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Bourdieu, Pierre (1930-2002)

Pierre Bourdieu was probably the most influential French sociologist of the last third of the twentieth century. Synthesising diverse philosophical and sociological traditions, his research practice and theory aimed at unveiling correspondences between social and mental structures, and at giving an historical account for their emergence – a research orientation that Bourdieu himself once called 'constructivist' or 'genetic structuralism'. He became internationally renowned for introducing or re-actualising the concepts of 'practice', 'habitus', 'capital', and 'field' in social science. Having graduated in philosophy, Bourdieu turned to anthropology and sociology during a stay in Algeria in the late 1950s. He taught at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales (Paris) from 1964, and edited the interdisciplinary journal *Actes de la Recherche en Sciences Sociales* from 1975. In 1981 he obtained a professorship at the Collège de France, the most prestigious French academic institution, and became latterly one of the leading intellectuals in France.

At first sight, Bourdieu's work covers a bewildering range of subject-matter, including perceptions of time among Algerian peasants, matrimonial strategies in South-Western France, students' performances at French schools and higher education institutions, cultural tastes, language, literature, museums, photography, sports, haute couture, housing, intellectuals, urban ghettos, and the State, to name some central areas of investigation. There is, however, one main theme that runs through most of Bourdieu's analyses, namely the issue of unequal access to the dominant culture, and the socio-political preconditions and consequences of this inequality.

Bourdieu drew a significant amount of his material from three sites: the French region of Béarn, where he was born in 1930, the son of a lower civil servant; 1950s Algeria, where he did military service, conducted fieldwork, and taught at university level; and (élite) higher education institutions in Paris, which he attended as a student and where he worked until his death in 2002. Albeit informed by philosophy (his original subject of study), Bourdieu's concepts were forged out of the practical engagement with and the critical analysis of these three fields.

Bourdieu examined Algeria, the Béarn, and the French élite in terms of 'symbolic violence'. A universally shared system of values and perceptions privileges those who embody the dominant or legitimate culture, whereas those who have less access to material and cultural resources are devalued. What is more, the disadvantaged segments of the population (colonised Algerians, rural Béarnais, poor and uneducated Frenchmen) contribute to their own domination to the extent that they unquestioningly share the system of evaluation that works against them.

For instance, Bourdieu showed that, in the 1950s, with increasing urbanisation, peasant families in the Béarn encouraged their daughters to marry townsmen, whom they considered to be a better match than young farmers, thus condemning their own sons to celibacy and depreciating life in the countryside still further. As this example indicates, Bourdieu looked at kinship (and social action in general) in a more dynamic, more actor-centred, and more politicised framework than Lévi-Straussian structuralism, the dominant paradigm in 1960s French social science.

He elaborated on themes from Durkheim and Mauss (social systems of classification), Marx (class relations), and Weber (legitimacy, subjective representations), and orchestrated a fruitful dialogue between their points of view.

Bourdieu himself represented his own social thought as an attempt to overcome dualisms, and in particular the opposition between 'objectivism' and 'subjectivism'. According to Bourdieu, most social action is guided neither by objective rules, nor by subjective choices. 'Habitus', 'strategy', and 'practical sense' are the concepts that he used to express this intermediate position. *Habitus*, a term taken from Aristotelian discourse, refers to a set of dispositions that are inculcated in childhood, persist more or less unchanged over the course of a life, and incline people to act and react in specific ways which virtually always betray their social background.

Relatively unawares and without following any conscious rule, people of similar social origin share homologous attitudes, categories, and perceptions, and engage in similar practices.

The sense of honour of Kabyle men, and the humble attitude of Kabyle women, in Algeria, are examples of such dispositions. The *habitus* is history materialised and embodied; it is inscribed in the Kabyle house (which is organised along an opposition between a dark, damp, lower, 'female' part and a light-filled, noble, upper part) and in the (upright, male, or stooped, female) bodies of the Kabyle. Pierre Bourdieu used the Kabyle material as an illustration in *Outline of a Theory of Practice* [1972] and *The Logic of Practice* [1980], two highly influential books that summed up his social thought in mid-career, about two decades before the comprehensive presentation of his approach in *Pascalian Meditations* [1997].

Bourdieu drew on concepts derived from economics to conceptualise social action. Agents have different kinds and amounts of 'capital'. These include material resources in the original sense of the word, but also 'social capital' (social relations, networks), 'symbolic capital' (prestige, honour), and 'cultural capital'. Cultural capital takes three forms: it is materialised as books and art works in one's possession, incorporated as a certain cultivated 'habitus', and institutionalised in the form of diplomas and degrees.

With the help of these conceptual instruments, Bourdieu analysed the workings of the French educational system. *The Inheritors: French Students and Their Relation to Culture* [1964] and *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture* [1970], two books co-authored with Jean-Claude Passeron, showed that students from lower social classes, being less familiar with the dominant culture, are more likely to fail in school than those with a certain social and cultural capital. Notwithstanding an appearance of neutrality, the school system reproduces and legitimises pre-existing social differences.

Generally, and with the complicity of the educational system, the dominant classes accumulate all kinds of capital. In strategies that are designed to bring about the reproduction of their social standing, they sometimes transform one kind of capital into another, for example when they invest in the education of their children. Having graduated from prestigious schools, the latter obtain leading positions in industry and the State, so converting their cultural and symbolic capital back into economic capital.

In accordance with the amount and structure of their capital, agents occupy different 'positions' in the 'social space'. In *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* [1979], Bourdieu made a fine-tuned analysis of the class visions and divisions of French society in the 1960s and 1970s. He correlated social positions with preferences for certain types of music, art and theatre, but also seemingly trivial cultural forms such as foodstuffs, table manners, sports, and interior design. Such seemingly natural tastes and 'choices', Bourdieu argued, are in reality strategies that serve to differentiate oneself from (or sometimes to emulate) members of other social groups.

The social space can be seen as a juxtaposition of various 'fields', for instance the economic and the political field, or the fields of science, fine arts, and literature. A field is a relatively autonomous microcosm with its own rules and logic. Agents and institutions compete with each other over a highly priced value or good that all agree is at stake, e.g. truth in the field of science, or salvation in the field of religion. Everyone employs strategies (either consciously or, more often, out of practical sense, the 'feel for the game') in order to maintain and increase their capital. The existence of a field implies struggle and a power relationship between a dominant and a dominated section within the field.

These fields have evolved historically. For instance, Bourdieu investigated the emergence of an autonomous field of the arts in the late 19th century. He argued that only such a historical analysis could unearth the conditions for 'understanding' art in our time, e.g. for judging artworks according to purely formal aesthetic criteria rather than appreciating their (religious, economic or decorative) function.

Bourdieu advocated a similar historization for every scientific endeavour. In an exercise of self-reflexivity or 'participant objectivation', social scientists should question their research interests and strategies in three ways: how much are these research orientations influenced firstly by the scholars' social origin, and secondly, by their current position in the scientific field; and do they have an 'intellectualist' bias, i.e. is sufficient attention paid to the fact that most social action is practice rather than the conscious creation of meaning or application of rules? In *Homo Academicus* [1984], Bourdieu proposed an analysis of the field of higher education in France prior to and during the events of May 1968, investigating correspondences between scholars' social and symbolic capital, their career paths, research interests and outlooks; and he included his own career and research activities in this review.

In the 1990s, Bourdieu had amassed enough scientific authority (or symbolic capital) to make his voice heard outside his own field. Obviously, there was a political agenda in Bourdieu's research virtually from the beginning. By exposing the mechanisms of domination, social science should provide weapons of defence against symbolic violence, as he argued repeatedly. From the mid-1990s however, having published *The Weight of the World* [1993], an account of the daily suffering of the disadvantaged in France, Bourdieu intervened more and more often directly in public debate, speaking out against neo-liberalism and in defence of the welfare state. If these statements secured him a considerable following outside the field of social science and stirred increasing media attention, they also provoked sometimes harsh criticism from political adversaries and some peers.

Social scientists have also questioned certain of Bourdieu's central concepts. The actual impact of childhood experiences on the *habitus* has come under scrutiny. What is the influence of the plural, perhaps contradictory settings in which many humans grow up? What role do media and other discourses play in the formation of *habitus*? The notion of the *field* might be extremely pertinent for the analysis of socio-professional domains, but possibly much less so for other social realities, such as the family. Is there necessarily conflict and domination as soon as relations between human beings are established? Is it appropriate to suspect (conscious or unconscious) interests behind expressions of friendship, compassion, and solidarity? As for 'capital', how can one account for the social action of those who do not possess any at all?

Many of Pierre Bourdieu's analyses are highly pertinent criticisms of French society, where the republican ideology of egalitarianism and meritocracy often clashes with a reality of racism, class contempt, and relative social immobility. His writings have had a decisive impact on the sociological study of culture and education, as well as on the anthropology of Algeria. Bourdieu's social thought offers suggestions about how to overcome theoretical impasses associated with dichotomies such as the social and the individual, free will and determinism, body and mind, structure and agency. One of the most important legacies of his work is his own *modus operandi*, i.e., the ethos of a social science that crosses boundaries between disciplines such as sociology, anthropology, philosophy, and history; between different national intellectual traditions; and between the purely academic exchange of ideas and public debate.

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