Research Article

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Bourdieu and Working-Class Neighbourhoods: What Place for Ordinary Aesthetics?

https://doi.org/10.1515/opphil-2022-0274
received July 30, 2023; accepted December 4, 2023

Abstract: Today, an extensive body of research has been produced on the history of mobilisation by residents of working-class neighbourhoods in France and by those who identify with them. These analyses have changed our understanding of contemporary mobilisations, but the existing discourse should not prevent us from reflecting on the alternative modes of engagement that are emerging in these neighbourhoods. These commitments contribute to the "making" of a distinct political *culture*, rooted in practices and discourses hybridised within working-class *lifestyles*. Is there an elective affinity between Bourdieu's theoretical framework and the mobilisations of working-class neighbourhoods? If so, how can this framework provide a productive interpretation of the ordinary actions interwoven into the daily fabric of these social spaces? One way of answering these questions is to consider these actions as a form of political knowledge that reveals alternative ways of considering politics.

Keywords: ordinary aesthetics, popular culture, Bourdieu, sociology, politics

Today, an extensive body of research has been produced on the history of mobilisation by residents of working-class neighbourhoods in France and by those who identify with them.[1] These analyses have changed our understanding of contemporary mobilisations, but the existing discourse should not prevent us from reflecting on the alternative modes of engagement that are emerging in these neighbourhoods. These commitments contribute to the "making"[2] of a distinct political *culture*, rooted in practices and discourses hybridised within working-class lifestyles, which I will refer to as *popular lifestyles*.

The features of this distinctive political culture emerge in a conflictual relationship with both the symbolic left-wing order and the labour movement, as well as with the organisations that have traditionally embodied these political ideologies. This gap is not a question of a so-called *rendez-vous manqué*[3] (a missed *opportunity* for the left wing) but is rather the result of a historical and political process. Within certain segments of the working classes, a critique of the social order is intertwined with a critique of established forms of political engagement, which are perceived as perpetuating modes of domination and needing to be sidestepped.

Such critique produces modes of action and discourse that maintain a contradictory relationship with dominant norms, due to the inherent instability of the social positions of those who enact them. The

1 See Boubeker and Hajjat, *Histoire politique*; Taharount, *"On est chez nous."*

2 The term "making" refers to the work of Edward Thompson. See Thompson, *The Making*.

3 A *rendez-vous manqué* is "a missed appointment." This expression is often used in France as a reference to an important book by Olivier Masclet. See Masclet, *La gauche et les cités*.

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experience of subjugation underpins what James Scott terms a "hidden text,"[4] which, both strategically and by necessity, plays with traditional reading grids – it is not merely a matter of "doing politics without looking like it," but rather of endeavouring to embrace multiple frameworks of engagement and expression, thereby defining an ordinary aesthetic that is worthy of serious analysis. This approach challenges the established discourse of the sociology of domination, particularly as influenced by the enduring legacy of Pierre Bourdieu in France. This article aims to discuss a contradictory dialogue between sociology of domination and elements of popular culture emerging in French working-class neighbourhoods.

1 Sociological Analysis of Working-Class Neighbourhoods: Bourdieu's Theory

Published in 1993, *La Misère du monde* opens with a striking introduction, in which Pierre Bourdieu defines the "cités" or "grands ensembles" as the *privileged* places for observing and highlighting the "incompatible points of view which are equally founded in social reason." In fact, the first 15 chapters of the book are dedicated to the patient and unequivocal description of the social violence inflicted on the inhabitants of working-class neighbourhoods.[5] This sets out a theoretical framework, as well as a scriptural *décor* for the ensuing discussion – an atmosphere that no longer resembles Chris Marker's red air[6] but rather the grey hue of the projects, where *fractured* doors bear witness to new social antagonisms that are still unfolding.

This is a noteworthy approach since, until then, Bourdieu's work had largely ignored the study of working-class neighbourhoods. His previous sociological investigations had aimed to "break the enchanted circle"[7] of modes of domination by unveiling them *from above* and focusing on the naturalised reproduction of the social order by the dominant classes. The first part of *La Misère du monde* undoubtedly signals a willingness to reverse this approach. Something is changing in Bourdieu's thinking, even though, as we know, its theoretical consequences will ultimately be limited. It should be noted that despite the consolidation of working-class neighbourhoods in sociology, there is no mention of the words "banlieue," "cité" and "quartiers" in the newly published *Dictionnaire international Pierre Bourdieu* (CNRS Éditions, 2020).

So how are we to understand the pages from *La Misère du monde*? Do they constitute a genuine reversal of Pierre Bourdieu's perspective, or do they signify an assumed affinity between his work and working-class neighbourhoods, even if the latter remain somewhat absent? Although the term "working-class neighbourhoods" was not yet widely used at the time, the suburbs (*les banlieues*) had already become a subject of study for social sciences. In 1993, Adil Jazouli's seminal work *The Suburban Years*[8] had already begun to reshape the analysis of working-class communities. On the political front, by 1993, the March for Equality and Against Racism had already turned a decade old – it represented a striking expression of the demands of young people from these neighbourhoods and immigrants in the political arena. The violent reaction of the political establishment to the March has since become the subject of numerous socio-historical analyses of the event.[9]

Nonetheless, social sciences have been slow in analysing and acknowledging the mobilisation of these neighbourhoods, and it is regrettable that Bourdieu did not lead the way at that time. The chasm between the struggles of working-class neighbourhoods and the academic field has been reflected in a general silence, disrupted only by studies of the "galère" (such as François Dubet's seminal work).[10] The exclusion paradigm,

4 See Scott, *La domination*.

5 This includes chapters on urban issues in the United States.

6 Marker's movie, *Le fond de l'air est rouge* (1977), is a representation of the atmosphere in which the "New Left" emerged and which led to the growing importance of left-wing values in Western societies in the 1960s and 1970s.

7 Bourdieu, *Méditations Pascaliennes*.

8 Jazouli, *Les Années banlieue*.

9 See Bouamama, *Dix ans de marche des Beurs*; Belgacem Hadj and Nasri, *La Marche de 1983*.

10 See Tissot, *L'État et les quartiers*.

inherited from the work of Alain Touraine and applied at the time, tended to distance from the political sphere all the forms of resistance and political commitment that had marked working-class neighbourhoods since the 1970s. Through this prism, all forms of mobilisation were seen as opposing the *ordinary*, and the latter was considered only in terms of lack or bewilderment.

Fortunately, the 1990s saw a change in power dynamics, which manifested in the November 2005 riots. These events served as a catalyst for applying Bourdieusian theoretical tools to understand the social mechanisms, historical context and political significance of the revolt. The political and media reactions to the riots were the subject of an intellectual reappraisal, with the concept of symbolic violence emerging as a crucial lens for interpreting the on-going processes. While Bourdieu remained relatively discreet about political developments in working-class neighbourhoods during the 1980s, a new generation of sociologists was emerging. They drew on the tools he had "disseminated" to counter *political isolation*, understood as the lack of support suffered by neighbourhood residents. Although wider political and intellectual circles largely dismissed this historic social mobilisation, a segment of French sociology played a significant role in combating the backlash. Some sociologists offered crucial interpretations of the events, challenging their stigmatisation in public discourse by establishing a link between urban violence and the social violence palpable on the ground.

Is there, then, an elective affinity between Bourdieu's theoretical framework and the mobilisations of working-class neighbourhoods? If so, how can this framework provide a productive interpretation of the ordinary actions interwoven into the daily fabric of these social spaces? One way of answering these questions is to consider these actions as a form of political knowledge that reveals alternative ways of considering politics.

2 Bourdieu and the "Popular" Neighbourhoods

We know that Bourdieu was reticent about using the term "popular" and associating it with other terms in everyday language, particularly in the political sphere. He saw the notion of "popular neighbourhood" as a kind of "magic epithet" which, like other essentialist labels, risked distorting the reality of dominated social spaces and making them something that "we talk about much more than they actually speak."

This difficulty is apparent from the very first pages of *La Misère du monde*, where Pierre Bourdieu appears somewhat uncomfortable writing about neighbourhoods. The quotation marks around the word "cites" suddenly disappear, and the references to these places sometimes force the description, breaking with the ethnographic precision that characterises his investigations in the fields of culture and education. One is surprised to read Bourdieu "blessing the chance" of meeting the two young interviewees in the (otherwise excellent) chapter "L'ordre des choses," suddenly forgetting the alteration of the object, whose full measurement by the researcher is so dear to his sociological practice. The defence of working-class neighbourhoods and their inhabitants sometimes takes the form of "benevolence," which Bourdieu's analyses have shown to be ambivalent.

Bourdieu's discomfort is evident in the well-known images captured during a debate at Mantes-la-Jolie in the Val Fourré district.[11] When asked, he would reply: "I am sorry, you have taught me nothing… I have read Sayad… I could tell you something that would teach you about yourself… It is not a disease to be an intellectual!". Bourdieu was referring here to his friend and colleague Abdemalek Sayad, with whom he conducted field research in Algeria in the late 1950s. Sayad died in 1998. His contribution was fundamental to understanding immigration as a dual process of emigration and immigration – the concept of "double absence"[12] is the result of this duality and its negation. In this quotation, Sayad's work on Algerian immigration was paradoxically used by Bourdieu to close the debate, with young people from immigrant backgrounds. Earlier that day, he had appeared on a local radio programme to talk about his work on inequalities in education.

11 See Pierre Carles' documentary, *La sociologie est un sport de combat* (2001).

12 Sayad, *La Double Absence*.

These images are the only instances I am aware of Bourdieu engaging in this "neighbourhood mode," and they have been widely interpreted as emblematic of the ambivalent reception of "critical sociology" "on the ground,"[13] underlining the challenge of bridging the gap between the "sacred" sociologist and the reality of the oppressed people he defended. The reasoning for *challenging* Bourdieu ("who is not *Dieu*") among those present is easily comprehensible, and the interaction was quickly seized upon by those whom Daniel Bensaïd ironically called the "anti-Bourdieu" or "servile intelligences" of the neo-liberal establishment. They saw this exchange as an opportunity to criticise the intellectual for what they perceived as exploiting his status and authority by intervening in the public debate.

This peculiar (or rather fictitious) encounter between Bourdieu and working-class neighbourhoods gave rise to a doubt that was reflected in his later reflections on politics from the 1990s onwards. Bourdieu addressed this issue directly in his *Propos sur le champ politique,*[14] approaching it from the perspective of reflexive doubt as it emerges in the *Méditations pascaliennes.* He had previously explored this theme in a theory of practice rooted in his Algerian experience, where he stressed the importance of never losing sight of the tensions inherent in the sociologist's *political* position and the paradoxical nature of his engagement with the social world. Ultimately, he asked the same question as the French hip-hop group Ärsenik, but in the realm of his own discipline: "Who claims to do sociology without taking a stand?"[15]

Bourdieu was faced with the contradictions inherent in his position of authority, articulating a "permanent hesitation between the role of the compassionate intellectual, at the service of the people, and that of the priestly intellectual (leader or guide of the flock). The two figures end up merging without the dilemma being resolved."[16] In this state of unease, conflicts can sometimes erupt violently, emerging as the sole means of accessing the "lateral possibilities"[17] which, through exploration and revelation, could challenge the established social order. For Bourdieu, as well as for others, solidarity with oppressed people inevitably entails hysteresis and socio-analysis, constrained by the asymmetrical conditions of dialogue between "the scholar and the popular" and the intrinsically destabilising expressions of this asymmetry by the people concerned.

The political aspirations of working-class neighbourhoods and immigrants represent a distinct manifestation of this conflict. The questions they pose to the political sphere resonate structurally in the scientific field. The dual challenge of *legitimism* and *miserabilism* posed by the inhabitants and activists of these neighbourhoods towards the political left is also intrinsically connected to the sociology of domination.

By describing the determinism of inequalities, the sociology of domination runs the risk of producing "psychiatrists of the suburbs" (a pithy expression used by a resident of Val Fourré during the exchange with Bourdieu mentioned above), who have an absolute interest in ensuring that the phenomena they analyse persist. This notion echoes recent observations[18] about the strained relations between the political left and working-class neighbourhoods: "If you look closely, a lot of towns changed the day that these people, the 'left-wingers' that the Commies used to talk about, suddenly decided not to be left-wingers any more. I would even to say that they decided to stop being the people, to be themselves and to exist on their own." There is an obvious analogy here between accusations of hypocrisy and miserabilism levelled at the political left and the recurrent criticisms of Bourdieu's sociology, which have already been widely discussed. These criticisms suggest that Bourdieu's sociology leaves no room for individual action due to social determinism, confining the dominated to the register of the *negative* and the *nécessité fait vertu.*[19]

13 See Mariojouls, "Pierre Bourdieu au Val Fourré."

14 See Bensaid, "Pierre Bourdieu." "[It is a] very difficult *problem* [and perhaps insoluble in its problematic] for intellectuals to enter politics without becoming politicians [...] how to give force to ideas without entering the political field and game*?"*.

15 I am referring to the French hip-hop group Arsenik's punchline: "Qui prétend faire du rap sans prendre position?" in *Boxe avec les mots*, 1998.

16 See Bensaid, "Pierre Bourdieu."

17 See Bourdieu, *Raisons pratiques.*

18 See Rabaté, *Politique Beurk Beurk.*

19 See Bourdieu, *La Distinction:* "La nécessité impose un go û t de nécessité qui implique une forme d'adaptation à la nécessité et, par-là, d'acceptation du nécessaire, de résignation à l'inévitable."

It is difficult to engage with these criticisms as they are part of a rhetoric that *aligns* with a specific neoliberal and reactionary discourse built on sociological justifications. However, it is important not to overlook their reflexive and dialectical depth when they are articulated by those directly affected. Acknowledging this might pave the way to establishing new criteria for defining political commitments that diverge from conventional perspectives. In short, difficult as it may be to accept, our fieldwork[20] reveals that the sociology of reproduction, as a critique of the established order, has paradoxically absorbed a form of fatalism, inadvertently reinforcing prevailing modes of domination and the roles they impose. By aligning themselves with the interpretative frameworks of common sense, or more precisely the practical sense of the dominated, the principles of reproduction have been transformed into a widely shared tool for political understanding.

This understanding of the active consolidation of domination necessarily calls into question the foundations of authority, by provoking a questioning of the social order itself. This is the entry price into the realm of popular culture: the dissemination of critical weapons that can be turned around or reformulated. Political inquiry therefore requires a re-examination of social criticism in the light of its own fatalism. From this standpoint, we must look more closely at the subaltern perspective on the established language used to denounce inequalities. Rap lyrics can illustrate this ambivalence.

3 Popular Culture as a Reappropriation of Political Spaces and Subjectivities

This perspective enables us to decipher the different dimensions of popular expressions. For instance, can French rapper Kery James's emblematic phrase "We are not condemned to failure" (*Banlieusards*, 2013)[21] be seen "anti-Bourdieu"? At first glance, it might seem like a rejection of deterministic sociology. However, on closer analysis of the particular history of the phrase, it becomes clear that it cannot be co-opted by the dominant camp advocating the neoliberal notion of "if you want, you can." Rather, it is part of a body of work that both describes and denounces living conditions in the suburbs, while observing and analysing the lack of change. As IAM put it in the song *Demain c'est loin* (1997)[22]: "The same shit behind the last coat of paint." Similarly, it is fascinating to observe the over-representation of the Bourdieusian critique of inequality in rap lyrics dealing with the educational system, what rapper Skalpel has called the "parcours s'colère" (2021)[23] – the way in which the educational trajectory structures contentious relationships with institutions and, potentially, the determination to transform them. It also describes consolidation of street codes that articulate solidarity, shared experiences and a culture of protest. In this process, the school remains omnipresent. There are countless examples of this (particularly where guidance counsellors are concerned) but the song *Le Ghetto français* by Kery James (1996), written during the Ideal J period, is particularly striking: "If most young people turn out badly, it is because they can no longer tell the difference between what is right and what is wrong. Misery is the main cause, closely followed, if not outstripped, by the weight of academic failure."

With this "Sens pratique,"[24] the residents of working-class neighbourhoods have entered the political arena by asserting their roots in the suburbs and immigration. These residents, along with their political and cultural representatives, have positively reclaimed a spatial identity – the "place effect" referred to by Bourdieu in *La Misère du monde* through the prism of "downward drag" of dispossession. However, this reclaiming also becomes an act of reappropriation. The precision of the space of possibilities that characterises this dispossession and the conflicts associated with it is central here. Criticism of determinism enters through the window left open in the Bourdieusian practice theory: "The suburbs do not exist" but "the suburbs

20 See Rabaté, *Politique Beurk Beurk*.
21 James, *À l'ombre du show-business*, 2008.
22 IAM, *Demain c'est loin*, 1997.
23 Skalpel, *Radioactif*, 2021.
24 See Bourdieu, *Le Sens pratique*.

influence Paname (Paris), Paname influences the world" (French rapper Médine, Grand Paris, 2017).[25] The innovative concepts and perspectives of the subaltern "attitude" have led to an analysis of political insight and claim elaborated autonomously, reshaping not only the aesthetics of art but also politics, refocusing the human forms of life in working-class neighbourhoods.

Recently, French artists from these neighbourhoods have taken a stand against the reform of the pension system. These positions were based on a conception of "the people" that combines the evocation of contemporary popular experiences with certain "reflexes" deeply rooted in the political history of working-class communities. One notable example is that of SCH, a famous rapper from Marseille, who declared: "The government despises the voice of the people … I do not forget where I come from, and I have too much respect for our heroes to be just an object of entertainment."[26]

Within what Raymond Williams might call the dominant political culture, conflicting forces give rise to alternative practices and experiences that diverge from the dominant forms. Whether they are perceived as alternative or openly oppositional, they reveal an "emerging" culture[27]: meanings and values that contribute – though not exhaustively – to current contemporary practices. Certain stances reveal inclinations that break free from domination, manifesting themselves in innovative political constructions. These ordinary aesthetics reshape the rules of political representation, as defined by Bourdieu.[28] They do not merely reverse stigma but represent a distinct expression based on a reflexive claim of experience.

In this context, popular culture has carried out its political work, a "work of rupture," as Sayad would describe it, moving from the subjective expression of collective grievances to the essential formation of a "political existence." The importance of Sayad (alongside authors such as Mouloud Feraoun and Mouloud Mammeri) in Bourdieu's career is well known – not only in his work in Algeria but also in his interpretation of events in France. "The suffering of the immigrant"[29] draws a contradictory relationship with traditional categories of commitment, and the role of immigration is inescapable in understanding and elaborating the "gauche de gauche" (far left) to which Bourdieu alluded in a famous article at the end of his life.[30] This trajectory and these connections are evident in many of Bourdieu's resonant positions, which today could be called anti-racist.[31]

In the process of reflexive analysis of the suffering endured, the *freedom* claimed is deeply rooted in a comprehensive understanding of the social mechanisms of domination and the violence of their reproduction. But how should we regard this knowledge? Are we fully recognising and appreciating the value of the words emerging from the streets as a "theoretical resource"[32] and political tool? How is the reformulation of the quest for equality received when it challenges the very foundations of the critique of inequality? What kinds of "visions and divisions" emerge from the strategies of avoidance and confrontation that accompany this aspiration, which necessarily comes into conflict with the sanctioned political discourse?

Following this path requires a clear recognition of the *cost* of this confrontation, a notion derived from Heinz's book on boxing, *The Professional*. However, the metaphor of the *fight* or the *face-off*, often employed in sociological commentary, may be adopted too hastily, as it can potentially isolate the researcher from the social world. The investigative tools that take account of the collective dimensions of inequalities offer a

25 Medine, *Prose Elite*, 2017.

26 "Le gouvernement n'a rien à faire de la voix du peuple, l'utilisation du 49.3 en est bel et bien la preuve, c'est genre 'ça passera quoi qu'il arrive'. Dans une "démocratie," ça laisse pensif […] Je n'oublie pas d'où je viens et j'ai trop de respect pour nos héros pour n'être qu'un objet de divertissement."

27 See Williams, *Culture et matérialisme*.

28 See Bourdieu, "La représentation politique."

29 See Sayad, *La Double Absence*.

30 See Bourdieu, "Pour une gauche de gauche," *Le Monde* (08/04/1998).

31 See Sayad, *Femmes en rupture de ban*.

32 In the preface to Sayad's *La Double Absence*, Bourdieu emphasizes the crucial role played by the Algerian sociologist's knowledge of the words and notions of "traditional" (in reality modern) Kabyle knowledge in the production of a theory that has a singular grasp of the issues at stake in his object of study, i.e. immigration.

glimpse of a less idealised conflict. As Bourdieu warned from the corner of the ring, one must beware of "overconfidence."[33]

In her latest film, *Nous,*[34] the French filmmaker Alice Diop questions the "We" concept as she travels along the RER B line from north to south of the Île-de-France region. To capture the synchronic presence of seemingly autonomous social microcosms, she incorporates the notebooks of writer Pierre Bergougnoux, which echo her own words, her "obsession" with restoring dignity to lives kept in the shadows. While the film is not intended to be sociological, it does reveal the "illusion of the temporary" (Sayad's famous concept, taken up by Bourdieu) through the portrait of the Malian car repairman on the telephone with his mother who has stayed in Africa, or the "choice of the necessary" (a concept developed by Bourdieu in *La Distinction*) in the artistic musings of young boys watching planes in the sky over the Blanc Mesnil housing estate. Through this journey on the RER B, spectators observe the active consolidation of divisions in the social world through the reproduction of practices and lifestyles. The artist does not clearly endorse the sociology of domination, but the ordinary knowledge of its mechanisms forms the basis of aesthetic expression.

4 Conclusive Remarks

The undeniable political power of the sociology of domination lies in its integration with ordinary grids of interpretation and expression, revealing the real before us through observation and analysis, a progression facilitated by the tumultuous appropriation of the sociological method. The political potential of the ordinary aesthetics we are witnessing is structured by a contradictory appropriation of these tools, combined and absorbed in popular culture. What remains, perhaps, is a political action already underway, waiting to be re-cognised.

Heretical modes of interpellation of authorities, particularly intellectual and political authorities, as well as emerging forms of political commitment within working-class communities, are best understood as "dispositions to recognition." These dispositions are, in a way, formed through the violence (and therefore the rejection) of the "monopoly of the production and imposition of instituted political interests."[35] It is in this recognition/non-recognition equation that we can elucidate "the force of the social"[36] between what is misrecognised and what is recognised lies *an ordinary residue* containing the perpetual justification of critical sociology and its relation to politics – a contradictory yet necessary desire to *intervene* in it.

Funding information: Publishing costs have been covered from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation program (grant agreement no. 834759).

Conflict of interest: Author states no conflict of interest.

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33 The expression is aimed at philosophers in the *Méditations pascaliennes,* but also applies to sociologists.

34 Alice Diop, *Nous* (2021). See Romain Lefebvre's review on AOC: https://aoc.media/critique/2021/03/09/commune-image-a-propos-de-nous-dalice-diop/

35 Bourdieu, "La représentation politique."

36 Gautier, *La force du social.*

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