociologist declares the “truth” of the social world, reveals its objectivity and designates its victims, exposes its failings. This approach has long been critiqued: E. P. Thompson, Richard Rorty, and Michael Walzer have all shown how reference to external objectivity or decontextualized universal values leads to a “theoretical” or “scientific” elitism and to projecting highly abstract emancipation logic onto the “dominated”. (38) According to the

(37) See Anne Rambach and Martine Rambach (2001).

(38) “The stereotypical leftist critic breaks loose from his local and familial world (bourgeois, petty-bourgeois, conformist, religious, sheltered, provincial, and so on), escapes with much attendant drama, detaches himself from all emotional ties, steps back so as to see the world with absolute clarity, studies what he sees (scientifically, in accordance with the most advanced views), discovers universal values as if for the first time, finds these values embodied in the movement of the oppressed (class, nation, gender, his own or the other –so long as the “finding” is objective, it doesn’t matter), decides to support the movement and to criticize its enemies, who are very often people such as he once was”, Michael Walzer (1989, pp. 225-226). See Richard Rorty (1998).
radical understanding, the truth of the social world surges up when its invisible mechanisms and above all the hidden intentions of the dominant—which the dominant themselves are in no position to understand—are exposed. That truth does not emerge from any “dialogue” with social actors or intellectual confrontation with social experience of the sort Thompson called for, but from the radical sociologist’s monologue. He indicates what needs to be done to become “radical”; she “gives a set of instructions”. The “radical” sociologist states a point of view and seeks to impose it. But he cannot let it be contradicted or even discussed. He possesses the truth, the sole truth, and a monopoly on that truth: “Social sciences, particularly sociology, have difficulty imposing their monopolistic ambitions—a monopoly nonetheless 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 democracy, there is the desire for truth to be ‘plural’.”

How to evaluate truth and non-truth? Even if “everyone thinks they have a right to interfere in sociology”, only the sociologist possesses the “very special ambition: to pronounce the truth”. What’s more, only the sociologist practicing true reflexivity and exercising his profession in a disinterested manner has a right to pronounce the truth. He thus has to accept being “dominated” and outright persecuted by those who have fewer scruples than he and who compensate for their scientific weaknesses or incompetence by “plebiscite logic, the clapometer, audience ratings”, as Poupeau puts it when evoking his discovery of the persecution awaiting him because of the “genuine censure” practiced “in the scholarly milieu” against any “reference to theories and methods inspired by Bourdieu”: “Bourdieu himself advised me to quote him as little as possible.”

The radical sociologist often says “we” not so much to particularize what he has to say as to designate a community where there is no “disagreement”, where “disagreement” would be utterly incomprehensible. Sartre wished to speak only to the disadvantaged, affirming that their point of view was that of truth. For Sartre, though subjectivity existed, there was certainly no intersubjectivity. Today’s radical sociologist is just as closed to the idea of intersubjectivity. The “subject” cannot possibly emerge from confrontation and dialogue, but can only be born through emancipation, mastery of social determinations, objectification of self, and reflexivity. This means the radical sociologist can only talk to himself and those who most closely resemble him. He is hardly concerned to “convince” anyone outside his circle; indeed, he speaks in order to constitute that circle. He does not speak to but of others, to try to make them “shut up” and to unify “his own”. At most he will concede that there can be dialogue once all subjects have become “enlightened”: “To conquer one’s autonomy, a kind of ivory tower has to be constructed, inside of which we judge each other, criticize each other, even combat each other, but knowingly; we clash, but with scientific weapons and instruments, techniques,

(41) This was Merleau-Ponty’s criticism of him (1955).
methods.” (42) The sociologist cannot speak outside that ethereal universe of science and scholarly confrontation, because those to whom he might speak “don’t have the code” for “decoding what is being said” – they can only really understand commonplaces. The ivory tower is therefore necessary for the making of truth. Sociology can only exist by way of a clean break from “commonsensical” perceptions and interpretations – “spontaneous sociology”. The radical sociologist discourses, but he could not possibly dialogue. And wouldn’t it be persecuting him to make him dialogue?

Logically, the radical sociologist mistrusts democracy, opinions, and the public. And he is often hostile to what he perceives as a world of emptiness and manipulation. Since the truth is hidden, it could not possibly be seen and even less shown in the public arena. Whatever “truth” could be shown that way could never be anything but an “illusion of immediate knowledge”. Dialogue, procedures, information presuppose a kind of trust that could only be a trap, a delusion, in a world dominated by ideologies and hidden powers. Behind “participation” there can exist only strategies implemented by the dominant to get their neo-liberal policies accepted. Urban planning and welfare policies in France, for example, should be read as means of “threatening the welfare state [...] in the name of economic liberalism and principles like being close to citizens and inhabitants, democracy, citizenship”. (43) The idea is that consultation procedures and la démocratie de proximité primarily serve to obtain acceptance for policies hostile to the weakest or to force public service employees to use a “rhetoric of state reform”. When teacher-researchers are given the job of implementing a university reform, this the ultimate “ruse”, leading them to “create a technocratic, largely fictional universe in phase with neo-liberal dreams” on the basis of “self-management principles”: “This is the victory of bureaucratic reform-speak over all forms of real ‘participatory’ democracy.” (44) More generally, actors’ participation in their own learning and any successful conquest of autonomy in education are never anything more than snares aimed to further inequalities while fraudulently getting the weakest to accept those inequalities. The university plays a central role in this process because it fashions students’ “habitus”. Trained neo-liberally, students then export this ideology into the social world at large. “Individualist, utilitarian, mercantile leveling is present in journalism (where decomposition is the most advanced) but also in publishing (which is in the hands of the big press groups), and creation (performing arts, documentary filmmaking, cinema, etc.). The same managerial recipes are being applied to very different worlds, without at all taking into account their specific requirements. And primary and secondary schools are hit through the university because university-trained school teachers are shaped by the new university

business culture.” (45) This critique of democracy lists non-congruent claims rather than integrating them. In some cases democracy is criticized in the name of the elitism required by science and truth: “ordinary people” cannot accede to science and truth and do not have the “necessary tools” for understanding; in others, democracy is rejected because of the way it “manipulates” citizens: the dominant use it to their own advantage to impose their neoliberal ideology, exploiting the goodwill and naïveté (even stupidity) of the “dominated” to make them act “commonsensically” –i.e., against their own interests.

**Critique of the media and hostility toward democracy**

Media critique occupies a particularly significant place in the productions of radical academics, quite explicitly fed by the two above-cited claims, to the point where the term “journalistic” has become an insult in their literature. Democracy and journalism are both categorically rejected because subject to the “law of numbers” and “demands” of social actors. Journalism as Bourdieu understood it weakens politicians’ authority by forcing them to submit to the verdict and oversight of the public. (46) In media space as in academic space, the “truth” is conceived as the product of a reflexive “ascetic labor” and not the fragile result of a confrontation between different points of view, or pluralism. As Geraldine Muhlmann has shown, for Bourdieu, the reforms necessary to the practice of journalism ought to lead to the death of that practice. Sartre believed that the intellectual should abolish himself to accede to the truth borne by the point of view of the disadvantaged. Following the logic of radical academicism, Bourdieu affirmed that journalists should abolish themselves to accede to the truth borne by the point of view of sociologists. Producers of “truth”, scientists and therefore sociologists should be in control of both their own words and the conditions in which those words are received. Every member of a “field” should be the sole agent of any popularization of that field. Consequently, there is no place for journalists. More generally, the point is to avoid “truly false and falsely true debates”. The work


(46) Bourdieu’s hostility to democracy, the public space, and social actors is quite explicit: “Despite the fact that agents involved in the journalism and politics fields are in a relation of competition with each other, [...] both these fields are very directly and closely under the sway of market sanction and plebiscite. It follows from this that the sway of the journalism field reinforces the tendency of agents active in the political field to submit to the pressure of demands and expectations emanating from the greatest number, some of which are rooted in the passions rather than reflection, all of which take the form of demands for mobilization because of the way they are expressed in the press. [...] All this means that the ever-increasing power of the journalism field, itself subjected to the tightened grip of business logic on the political field, which is in turn forever tempted to use demagogy [...] works to weaken the autonomy of the political field, and thereby the ability granted to representatives (political and other) to invoke their competence as experts or their authority as guardians of collective values.”, Pierre Bourdieu, “L’emprise du journalisme” (1994).
of the journalist should efface itself before the word of the dominated while working to bring that word into the world. This work, where it would be sociology’s prerogative to interpret what the dominated say —sociology, of course, has a monopoly on ability to interpret— would prevent the public space from functioning in the inegalitarian, alienating way it does. The very future of civilization is at stake here, if ever civilization were to become an object of publicity and democratic debate: “It will be objected that I’m being elitist, defending the besieged citadel of high science and culture, even imposing prohibitions on the people (by seeking to prohibit television time to those who, with their extravagant fees and lifestyles, occasionally call themselves spokespersons of that people, claiming that they know how to hear the people —that they know how to win a landslide victory in the audience ratings). In fact, I am standing up for the conditions that are necessary to the production and diffusion of humanity’s highest creations.” (47) As Géraldine Muhlmann points out (2004), this critique of the media slips from the one claim to the other: the defense of necessary elitism against the people and therefore the rejection of debate and public critique in the name of science shifts into a denunciation of journalists’ “ideological” construction of public opinion, or the public, in the name of the people. (48) After being at the very origin of “common understanding”, the “people” fall victim to a manipulation by the dominant and their allies. Does this mean that once liberated from the sway of journalism, the people will be able to reveal itself to itself by recognizing the superiority of the sociologist’s word and knowledge? The same ambiguity suffuses the critique of the media developed by other “radical” sociologists in a number of regular publications. Alain Accardo overcomes it by explaining, for example, that journalists submit to the dominant order because they lack “cultural capital”: they “apprehend the world […] through the simplistic, stereotyped categories of a kind of ready-made thought of which their newspapers and other press material have become one of the main producers.” (49) In “wide-audience” publications, the ambiguity is usually resolved through an aggressive move into personal insults and attacks against journalists or non-radical sociologists, designated “clowns” or zealous servants of the dominant order who have “sold themselves out”. (50) “Critique” here is not so much
critique as an explicitly violent practice and a call to physically force the
“objects” of it to “shut up”. All public statements that escape the control of
the sociologist are considered at best naivété, at worst a manipulation that
benefits the dominant. The contraditor is locked into a simple pair of alterna-
tives: stupidity or bad faith. Either he’s an idiot because he doesn’t understand
what he’s doing or she’s “sold herself out”, doing what she does knowingly
with the sole aim of furthering her interests. (51)

The radical sociologist monologues. He speaks only to say that other
people have to shut up: “I think that a part of what I write is aimed at making
a whole load of people shut up.” (52) His radical academicism and position
defense make him violently hostile toward democracy. In this he connects up
with the ancestral tendency toward paranoia in intellectual milieus. Since the
intellectual cannot reign over the world, he makes it fit a “theory”. He creates
an “empire of signs” that he controls perfectly and seeks to impose as the only
conceivable world. (53) It is fair to suppose that the radicalizing of this
discourse compensates for having been disappointed by social struggles and
working-class actors: the true people is far from being the real people. The
ture “people” takes nourishment from science, whereas the real people
watches TF1 [low-brow, privately owned French television channel]. In
classic fashion, intellectuals’ radicalness comes to take the place of failed
action or action that doesn’t satisfy the hopes that were placed in it. With the
disappearance of the “working-class” reference, the radical sociologist can no
longer found his analyses on the “historic mission” of a social category. He
therefore seeks to “enchant” the social struggles of the “petty state nobility”,
to endow them with “universal” significance that he knows best how to bear
forward and to signify, because he can no longer see that significance as
operative in the proletariat or working class. Radical academicism thus
connects up with the social experience of the socio-economically precarious
intelligentsia, and finds in it a relay that links it up with enlightened opinion.
Radical academicism’s denunciation of the “market” and “neo-liberalism” are
related to worries about socioprofessional status operative in a social category
that is attached to the republican state, the state which in turn protects that

---

(51) For Patrick Champagne, “we do not know” if the disagreement expressed by
the sociologist Philippe Corcuff is “only” a matter of “malevolence” or instead, and more
“commonly”, “stupidity” (“Philippe Corcuff, critique ‘intelligent’ de la critique des médias,”
2004). For Bourdieu, “journalist-intellectual” sociologists who expressed any disagreement in
response to the December 1995 strike movement against the Plan Juppé were “either
stupid or dishonest or both” (“Retour sur les grèves de décembre 1995,” 2002).

(52) Pierre Bourdieu, Si le monde social m’est supportable (2002, p. 40). Bourdieu often
expressed this idea, and the desire to “stop the others from doing sociology”; see for example
the interview he gave in Libération (Feb. 11, 1993).

category and ensures that it will be able to continue its activities. Radical academicism’s hostility to democracy is related to fears of a world that dares try to escape political “sanction”. The defense of the “French exception” with regard to public service and cultural matters –curiously enough, French culture is never mentioned with reference to the exceptionally low figures for French press circulation– abundantly illustrates the logic operative in these professions, which demand a sort of professional guarantee from the state and identify themselves with “universal” values that are, as they understand it, no longer being borne forward by “the people”.

**Distance, critique, and self-pity**

The social dimension of this hostility to democracy characteristic of intellectuals and middle-class categories linked to the state is not enough to explain the resonance and impact of radical academicism. It is in the antidemocratic dimension itself that the reasons are to be found for its properly social “power”, which extends far beyond the lumpenintelligentsia. Indeed, radical academicism, in its very content, makes the middle classes, or at least that part of them linked to the state, the main victims of neo-liberalism because they are the vectors of “the universal”. A recent title in the weekly magazine *Télérama* was quite direct: “The teacher, the researcher, the intermittent: society’s new pariahs.” (54) The petition against the “war on intelligence” fronted just these social categories –up against a government that was in fact applying one of the most violently anti-welfare– and therefore anti-working-class –policy approaches since 1945. We can read Bourdieu’s *Misère du Monde* (1993 [Weight of the World]) in the same terms: the book managed to place the middle classes at the same level as the working classes, with the suffering of the project supervisor and the social worker equivalent to that of the young proletarian and the young immigrant –all victims of neo-liberalism. Furthermore, the “middle-class” victims are discharged of all responsibility, and because they are bearers of the universal, they are said to have a kind of political priority over the proletariat world. The point is first and foremost to defend “public service” –in other words, the wages and social status of the social worker first, before the living conditions of the young immigrant whom that social worker refuses to grant the 100 euros he needs to get through the month.(55)

Literature as well as sociology has long underscored the “sentimental dispossession” of the middle classes; that is, the “affective dislocation” that

(54) See February 14, 2004 issue.

(55) Pierre Bourdieu explicitly assumes responsibility for this reading: “The relative inferiority of those inferior superiors [...] is what defines the misère of position; that misère cannot be reduced [sic] to the misère of condition, but it is just as real and profound. These relative misères cannot be relativized [...] The Revolution was sparked by the revolt of the petty nobility against the great.” (interview with Sylvaine Pasquier in *L’Express*, March 19, 1993; republished in *Interventions* (2002). Bourdieu and Accardo, *La misère du monde* (1993).
causes their members to feel personally impoverished “culturally and spiritually” by the economic prosperity they enjoy, as Catherine Jurca has shown (2001). As the living conditions and cultural level of these social categories rise, the objects and symbols they can appropriate to themselves multiply to infinity. Individuals are then torn between all the advantages they can draw from the market and the general increase in education level, and the feeling that the value of those objects and signs, of their “cultural capital”, is rapidly falling simply because their number has been multiplied. The democratization that produced those individuals also means “massification” to them. They “fall” at the very moment they rise. What makes each individual unique is at the same time what threatens to dissolve him in the anonymity and banality of the “mass”. The result is a strange perception of self as having also been multiplied to infinity: the market makes me both a unique and extremely ordinary individual; democracy lets me individualize myself but also “massifies” me. The effect on the middle-class individual is to interpose a permanent distance. It is absolutely vital for the individual to affirm that he is not part of the mass, that he escapes this process even though he is fully conscious of being imprisoned in it. In the end, it is because he is the primary beneficiary of the market that the middle-class individual feels he is its primary victim. He “revolts”, then, not so much against “economic rationality” as workers do as against “democratization” and massification of goods and resources by the market. If transformed into merchandise, her privileges are in danger of proving mere banalities. Democratized, those goods and resources disintegrate at the very moment the middle-class individual gets his hands on them. The result is a combined tendency to pity self and keep others at a distance.

The beneficiaries of modern culture think of themselves first and foremost as its secret or recognized victims. C. Wright Mills and David Reisman, also the essayist Vance Packard and the psychanalyst Erich Fromm, insisted on the alienation of managers and members of the middle classes generally. (56) The direct consequence of this is the development of a “therapy” culture, abundantly noted in sociology. The experience of the middle classes has more to do with individual self-pity than resistance to capitalist culture, as Catherine Jurca has explained in detail. (57) Consequently, to be a member of the middle classes is first and foremost to define oneself as a “victim” and feel sorry for oneself. As the primary victim of market logic, this individual tends to think that his priority is to defend his status. But at the same time, market logic allows him to redefine himself positively. He has fallen victim to massification, the multiplication of “people like me”, of growing cultural homogeneity. In thus experiencing himself as a victim, he can lay claim to individual specificity, originality, “superiority” over others, because he isn’t “taken in”. He is not completely like the others, because he does not simply enjoy and take advantage of his privileges; he is conscious of the emptiness of

consuming and of the massification that lurks behind it. To be a member of the middle classes is also to claim that one is not like the others; it is to escape from social determinism because of one’s “lucidity”, just like the scientist or savant. Marcel Gauchet (2003), who clearly understood this, saw it as one expression of the deepening process of individualization: “The identity of the contemporary individual is to be critical. To resolutely ‘desolidarize’ oneself from the world as it is is one current way of affirming one’s individual existence.” But this also works as a kind of class identity—it is the ideology of the middle classes. Literature has perhaps been more effective than sociology in giving us a vision of the combined self-pity and critical distance specific to this social category. In The Sportswriter, his fine novel on the American middle class, Richard Ford (1999) shows a man in that profession full of vague literary ambitions but with no illusions about his true talent, living his suburban life—children, ex-wife, lover. While enjoying his comforts, he also feels a victim of them, unable to give them up so as to lead a life that would correspond better to what he thinks he could be. He observes his friends, who are all leading similar existences and have the same feelings about them: “Perfect Babbitts, really, all of us, even though to some extent we understood that”. (58) None of them can “separate happiness from desperation”, satisfaction from boredom. But it is in fact their desperation and boredom that make each feel himself or herself to be a person.

Middle-class identity logic is gaining ground in our society, one sign being the emergence of “victims” of all sorts. This type of logic is very present among teachers in France, who feel they are “victims” of contempt emanating from a system they know exactly how to take advantage of, who defend the principle of equality while validating school inequalities and discrimination with their demands to be transferred to less troubled schools. It is also to be found in the world of journalists. A 1999 survey of journalists at the regional newspaper Sud-Ouest showed the same duality at work: respondents said they were victims of precisely what enabled them to practice their profession; this led to a mixture of self-pity and violent criticism of the world they live in; they were particularly critical of their colleagues. (59) It is also widespread among social workers and other occupational categories. (60) Politically, it offers undeniable advantages, allowing these social categories to appropriate the demands of the working-class world as well as a monopoly on public space and representation. But in the struggles conducted by these categories according to this logic there is no social adversary. Their struggles are not of a conflictual nature; rather they are opposed to “projects”, “intentions”, “the market”, and “neo-liberalism”. They are aimed at maintaining a particular status while denouncing a system. This is why they are strongly marked by avoidance and competition logic. In an increasingly rich society, opportunities

(59) Georges Felouzis and Didier Lapeyronnie (2000).
(60) In a remarkable study of a town in the outskirts of Paris, Olivier Masclet (2003) shows how the “petty state nobility” has gradually come to monopolize political space, marginalizing “militants” from the working-class world, which world has been in turn gradually weakened.
for choice increase and social categories are increasingly less constrained to engage in conflict. It is always possible to “go somewhere else” or to try to take shelter.

Radical academicism gives a very clear idea of the contours of this social and political middle-class logic. Above and beyond the relaying function observable in the lumpenintelligensia, it is a sort of exacerbation of the ideology of these social categories. Radical academicism sanctifies their self-pity while offering the distance required for individuation and affirmation of self-superiority: one is oneself a victim, and because a victim, critical, and a victim because critical. This logic is precisely what defines the radical sociologist: a victim because successful, and successful because a victim; pariah because he is not fooled by a game that he himself has drawn every practical and symbolic advantage from and that he looks down on with his “lucidity”, but at the same time honorable because a pariah. In this way, the individual can benefit from the advantages linked to her position while demanding that that position improve; he can show how distanced he is from the world –thus proving his superiority– while remaining certain that that world won’t change.

To sum up: radical academicism involves identifying oneself with a kind of “objectivity” outside society (incarnated by the institution) and leads in classical fashion to a sort of elitism: only the savant elite accedes to the clear-mindedness or “lucidity” that can be had from theory and universal values. The savant must therefore demonstrate that he slips the grip of social determinism –determinism that he can see at work in others’ lives. He must also show how the “dominated” or the “little” people are bearers of universal values and carry forward the emancipation movement. This leads him to monologue and to make his “self” the point where science and politics fit together: he has succeeded in freeing himself from the social so as to better “mold” himself to the cause of the universal and can therefore “show” the dominated the true meaning of their actions, giving the impression that he is using his lucidity to support them, to enchant or universalize their positions or demands. Extreme objectivism and extreme subjectivism go together here to produce an “apocalyptic” analysis of the social world in which the “neo-liberal conspiracy” causes the greater part of society to suffer and endure poverty to the benefit of a small minority. In addition to the benefits it makes possible, this position links up in France with the social experience of a “lumpenintelligentsia” of socio-economically “precarious” or “dominated” intellos who in this way are able to universalize their position. Radicalism enables them to resolve the contradiction between their “culturally” privileged position and their difficult living conditions. They can thereby “absorb” demands for equality and present their misère as equivalent to the “suffering” of the helpless and the dominated social categories. Implied in radical academicism is sharp hostility toward democracy, alternately in the name of science and the need to preserve truth from any debate, and the name of the
“true” people and the need to protect the people from manipulations whose purpose is to make it absorb the ideology of the dominant. This anti-democratic logic corresponds directly to the ideology of the middle classes, characterized by self-pity and critical distance. All these features are part of a general political movement in which radicalism plays a double role: it is a direct expression of the fact that the world of working-class demands has been taken over in France by the state-related middle classes (the universal is no longer borne by the proletariat but by the “petty state nobility”); it shows the absence of a strong social actor, with ideological escalation compensating for the weakness of social protest while offering absolution for an approach that holds the “working-class” world ever at a distance.

Lastly, when the radical sociologist makes his demand for superior reflexivity, when he believes that it is possible to free oneself from social context and claims to be in possession of the only truth there is about the social world, he is deluding himself. She does not see how closely her self-enclosed discourse follows the ideology specific to a set of social categories and how her logic of “exposure” “universalizes” interests that can only be particular. Radical academicism is a sign of a particular social-historical context; its soliloquy is the expression of that context. In an increasingly rich, inequality-ridden society where social conflict is yielding to a combination of self-distancing, status defense, and social problems, where actors are dissolving in consumption and identity concerns, where the middle classes impose their normative categories and push aside the genuinely underprivileged, who is there for sociologists to talk with?

Didier LAPEYRONNIE

Département de sociologie
Université Victor Segalen-Bordeaux 2
3, place de la Victoire – 33000 Bordeaux – France

Translation: Amy Jacobs

Previously published: RFS, 2004, 45, 4

APPENDIX

Documentation used

This article uses two sets of documents pertaining respectively to sociology and social activism: publications of the association Raisons d’agir [Reasons to act], presided by Frédéric Lebaron, to which have been added a few other explicitly related texts (see the internet site: raisonsdagir.org); and publications of the association Action Critique Médias (ACRIMED) and the review Pour Lire Pas Lu (PLPL [To be read, not been read]), whose promoters and editors are proponents of the critical logic of “radical sociology”.

1) Raisons d’agir, the militant publication series launched by Bourdieu, puts out “small, very low-priced books which present the results of the most
advanced research on important political, social, and cultural issues and, whenever and wherever possible, offer concrete proposals for action”. This collection has had great media and readership success and been much copied. Sales of Sur la télévision (1996) exceeded 140,000; sales of journalist Serge Halimi’s Nouveaux chiens de garde (1997) “reached 100,000 in less than six months”. The small books published by the Éditions du Croquant are a “Collection de l’association Raisons d’agir”. Among them, I have considered only those written by sociologists and claiming to practice sociology.


To this set of works I have added press articles and interviews and the unpublished thesis of Sylvie Tissot, Réformer les quartiers: enquête sociologique sur une catégorie de l’action publique (Paris, EHESS, December 2002, thesis director Christian Topalov), which clearly fits into this militant logic and “radical” academic critique. For the same approach and tone see also Pierre Tévanian and Sylvie Tissot, Mots à maux: dictionnaire de la lepénisation des esprits (Paris, Dagorno, 1998) and the internet site: Les Mots Sont Importants (LMSI.net), run by these two authors. Le Monde Diplomatique has published numerous articles by all these writers. See for example an article by Louis Pinto accusing Michael Walzer of defending “American imperialist ideology” (May 2002), the collectif Abélard’s “Recettes pour une université plus mercantile” (May 2004), Henri Maler’s “Face à l’ordre médiatique.”

Other publications were used when they allowed for shedding light on particular points.


30

2) With regard to radical critique of the media, see Action, Critique, Médias (ACRIMED: www.acrimed.org), founded after the strikes of December 1995 by the sociologist Patrick Champagne and professor Henri Maler as well as the above mentioned review Pour Lire, Pas Lu, edited by Pierre Rimbert and Serge Halimi (as mentioned, Halimi is one of the leading authors in the series Raisons d’agir). The tone characterizing PLPL, the use of extreme-right style rhetoric that occasionally recalls late nineteenth-century, 1920s, and even 1930s anti-Semitic propaganda –animalization, reference to physical appearance, accusations of corruption, innuendo –have provoked angry debate in the press. Favorite targets of the journal are left-identified newspapers and sociologists. The sociologist Pascal Perrineau is called “the science-po donkey”; the sociologist Michel Wieviorka is called “the mustachioed poodle”; they are accused of “gobbling up public money”. The sociologist Zaki Laïdi is called “the demi-cerebellum”. In an article on the “scholarly bears of social-liberalism” the journal writes: “The ‘scientific committee’ of A gauche in Europe provides PLPL with the occasion to close its triology of intellectual corruption in style... So, all advisors on the left are together at last in a single termites’ nest? Burn it, burn it, burn it!” (PLPL, February 2004, 18).

To give a fuller idea of the journal’s tone, see editorial no. 6, October 2001:

“The Kursk has gone down. The vile monthly newspaper, called Le Monde des Débats by its last readers, Nicole Notat [former head of France’s moderate labor union, the Confédération Française Démocratique du Travail] and [the economist] Denis Kessler, has just declared bankruptcy. PLPL exults. In February 2001, PLPL sent ‘its advance condolences to the families of the unfortunate submariners of the Kursk’. In May 2001, PLPL added: ‘A newspaper of theirs dying is a bit like our freedom being reborn.’ The renaissance has only just begun –get ready for other deaths. The Quotidien Vesperal des Marchés [Vesperal market daily] called Le Monde, up to its neck in debt, is now also on a drip. This time the schemes of the Evil Dwarf Alain Minc,
president of the QVM oversight committee, won’t be enough to save it. PLPL can therefore announce that QVM’s impending arrival on the stock market will take the place of extreme unction.”

“The collapse of the advertising market and the hopes invested in Internet allow us to presage other good news of the kind.”

“Nonetheless, the enemies of Sardonie have not all been annihilated. Moreover, the attacks against the Pentagon and World Trade Center have confirmed Sardonie theories about the unanimously lying media, the arrogance of the swaggering bosses, and the servility of the capitulating left. A few hours after the collapse of the towers in which could be said to beat the heart of world capitalism, journalists ordered us to get out and buy stock to defend “democracy and capitalism” (CNN, 12/09/01). Others, who had sung the praises of the destruction of Iraq and its people under the name “war of the civilized world against the Arabs” (TF1) demanded that we don mourning. For once, the precision of the “strikes” did not thrill those who are when the victims are Yugoslavians, Sudanese, or Panamanians. At an open-air market in Lille, a journalist of Radio Monte Carlo wandered around desperately in search of a weeping fishwife…”

REFERENCES

Cingolani Patrick, 2003. – La République, les sociologues et la question politique, Paris, La Dispute.
Felouzis Georges, Lapeyronnie Didier, 2000. – Journalistes au travail, rapport d’enquête, Bordeaux, LAPSAC, Université de Bordeaux II.
Lasch Christopher, 1965. – The New Radicalism in America, 1889-1963, the Intellectual as a Social Type, New York, Vintage.
Mills C. Wright, 1951. – White Collar, the American Middle Class, New York, Oxford University Press.