

Interview with
Philippe Coulangeon

CULTURE DE MASSE ET SOCIÉTÉ DE CLASSES LE GOÛT DE L'ALTÉRITÉ

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texte | tekst

What is the book's point of departure?

I started this book feeling a double discomfort. First, with regard to the resurgence in the social sciences over the past several years, of a sort of culturalist temptation. Social issues have thus been reduced to cultural issues. A second source of discomfort was the fact that I, nevertheless, did not wish to abandon the idea that inequality has a cultural component, though this is different from what the culturalists claim it to be. Cultural differences do not explain inequality. Rather, it is the existence of unequal social relations that creates cultural inequality. It seemed to me urgent to return to these questions, and to approach them from the issue of power relations and social inequality viewed in terms of class relations. A final point of departure, which was perhaps the most uncomfortable of all for me, was the relation with what I would call a certain Bourdieusian or even a Foucauldian-Bourdieusian vulgate, as it according to which everything is arbitrary in culture.

How did you go about writing the book?

I reread Bourdieu a great deal, particularly his *Pascalian Meditations*, one of his later books and very different from what he wrote with Jean Claude Passeron in the 1970s. There, he develops a sort of epistemological remorse regarding these questions of cultural arbitrariness and symbolic violence. However, my book is also based on statistical surveys, in line with several studies that I have conducted over the past fifteen years. I felt the need to offer a synthesis, somewhat general, on these issues of education, of culture ... I defend the idea that the social sciences need statistical objectifications based on survey data gathered from very large populations. We are in a period when it is necessary to take stock and to establish a certain number of results based on data that permit generalization and the establishment of the robustness of proposals and results presented. There is a real complementarity between field surveys and ethnographic research.

How is this book relevant today?

It is a very political issue. I think there is a certain 'populist' impasse linked with the Foucauldian Bourdieusian vulgate. That is to say, once all knowledge is power, then all transmission of knowledge is a project of domination. Obviously neither Bourdieu nor Foucault ever wrote this as

such. Yet some among their followers have understood them thus. And there is a risk involved in thinking that every activity of cultural transmission, of education, of cultural democratization is, in reality, a project of colonialism or domination.