

## PROLOGUE

### *Journalism and Politics*

It should go without saying that to reveal the hidden constraints on journalists, which they in turn bring to bear on all cultural producers, is not to denounce those in charge or to point a finger at the guilty parties.<sup>1</sup> Rather, it is an attempt to offer to all sides a possibility of liberation, through a conscious effort, from the hold of these mechanisms, and to propose, perhaps, a program for concerted action by artists, writers, scholars, and journalists—that is, by the holders of the (quasi) monopoly of the instruments of diffusion. Only through such a collaboration will it be possible to work effectively to share the most universal achievements of research and to begin, in practical terms, to universalize the conditions of access to the universal.

What can possibly explain the remarkably violent reactions by so many of France's best-known journalists to this analysis?<sup>2</sup> Surely, with all my disavowals, they can't have felt personally targeted (at least the ones who were cited directly, or indirectly through people who work with them or who are like them). In part, no doubt, their virtuous indignation can be attributed to the *transcription effect*—the elimination by transcription of the nonverbal accompaniment to words such as tone, gestures, and mimicry. An impartial viewer perceives these elements, which make all the difference between a discussion meant to produce understanding and the polemic that most journalists saw in this book.

But the furor is best explained by certain attributes typical of the journalistic vision (the very characteristics that gener-

ated so much enthusiasm for a book such as *La Misère du monde* just a few years ago<sup>3</sup>): a tendency to equate what is new with what are usually called "revelations"; an emphasis on that which is most obvious in the social world, meaning individuals, what they do, and especially what they do wrong; and, finally, a readiness to denounce or indict. All of these inclinations hinder an understanding of the invisible structures and mechanisms (here, those of the journalistic field) that influence the actions and thoughts of individuals—an understanding that is likely to lead to sympathetic indulgence rather than to indignant condemnation. Then again, there is a predisposition to focus on an analyst's (supposed) "conclusions" rather than the method by which those conclusions were reached. After the publication of *The State Nobility: Elite Schools in the Field of Power*, the result and summing-up of ten years of my research, I remember vividly a journalist who proposed a debate on the *Grandes Écoles*: the president of the alumni association would speak "for" and I would speak "against."<sup>4</sup> And he hadn't a clue as to why I refused. In just the same way, the journalistic "big guns" who went after my book simply bracketed my method (in particular the analysis of journalism as a field); without even being aware of what they were doing, they reduced the book to a series of utterly hackneyed positions punctuated by a smattering of polemical outbursts.

But this method is precisely what I want to come back to. Even at the risk of new misunderstandings, I want to try to show how the journalistic field produces and imposes on the public a very particular vision of the political field, a vision that is grounded in the very structure of the journalistic field and in journalists' specific interests produced in and by that field.

In a world ruled by the fear of being boring and anxiety about being amusing at all costs, politics is bound to be unappealing, better kept out of prime time as much as possible. So, insofar as it does have to be addressed, this not very exciting and even depressing spectacle, which is so difficult to

deal with, has to be made interesting. This imperative explains why, in the United States as much as in Europe, there is a tendency to shunt aside serious commentators and investigative reporters in favor of the talk show host. It also explains why real information, analysis, in-depth interviews, expert discussions, and serious documentaries lose out to pure entertainment and, in particular, to mindless talk show chatter between "approved" and interchangeable speakers. (In the text that follows, I seem to have committed the unpardonable sin of mentioning a couple of them as examples). To understand what is said in these staged "exchanges" and, in particular, what *can* be said, would require a detailed analysis of the selection process for these individuals, whom Americans call "panelists." These people are always available—meaning always ready not merely to participate but to play the game—and they answer all the questions journalists ask, no matter how silly or outrageous. They're ready for everything and anything, which means to make any concession (as to the subject under discussion, the other participants, and so on), any compromise, any deal as long as they can be "in" on things and receive the direct and indirect benefits of "media" celebrity—prestige in the media world, big fees on the lecture circuit, and so on. Further, particularly at the pre-interviews conducted by some producers in the United States and increasingly in Europe as well, prospective panelists must present their positions in uncomplicated, clear, and striking terms. Above all, they must avoid the quagmire of intellectual complexity. (As the maxim goes, "The less you know, the better off you are.")

To justify this policy of demagogic simplification (which is absolutely and utterly contrary to the democratic goal of informing or educating people by interesting them), journalists point to the public's expectations. But in fact they are projecting onto the public their own inclinations and their own views. Because they're so afraid of being boring, they opt for confrontations over debates, prefer polemics over rigorous argument, and in general, do whatever they can to promote

conflict. They prefer to confront individuals (politicians in particular) instead of confronting their arguments, that is, what's really at stake in the debate, whether the budget deficit, taxes, or the balance of trade. Given that their claims to competence are based more on their claims to close contacts in the political realm, including access to insider information (even rumors and malicious gossip), than on the objectivity of their observation and investigation, journalists like to stick to their home territory. They direct attention to the game and its players rather than to what is really at stake, because these are the sources of their interest and expertise. They are more interested in the tactics of politics than in the substance, and more concerned with the political effect of speeches and politicians' maneuverings within the political field (in terms of coalitions, alliances, or individual conflicts) than with the meaning of these. (That is, when they don't simply invent issues, such as the question during the 1997 French elections of whether the contest between the Left and the Right was going to take place between two main contenders—Lionel Jospin, leader of the Socialist opposition, and Alain Juppé, the conservative prime minister—or between four politicians—Jospin and Robert Hue, his Communist ally, on one side, and, on the other, Juppé and his centrist ally, François Léotard. Despite its apparent neutrality, the emphasis given to this question actually made an overtly political move in favor of the conservatives by focusing attention on possible splits on the left, between the leading candidate Jospin and his minor, Communist ally.)

Journalists occupy an ambiguous position in the political world, in which they are very influential actors but not full-fledged members. This position enables them to offer politicians vital symbolic support that they can't get for themselves. (Except, today, collectively, in publishing, where cronyism ensures favorable reviews for journalists and their books). This means that journalists are apt to look at things rather like Thersites, the ugly, cowardly, "thrower of words" in the *Iliad*, who abuses everybody and "argues nothing but scandal."<sup>5</sup>

Typically they adopt a spontaneous form of a philosophy of doubt, which leads them to ascribe the sincerest convictions and most disinterested political positions to interests tied to particular positions within the political field (such as rivalries within a party, or participation in a "trend").

All of this leads them to a cynical view of politics, which is reflected in their political arguments, and in their interview questions. For them, politics becomes an arena full of hyper-ambitious people with no convictions but with a clear sense of the competitive situation and of their opposing interests. (Journalists are certainly encouraged in this attitude by political consultants and advisers, who help politicians with this sort of explicitly calculated, though not necessarily cynical, kind of political marketing. Political success increasingly depends on adapting to the demands of the journalistic field, which becomes a "caucus" increasingly responsible for "making" both politicians and their reputations.) This exclusive attention to the political "microcosm" and to the facts and effects that can be attributed to it, tends to produce a break with the public, or at least with those segments of the public most concerned with the real consequences of these political positions on their lives and on society at large. This break is duplicated and greatly reinforced, particularly in the case of journalism's big television stars, by the social distance that comes with high economic and social status. It is common knowledge that, since the 1960s, in the United States and in most of Europe, media stars augment their already high salaries—on the order of \$100,000 and more in Europe, and several million dollars on the American side<sup>6</sup>—with often-exorbitant honoraria for talk show appearances and lectures, remuneration for regular newspaper collaboration, and fees from various "deals," notably at annual conventions and professional meetings. This is why we see the continuing increase in the distribution of power and privilege in the journalistic field. Some journalists act much like small-time capitalistic entrepreneurs who need to preserve, and increase, their symbolic capital—since their me-

dia visibility increases their value on the lecture circuit. At the same time, we are witnessing the growth of a vast journalistic subproletariat, forced into a kind of self-censorship by an increasingly precarious job situation.<sup>7</sup>

To these effects must be added others, on which I will elaborate in this book, that derive from competition within the journalistic field itself—the obsession with “scoops” and the unquestioned bias in favor of the news that is the newest and hardest to get; or the predisposition to overstatement that comes from attempting to offer the subtlest and strangest interpretation (which often means the most cynical one); or again, the predictions game, made possible by a collective amnesia about current events. Not only are these predictions and diagnoses easy to make (like bets on sports events) but they can be made with total impunity, protected as the predictor is by the rapidity with which the journalistic report is forgotten amid the rapid turnover of events. (This amnesia explains how, in the space of a few months in 1989, journalists the world over switched from exalting the dazzling emergence of new democracies to condemning the appalling ethnic wars).

These mechanisms work in concert to produce a general effect of depoliticization or, more precisely, disenchantment with politics. Nothing need be said about current events, since whenever politics raises an important but unmistakably boring question, the search for entertainment focuses attention on a spectacle (or a scandal) every time. “Current events” are reduced to an impassioned recital of entertaining events, which tend to lie about halfway between the human interest story and the variety show. (For an exemplary case, take the O. J. Simpson trial.) The result is a litany of events with no beginning and no real end, thrown together only because they occurred at the same time. So an earthquake in Turkey turns up next to proposed budget cuts, and a championship sports team is featured alongside a big murder trial. These events are reduced to the level of the absurd because we see only those elements that can be shown on television at a given moment, cut off from

their antecedents and consequences. There is a patent lack of interest in subtle, nuanced changes, or in processes that, like the continental drift, remain unperceived and imperceptible in the moment, revealing their effects only in the long term. This inattention to nuance both repeats and reinforces the structural amnesia induced by day-to-day thinking and by the competition that equates what's important with what's new—the scoop. This means that journalists—the day laborers of everyday life—can show us the world only as a series of unrelated flash photos. Given the lack of time, and especially the lack of interest and information (research and documentation are usually confined to reading articles that have appeared in the press), they cannot do what would be necessary to make events (say, an outbreak of violence in a high school) really understandable, that is, they cannot reinsert them in a network of relevant relationships (such as the family structure, which is tied to the job market, itself tied to governmental hiring policies, and so on). No doubt, they are encouraged to act as they do by politicians, and especially by government officials (who are in turn encouraged by the politicians), both of whom like to stress the short-term effects of the decisions they make and announce to the public. Clearly, these dramatic “coups” they favor create a climate hostile to action whose effect is visible only over time.

This vision is at once dehistoricized and dehistoricizing, fragmented and fragmenting. Its paradigmatic expression is the TV news and the way it sees the world—as a series of apparently absurd stories that all end up looking the same, endless parades of poverty-stricken countries, sequences of events that, having appeared with no explanation, will disappear with no solution—Zaire today, Bosnia yesterday, the Congo tomorrow. Stripped of any political necessity, this string of events can at best arouse a vague humanitarian interest. Coming one after the other and outside any historical perspective, these unconnected tragedies seem to differ little from natural disasters—the tornadoes, forest fires, and floods that

also occupy so much of the news. It's almost a journalistic ritual, and certainly a tradition, to focus on simple events that are simple to cover. As for the victims, they're not presented in any more political a light than those of a train derailment or any other accident. We see nothing that might stimulate any sort of truly political cohesion or revolt.

So, especially as a result of the particular form that competition takes there, and through the routines and habits of thought it imposes, the journalistic field represents the world in terms of a philosophy that sees history as an absurd series of disasters which can be neither understood nor influenced. Journalism shows us a world full of ethnic wars, racist hatred, violence and crime—a world full of incomprehensible and unsettling dangers from which we must withdraw for our own protection. And when its commentators spew ethnocentric or racist contempt (as they often do, especially whenever Africa or the inner city are involved), the journalistic evocation of the world does not serve to mobilize or politicize; on the contrary, it only increases xenophobic fears, just as the delusion that crime and violence are always and everywhere on the rise feeds anxieties and phobias about safety in the streets and at home. The world shown by television is one that lies beyond the grasp of ordinary individuals. Linked to this is the impression that politics is for professionals, a bit like high-level competitive sports with their split between athletes and spectators. Especially among those who are basically apolitical, this worldview fosters fatalism and disengagement, which obviously favors the status quo. It requires blind faith in ordinary individuals' (undeniable but limited) capacity for "resistance" to assume, along with a certain "postmodern cultural criticism," that television viewers' active cynicism (exemplified by channel surfing) can do much to counter the cynicism of its producers, whose mindset, working conditions, and goals—reaching the biggest public with that "extra something" that "sells"—make them more and more like advertising people. Facility with the games of cultural criticism—their "I know that you know that I

know"—is not universal. Nor is the ability to spin out elaborate "readings" of the "ironic and metatextual" messages cynically manipulated by television producers and ad people. Anyone who thinks otherwise has simply surrendered to a populist version of one of the most perverse forms of academic pedantry.