

## Tommaso Pardi

**Pierre Bourdieu. *Sur l'État: Cours au Collège de France (1989–1992)*. Paris: Raisons d'agir / Seuil, 2012. 672 pp. ISBN 978-2-02-066224-6.**

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Pierre Bourdieu taught for twenty years at the Collège de France, where he held the Chair of Sociology from 1981 to 2001. The Collège de France is the most prestigious academic institution in France but also a very peculiar one: access to instruction is open, free of charge, and does not lead to any diploma. Its mission is to teach “science in making,” a motto which applies quite well to the three years of teaching that Bourdieu dedicated between 1989 and 1991 to the question of the state. Collected in the present book by editors Patrick Champagne, Rémi Lenoir, Franck Poupeau, and Marie-Christine Rivière, these teachings represent both a turning point in Bourdieu’s intellectual trajectory and the living foundations of important works that would follow, such as *La Misère du monde* (1993) and *Les Structures sociales de l'économie* (2000).

As emphasized by the editors in the postscript of the book (594), Bourdieu had not studied in most of his previous works the state as an object per se but only as an exogenous institution influencing other fields, such as the academic field (Bourdieu 1984) or the field of big business (Bourdieu and de Saint-Martin 1978). In fact, it was only with *Noblesse d'État*, published in 1989, that the state was fully assumed by Bourdieu as an object of research, but that book only studied the agents of the state, not its structure and organization.

In introducing the first of the 23 lectures that compose this book, Bourdieu explains the reasons for his long reticence: the state, he says, is almost an “unthinkable” object to study (13). First, as citizens of a given national territory who share a common language and a common “logic and moral conformism”—notions that Bourdieu borrows from Émile Durkheim—we are all products of the state, and this implies that the state is at the foundations of our unconscious predispositions to social life (of our habitus, in Bourdieusian terms). Second, social scientists, and sociologists in particular, are “spontaneously agents of the state” (71): “they departhicularize,” they make “official truths,” and they contribute to creating and consolidating the idea of a public and common good, which is embodied, enacted, and protected by the state.

Due to these cognitive constraints, in order to understand what the state is, how it functions, and how it evolves and changes, Bourdieu stresses the need to first know where it comes from, how it was made, by whom, and for which reasons. Indeed, most of the lectures published here are dedicated to this “genetic sociology of the state institution,” whose methodological and theoretical stakes are detailed towards the end of the first year of teaching (150–160). If Bourdieu constantly emphasizes the difficulties of such an “unrealizable” task (169), the result proves beyond any doubt why Bourdieu

was one of the most innovative and productive sociologists of the twentieth century. The book is incredibly rich: theoretical insights, methodological tools, critical reviews, and in-depth inquiries are in a constant process of interaction as we witness Bourdieu thinking aloud. But the book is also surprisingly clear and coherent for a collection of oral works. Despite the inevitable digressions and repetitions—which are, nevertheless, of great interest—Bourdieu never loses track of his “unrealizable” project and manages to provide almost as many answers as key questions he raises.

Throughout the text, Bourdieu approaches the genesis of the state as the result of a double historical process. On the one hand, there is a process of “universalization,” which is both economic—the creation of the nation as a unified economic space—and symbolic—the concentration of different kinds of capital (physical, economic, cultural, and symbolic). This concentration generates a sort of meta-capital (the “official,” the “public,” the law) that has power over the other capitals (311–312). On the other hand, there is a process of “monopolization” of this meta-capital by state institutions: monopolization of physical violence, as in Max Weber, but also, and even more important for Bourdieu, monopolization of symbolic violence.

The result of this double process is the emergence of an autonomous bureaucratic field where this meta-capital is concentrated and where social agents struggle to control it. Bourdieu insists that the social actors who were most active in making this field “autonomous” were those actors who had an interest in the “universal,” the “official,” and the “public”: jurists in the first place (520–533), but also those “dominant dominated” actors, such as clerics for instance, who were excluded from power by the dynastic principle of transmission and reproduction of power based on “blood, birth, and nature” and had an interest in the constitution of a new form of power based on “law, school, merit, and competence” (520).

Bourdieu emphasizes that, as in any other social field, the meta-capital of the state is unequally distributed, and this goes along with the reproduction of dominant positions under the form of the “noblesse d’État.” But he refutes the Marxist idea, developed notably by Louis Althusser and Antonio Gramsci, that the state functions as a “bloc” serving the interests of capital owners. He borrows from Norbert Elias the idea that the more the state enlarges its power, the more it enlarges its dependence on those who depend on its power and the more heterogeneous it becomes. From this perspective, the development of different forms of social welfare and public education, along with the emergence of the modern state, not only reflects historically the strategies and actions of certain actors within the bureaucratic field—philanthropists in particular—but also corresponds to a process of domestication of the dominated, which Bourdieu sees as the necessary counterpart of their inclusion within the state (565–571).

Bourdieu also uses the example of social welfare to illustrate how the state functions as a bureaucratic field. He relies for this on his enquiry into the reform of the housing system in France, and in particular on the role of the *Commission Barre*, created in 1975 by the newly elected government of Valéry Giscard d’Estaing and led by the economist Raymond Barre and whose report would serve as basis for the 1977 reform of the French housing policy (35–44). He shows that behind the conflicting positions of those who defended state aid to the construction industry (the collective side) against

those who promoted state aid to individual home buyers (the liberal side) there was an underlying tension between the ministries that brought money into the state—here, the Ministry of Finance—and the ministries that spent this money—here, the Ministry of Equipment and Housing. For Bourdieu this tension is constitutive of the bureaucratic field. It defines power relationships within the field and the stakes of the “legitimate political game” and allows for identification of the positions of the different actors in the structure of the field and their respective strategies.

This is also why the “demolition” of social welfare institutions implied by the implementation of neoliberal reforms since the beginning of the 1980s is seen by Bourdieu as a structural transformation of the bureaucratic field, whose implications are far more reaching than the simple reorientation of public policies in favor of certain interests. As far as the state is understood as “an entity that exists by belief” (25), its transformation affects our mental structures and destabilizes what we are used to take for granted. In his final remarks, Bourdieu speculates whether the dissolution of the “left side” of the state could for instance explain the simultaneous “revival of religion” (583–584) as an individual answer to the loss of faith in the fairness of the state; this is a point that he would further develop in *La Misère du monde* (1993).

More than twenty years have now passed since these thoughts and ideas were formulated by Bourdieu at the Collège de France, but reading the book is as insightful and exciting as if they were pronounced just yesterday. At the time, the dissolution of Yugoslavia and the collapse of the Soviet Union hung in the background and were often cited by Bourdieu as examples of the dramatic consequences of the disaggregation of the state. What they showed, he argued, was—in negative terms—how much it cost to make the state a “juridical fiction” that was taken for granted. Today, the Ukrainian crisis and the Arab Spring raise similar problems and call for similar analyses. The same can be said about the withdrawal of the state under the pressure of neoliberal reforms: in Europe, for instance, the policies of austerity triggered by the financial crisis of 2008–2009 threaten today the very foundations of the modern state. The teachings of Bourdieu will provide here important theoretical and analytical tools to grasp the present political and social crisis.

This book should be considered mandatory reading for those who are already familiar with the works of Bourdieu. It will give them access to a key—and so far largely unedited—part of his oeuvre and will let them discover a different side of the French sociologist whose oral expression was often more straightforward than his writings. The book will also work as an excellent introduction to his theory for all the others, who will appreciate Bourdieu’s pedagogic efforts to make his ideas more accessible to a wider audience.

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