Bern Porter International: Volume 5 Number 1 (January 1, 2001)

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Recommended Citation
Porter, Bern; Holtz, Sheila; and Bernstein, Natasha, "Bern Porter International: Volume 5 Number 1 (January 1, 2001)" (2001). Newsletters. 28.
http://digitalcommons.colby.edu/porter_newsletters/28

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One of Belfast's best-known residents, Bern Porter, says, "My major focus is to carry on some of the principles of fusing physics with poetry and humanity."
(NEWS Photo by Susan Latham)
And whether making atomic bombs or making waves, Porter has carved out a quirky reputation in Belfast and beyond. He has been described as a modern artist, maverick publisher, rebel physicist and founder of founds. Clearly eccentric, he is viewed by his acolytes as a genius. By others, a crank.

"My major focus is to carry on some of the principles of fusing physics with poetry and humanity," he said recently. "And by physics I don't mean a laxative."

Since the day he left the family farm at Porter Settlement near Houlton in the 1930s to follow a keen and driving interest in mathematics, Porter has left a mark in literature and a stamp on history. His life's work is well known, be it nuclear explosions or artistic implosions.

Colby College led to Brown University which, in turn, led to Princeton University, Los Alamos, N.M., and the Manhattan Project. Porter helped build the atomic bomb, yet walked away from nuclear physics when he saw the results firsthand.

"I have radioactivity in my body," he said with a shrug.

"We [the scientists] used to go on picnics and we used to talk about the [fissionable] material being used for peace. We certainly didn't want it dropped to destroy a country," Porter recalled. "I was at Hiroshima and what I saw was incredible. I was looking for a big future in physics but after the bomb was dropped in 1945, I went off on my own."

Porter headed west to San Francisco to hang out with Henry Miller, Jack Kerouac and the beat poets; "All the big operators and I'm pretty sure there were others. They bought the drinks and I drank them."

Porter opened one of the first West Coast galleries showing abstract and surreal art, became involved with NASA's space program during the 1960s and came back home to Maine where he ran for governor in 1969, served as development consultant for the Knox County planning commission and then moved to Belfast in 1972, carrying with him the Institute for Advanced Thinking.

According to Porter, the institute was founded in Ireland in 1630, moved to Maine in 1830 and to Belfast in 1972 and "is the oldest institute of its kind in the English-speaking world." It is dedicated to free thought, free association and free lunch, he says.

"We support worldwide art, architecture, community, literature, music, poetry, sculpture and theater," he explained.

Porter views the institute as a "think tank" for the avant-garde. It is always open, and there is usually a guest or two on the premises to tend to Porter's few needs. When he is alone, friends and supporters from the community stop by to make sure he is taking care of himself.

The yard of the institute is filled with sculpture made from found objects such as old furniture and metal products culled from trash or salvaged from the roadside. The interior walls are graced with rusted automobile fenders and hoods.

"Those are not car parts, they are contemporary artifacts," he said. "My yard is free and open to everyone. They can bring in anything."

By Porter's own reckoning, he has written more than 300 books, created works of art that are in collections on every continent, circled the world "at least" three times and carried out liaisons with hundreds of women, including erotica author Anais Nin, the subject of his four-part remembrance, "My Affair with Anais Nin Parts 1-3" and "I Pursue Her Still: Bern Porter on Anais Nin."

Affairious activity is also the subject of his 1999 four-part work, "Monica, Monica," "Monica Lewinsky, We All Want Some of Yours," "Don't Fail Us Monica," "That Trio Again: Monica, Hillary, and Bill!"

Porter's publisher, Roger Jackson of Ann Arbor, Mich., simply describes him as "a marvel." Jackson said he is "consistently amazed" by Porter's stamina and perseverance. He said the Belfast man has a unique perspective and despite his age continues to tackle his topics with maximum drive and energy.

"He's fast, he's prompt, and though he's coming up in years he's always enthused and his enthusiasm never wavers," Jackson said.

"I'm amazed at his creativity, the way his mind works and the way he looks at the world. He's just offbeat, and his mind is just a wonder. Regardless of how wacky the subject, he's right there."

Then there's Bern Porter International, the newsletter of the Institute of Advanced Thinking. Editor Sheila Holtz of Philadelphia started the publication 15 years ago in recognition of Porter's contribution to abstract thinking and modern art. "This is the focus of all my creative energy," Holtz proclaimed during a visit to Belfast last summer. "Bern is the center of the real world and having come here to see him I quickly discovered that Bern is the center of the unreal world, too."

Holtz said she was attracted to Porter's work because of his attempts to meld physics with poetry and language. She said his vision of a world of poetry and physics has established a context for the future of art. "It's not totally necessary to be a scientist. He inspires people whose works straddle more than one discipline," she said. "Bern is incredibly inspiring. Just by being in his presence, I feel more creative and productive. There is no physical explanation; I just feel his creative energy. I kind of look on Bern as one of those rare people who just has this vibration."
Porter's fame is not confined to the lexicon of physics, language, art and academia. He also is known the world over thanks to the etherland of the Internet. All anyone with Internet access needs to do is search his name and they will find enough articles to get a detailed handle on the man's life and avocation. There is also a personal biography published by Tilbury House in 1992. "where to go, what to do, when you are Bern Porter" was written by James Schevill, who has known Porter for more than 50 years.

Though he has been hobbled by a hernia lately, and can't get around town as much as he used to, Porter still can be found at his beloved Institute spewing abstract concepts and railing at his other pet peeve, Belfast City Hall.

Because his persona swings wildly from gadfly to curmudgeon and back again, Porter has never worn well in the corridors of power. He is footloose with his bombastic accusations and convinced of their legitimacy.

"I think it's about time the City Council settled down and took an interest in Belfast," Porter growled. "They never have and they never will. There's no connection with the people."

Porter's latest publication, "Insiders Guide to Belfast, Maine," is a satirical and critical look at what he perceives as the city's dark side, the one left out of its promotional brochures. Combining pictures of rundown parts of the city with personal observations, the thin, 26-copy edition has touched a nerve, according to Porter.

"I heard the city manager and the City Council don't like it and they don't like me," he said. "So what? Their motto is 'If you don't like it in Belfast, you can always go to east Belfast. Well, I haven't moved over to east Belfast yet.'"
France's Master Thinker

Pierre Bourdieu, a French sociologist whose remarks are often national news.

By EMILY EAKIN

PARIS—By almost any measure, Pierre Bourdieu is France's most influential intellectual. A professor of sociology at the Collège de France, an exclusive government-supported think tank for the academic elite, he also holds an appointment at the prestigious Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, edits a leading sociology journal, and oversees a popular imprint of works of social criticism.

Mr. Bourdieu's name appears in the French press almost weekly. Important literary journals have dedicated entire issues to his work. His last three books have been best-sellers. When he speaks out against free-market economics or anti-immigration legislation, it is national news. Last month, a two-and-a-half-hour documentary about Mr. Bourdieu titled "Sociology Is a Combat Sport," had its premiere.

Nor is his influence limited to France. The International Sociological Association named his "Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste" one of the 20th century's 10 most important works of sociology. And in American universities, his work is enjoying a vogue of the sort not seen since the ideas of the last big French theorist, Jacques Derrida, hit American shores in the 1970's.

Mr. Bourdieu, in short, has "symbolic capital" in spades. The term, one of several for which he is known, means, roughly, social status and in the grand theoretical framework for which he is known, means, roughly, "master thinker"—a title previously awarded to such sweeping philosophers of social existence as Sartre and Foucault.

Everywhere, he argues, comes into adult life with a predisposition to succeed or fail, what he calls "habitus": a set of deeply ingrained experiences that in important ways limit one's performance.

A basketball player's ability to sink a shot during a high-pressure game, for example, is not only a function of natural athletic skill but also of habitus: the number of hours he has practiced, the encouragement from his coach, his psychological expectation of success. At a social level, habitus describes the way people internalize class distinctions and how that makes movement up the ladder difficult. "Habitus is not fatal," said Mr. Bourdieu. "But unfortunately it can move only within very limited parameters. It's like a little computer program that guides one's choices."

Unlike other grand systematizers to whom he is indebted—Foucault and Marx prominent among them—Mr. Bourdieu has tested his ideas through detailed field work. In more than two dozen volumes dense with charts, statistics and often impenetrable academic prose, he has taken on one aspect of French culture after another, from the state-subsidized universities to the pun­dits who reg­ularly turn up on the evening news to test the way they believe museums or football stadiums or pictures of very important art, or consume rather than what they consume. His idea is that if you own certain pieces of difficult modern art or develop the cultural apparatus to enjoy them, you cannot distinguish rich from poor on the basis of who shops at the Gap or listens to Eminem.

"The French school system appears to be meritocratic but in fact it's very conservative," Mr. Bourdieu said. "Education, which is always presented as an instrument of liberation and universality, is really a privilege."

Partly because of his emphasis on cultural rather than economic factors, Mr. Bourdieu's work on education initially had few enthusiasts in the United States. "Many of us," said David Swartz, a sociologist at Boston University and the author of "Culture & Power: The Sociology of Pierre Bourdieu" (University of Chicago Press, 1997), "thought that money—that is, the ability to pay tuition or purchase a house in a neighborhood with a public school—was what explained unequal attainment and performance in school."

"What Bourdieu contributed was to say cultural socialization was the explanation. He was writing in a country where education was tuition-free and one still found enormous class differences in attainment and performance."

Similarly, when "Distinction," Mr. Bourdieu's book on taste, appeared in English in 1984, the reaction was lukewarm. His exhaustive analysis of the class implications of everything from potluck dinners and table etiquette to books and newspaper preferences encountered resistance from American sociologists.

This resulted partly from a conviction that, as Douglas Holt, a professor of marketing at the Harvard Business School, put it, "we're not a class-based society and that status works in a crasser way here: it's driven by money, not culture."

Moreover, even researchers interested in class had found that consumption habits did not tend to reveal very much about class affiliation: you cannot distinguish rich from poor on the basis of who shops at the Gap or listens to Eminem.

Latey, however, "Distinction" has found more sympathetic readers. "People were taking Bourdieu too literally," said Mr. Holt, who has applied some of Mr. Bourdieu's theory in his own work. "Distinction can happen through objects, but that's not Bourdieu's theory. That's a simple theory of status goods. His idea is that if you own certain pieces of difficult modern art or develop the cultural apparatus to enjoy these things, you have to study how people consume rather than what they consume."

In Mr. Bourdieu's analysis, perhaps no group comes off as badly as intellectuals. Because they tend to be people with prestigious jobs and educational credentials, writ-
ers, pundits and academic experts reinforce the idea that knowledge is the exclusive possession of the social elite, he argues. His most withering attacks are directed at what he calls “total intellectuals,” charismatic self-promoters who abuse their special social status and the public trust by speaking out on issues — from the war in Bosnia to peace in the Middle East — on which they have no real expertise.

In his best-selling 1996 polemic, “On Television,” Mr. Bourdieu denounced talk-show commentators as “fast thinkers” who substitute “cultural fast food” — politically sanitized sound bites and clichés — for substantive argument. And he has not hesitated to name names.

Which is why, in Mr. Bourdieu’s own estimation, in addition to being France’s most visible thinker, he may be its most vilified as well. “I have a lot of enemies,” he said.

Some detractors charge him with oversimplifying social reality. “He sees life as a zero-sum-game, in which we’re all struggling to maximize our social position,” said Michele Lamont, a sociologist at Princeton and the author of “The Dignity of Working Men: Morality and the Boundaries of Race, Class and Immigration” (Harvard University Press, 2000). “In my work, I found that rank is not based on social position alone. Morality is also very important and may act as a deterrent in the pursuit of social advantage.”

Others accuse him of trying to create universal concepts out of conditions peculiar to France. In the United States, for example, some critics point out, intellectuals tend to have nowhere near the same kind of public visibility or clout. Others dismiss his work as a “sociology of the obvious.” Is it news to anyone that the education system doesn’t really meritocratic?, these critics ask.

Mr. Bourdieu is not alone in his sentiment. “He’s the ultimate scholarship boy,” said Robert Darnton, a historian at Princeton who describes Mr. Bourdieu’s work as an “inexhaustible source of insight” for his own research on 18th-century France. “He’s won every scholarship, every prize. He began from very humble roots and now dominates the summit of French intellectual life.”

It is hard not to see in Mr. Bourdieu’s own career a glaring exception to his sociological rules. Born into a poor family in a tiny village in rural southwestern France, he spoke Gascon, now a moribund regional dialect, until he started elementary school. His father was an itinerant sharecropper turned postman who never finished high school. All in all, not circumstances conducive to an auspicious habitus, especially for an aspiring master thinker.

Mr. Bourdieu’s father was determined that his son should succeed, and he enrolled him at the region’s best high school. Eventually he won admission to the École Normale Supérieure, the traditional alma mater of French intellectuals. But he denies that his own story contradicts his thesis, contending that by letting in a token number of students from the lower classes, the system maintains the illusion of meritocracy. Though Mr. Bourdieu graduated at the top of his class, he was repulsed by the Parisian intellectual milieu. “A lot of what I’ve done has been in reaction to the École Normale,” he said. “I think if I hadn’t become a sociologist, I would have become very anti-intellectual. I was horrified by that world.”

A stint as a teacher in Algiers during Algeria’s war for independence led him to abandon philosophy for social science. His first several books, ethnographies about the plight of Algerians under French colonialism, were also implicit rebukes to the Parisian establishment.

“I thought that the French didn’t understand a thing about what was happening in Algeria,” he said, “in large part because the intellectuals holding forth on the issue didn’t know anything about it.”

The last thing he wanted or expected, Mr. Bourdieu insists, was to become part of the intellectual establishment. He said he rebuffed overtures from the Collège de France for three years in a row. Finally, in 1981, he relented.

“It was a horrible trial for me,” he said. “I didn’t want to join the College mostly because of this idea that I was going to become a big deal. My father died the same year and I think I linked these two events psychologically. I had six months of virtual total insomnia.”

The worst part of the ordeal, he said, was delivering his inaugural address, a centuries-old tradition in which incoming members present a speech — in his case, also published on the front page of Le Monde — to the entire College and various dignitaries, an audience that in Mr. Bourdieu’s case included towering figures like Levi-Strauss and Foucault as well as the mayor of Paris and the French ministers of culture and education.

“Up until that very afternoon, he thought he wasn’t going to go,” said Loïc Wacquant, a sociologist at the University of California at Berkeley and a close friend. “It was like Sartre refusing the Nobel Prize. He just could not bring himself to participate in this ritual of public consecration.”

In the end Mr. Bourdieu overcame his revulsion and delivered his address. Its subject? A sociological critique of the cultural value placed on inaugural lectures.

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Submission Guidelines for The Institute of Advanced Thinking:

No rules
No regulations
No teams
No uniforms
No trophies

SCHOLARS' PAGES

A Tale Of A Sort, by Corrigan

Once upon a time there was a lens knight, named Gravenstein, and he lived in the
great big country of Pharr, in a stone castle with ramparts. Which was no more than a
half-day's bouncy horse-ride from the border of the neighboring kingdom of Nyrr, where
lived a beautiful maiden named Chastity.

Pharr was heavily wooded, covered all over with maple, oak, and slippery elm. In
fact the principal export and major source of income in all the land of Pharr was skewed
furniture, manufactured by proxy. But there was a problem with the river, To Be
Continued. Which was why the lens knight sallied forth from Pharr to Nyrr, after lunch
one day, of course. And in the great forest of Orwhat, he was waylaid, by gum. A
band of merry troubadours sang him into a sleepy love spell. And in this lucid dream
he saw the most beautiful other person. His soul mate. But there was a problem with
To Be Continued.....

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False Prophecies of the False Prophet

Church Street Festival 2000

In the end, some physicists predict that nothing will matter.

MARY WEAVER:

Scholar of the Instituuet for Advanced Thinking, in Drama, Director of Belfast's "The Playhouse," and founder of Belfast's CHURCH STREET FESTIVAL, pictured above at the 21st ANNUAL Church Street Festival, October, 2000.

"There goes the mountain ... torn down for plunder...
remembered in dreams..."

Song by Tom Paxton
Photo by Scholar Katherine Donithorne
The work of Lason Gurley as appered in "The Adirondack Review, Palimpest Magazine, VOICE Magazine, The Bay Review, and Morella, among others. He edits and publishes the literary magazine, DEEPLY SHALLOW, and is writing his third novel. jagurley@nvbell.net

The Absoluteness of Girls

by Jason Gurley

In the passenger seat—big blue eyes and her mother’s hair, twisted into frizzy complicated braids—she looks at you and smiles, but it is the pink slip and the argument and the security escorts you are thinking of, and you drive away from your job a little faster than you should, and Sarah smiles and gurgles again and you think, Dear God, please don’t let her end up like my boss, and Sarah giggles, “Daddy,” and you have a glimpse into those eyes and see worlds beyond these two minutes and you know with absolute certainty that: she will be just fine.

EDITORS’ NOTE:

Beginning with this Volume, Number 5, BERN PORTER INTERNATIONAL will be published twice monthly (biweekly) rather than once monthly. This is due largely to the influx of a large number of submissions and a backlog of REALLY GOOD STUFF from scholars and readers. We thank you all for your voluminous and meticulous, meritorious input.

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BERN PORTER INTERNATIONAL
50 Salmond Street
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BPI is published twice monthly as newsletter of the Institute for Advanced thinking and alternative art/lit zine.