Since Francois Mitterrand declared education a national priority in 1988, his second socialist government has launched an extraordinary campaign to expand institutions and staff, with the goal of doubling the 40 per cent rate of pupils qualifying for (an almost free) universities education. This month the education budget has over-taken the defence budget. One possible explanation of this flamboyantly anti- Thatcherite scenario might be that Michel Rocard’s minister of education, Lionel Jospin, invited Pierre Bourdieu to join his advisory committee.

It was as if Raymond Williams had been given a blank cheque and asked to redesign British education. Bourdieu, whose work is now being published in English by Polity Press, has spent much of his career demystifying the French education system. Homo Academicus (Polity, hbk £29.50, pbk £10.95) in particular revealed how the professorial mandarins cloned and inhibited their successors, fostering elitism and inertia. Most worrying for the socialist government, still shaken by the failure of its 1984 education bill, were Bourdieu’s rude statistics: the real agents provocateurs of the May 1968 revolution were neither student conspirators nor brutal riot police, but a careless government which failed to match its random expansion of student numbers with any commensurable increase in resources.

Bourdieu has shunned media attention, which is perverse in a country where the public discourse of Weimar and the Reich, and plots the transposition of social and political judgements into subtleties and ideological systems where they are reformulated in terms of ‘care’ and ‘being’. In France this iconoclastic essay was met with disastrous silence.

Many of the above mentioned works were collective efforts by Bourdieu and his colleagues, reflecting a conscious drive towards cultural egalitarianism and scientific collaboration. But Bourdieu refuses to claim objectivity. On the contrary, he admits and studies the problem of the social scientist’s presence as a participant in the field of his research. His strong personality emerges in the complex language which articulates his work. His phrases crawl with alternatives and after-thoughts (or ‘tendrils’, to quote David Lodge). But there are reasons. Bourdieu is alert to the unconscious transactions that underpin discourse: determined not to yield to linguistic facility, he persistently filters and refracts an argument, hoping to preempt a whole range of potential misreadings. And his strong personality emerges in the complex language which articulates his work. His phrases crawl with alternatives and after-thoughts (or ‘tendrils’, to quote David Lodge). But there are reasons. Bourdieu is alert to the unconscious transactions that underpin discourse: determined not to yield to linguistic facility, he persistently filters and refracts an argument, hoping to preempt a whole range of potential misreadings. And there are times when a little more complexity in public thinking about society must be welcome. We have seen the havoc wrought when the literal-minded are entrusted with power.