

## 'Something like a subject': A critique of Bourdieu's implicit theory of agency

### **Abstract:**

Bourdieu's social commitment as an intellectual encourages those similarly engaged to look to his social theory, in which he attempts to transcend the dichotomy of agent-less structures and free acting agents through the central concepts of habitus and field. The lack of a role for consciousness within his theory raises questions about the nature of the agency he attempts to reintroduce into structuralism. This paper explores the part played by consciousness both within the context of Bourdieu's favourite metaphor of the 'feel for the game' and in wider society. It examines how an understanding of the interplay of the different possible responses to experience within subjective consciousness is necessary to help explain the possibilities for transformative social action, and embeds this in the marxist theory of exploitation, alienation and contradictory consciousness.

'What a strange choice, Bourdieu'.

So says Slavoj Žižek (2007: 4) in response to the tale of Musa Shanib from Abkhazia, 'whose incredible career passed from Soviet dissident intellectual through democratic political reformer and Muslim fundamentalist war leader up to respected professor of philosophy, his entire career marked by the strange admiration for Pierre Bourdieu's thought.'<sup>1</sup> The intellectual appeal and reach of Pierre Bourdieu is not so surprising however, rooted as it is in his exemplification of the socially committed intellectual. A commitment that turned engagement during one of the key events in the development of opposition to neo-liberalism, the French public sector strikes of 1995, and continued through active participation in that movement until his death in 2002. Bourdieu's sociology was also one of deep commitment, in essence, an attempt to explain the mechanisms of domination that exist in society, the processes of their conservation and the potential for their subversion. There is an immense amount to be learned from his analysis, particularly in the fields of culture and education, but ultimately, the pessimism that flows from the limitations of his theoretical framework blunts its liberatory potential.

### **Structure and agency**

Much of Bourdieu's work was developed in response to the two dominant strands of French post-war intellectual thought, existentialism and structuralism, (including the structuralist Marxism of Althusser). 'The Logic of Practice' represents the most systematic outline of his theoretical system and at its centre is an attempt to transcend the subjectivist-objectivist opposition that these two trends of thought exemplify. Bourdieu himself came from a structuralist background, seeing in the endeavours of Levi-Strauss 'a model of a kind of scientific humanism' (Bourdieu 2009: 2) in contradistinction to the ethnocentrism of much existing anthropology. Yet an attempt to apply these categories to anthropological work in Algeria through the fifties and sixties, during that country's struggle for independence, led to an eventual frustration with the approach. His search for a perfectly coherent system seemed impossible when faced with a 'logic immanent in practice', evident in the rites and practices of the people he observed, full of contradiction, ambiguity and uncertainty. Like the spherical cow of an old mathematics joke<sup>2</sup>, the objectifications of structuralism can miss

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<sup>1</sup> To be fair, Žižek rejects this as a response, but interestingly has never intellectually engaged with Bourdieu's work.

<sup>2</sup> A village of farmers are having trouble with their cows who haven't been producing milk. They've tried every folk remedy they know and elicited the help of the most expensive vets, all with no result. So, they advertise a big financial prize in a national paper for whoever can solve their problem. A mathematician turns up in the village and declares that he can solve it. They provide a room for him to work in, which he then doesn't leave for months. Eventually, one night, there is a huge cry of 'YES!' from the room, and he tells those who come running that he has solved the problem. The next day everyone assembles in the village hall to hear him explain. After an excited introduction from the mayor, the mathematician stands up, draws a circle on the chalkboard behind him and says to the villagers, 'Imagine, if you will, a spherical cow...'

all that is actually interesting, or essential, in what is being examined. And, for example, tends to conceal the fact that the logical relations of kinship, which the structuralist tradition almost completely autonomizes with respect to economic determinants, exist in practice only through and for the official and unofficial uses made of them by agents whose inclination to keep them in working order and to make them work more intensively ... rises with the degree to which they actually or potentially fulfil useful functions, satisfying vital material or symbolic interests (p. 35).

These agents with interests are not those of existentialism with absolute freedom however, where 'refusing to recognize anything resembling durable dispositions or probable eventualities, Sartre makes each action a kind of antecedent-less confrontation between the subject and the world.'

If the world of action is nothing other than this imaginary universe of interchangeable possibles, entirely dependent on the decree of the consciousness that creates it, and therefore entirely devoid of objectivity, if it is moving because the subject chooses to be moved, revolting because he chooses to be revolted, then emotions, passions, and also actions, are merely games of bad faith (p. 42).

For Bourdieu, structuralism's mistake wasn't to insist on objectivity and the existence of 'structuring structures', but lay in its elevation of the observer to a privileged position and the often resulting confusion of 'the model of reality for the reality of the model' (p. 39). To counter this he argued for objectifying the role of the objectifier, as 'the basis of a more acute awareness of distance and of a real proximity, a kind of solidarity beyond cultural differences' (p. 15) and for developing a theory of the logic of the actual practice of agents.

### **Habitus, field, practice, doxa**

The key concepts in Bourdieu's attempt to transcend the dichotomy of agent-less structures and free-acting agents revolve around the key concepts of field, habitus and practice. Bourdieu defines a field (such as the economic, academic, artistic etc.) as a semi-autonomous 'network, or a configuration, of objective relations between positions', where those positions are defined by 'the structure of the distribution of species of power (or capital) whose possession commands access to the specific profits that are at stake in the field as well as by their objective relations to other positions' (Bourdieu and Waquant 1992: 97). Thus the field is essentially defined as the structure of the competition for capital within it, with such capital being not just economic but social or cultural (among other possibilities).

An individual's habitus is made up of the dispositions that are formed through existence in the field: the conditionings associated with a particular class of conditions of existence produce *habitus*, systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles which generate and organise practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary in order to attain them. Objectively 'regulated' and 'regular' without being in any way the product of obedience to rules, they can be collectively orchestrated without being the product of the organizing action of a conductor (Bourdieu 2009: 53).

Importantly, habitus is embodied, it acts 'with an urgency and a claim to existence that excludes all deliberation' (p. 53). In the process of interrelation with the field the habitus generates practice, which in turn reconstitutes, and reproduces, the field. This interrelation between habitus and field, between incorporated history and objectified history can also produce doxa, the 'undisputed, pre-reflexive, naïve, native compliance with the fundamental presuppositions of the field'. Doxa also is 'a state of the body' (p. 68). This feel for the 'social game' leads agents to subjectively incorporate objective possibilities as they compete within each field for the scarce resource of capital, whether symbolic, cultural or economic.

The applications of this framework, which is more subtle and complex than the brief overview given here, leads to an analysis of how the forms of domination within society are obfuscated, and how the worlds of education and culture, for example, serve to perpetuate class differences. There is much to admire in both the aims and results of Bourdieu's research, yet there are problems with the framework that undermine its overall effectiveness, and these problems are now explored.

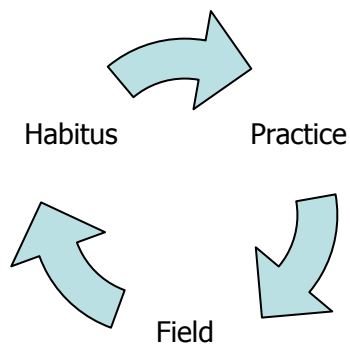
## Problematising Bourdieu

'The almost miraculous encounter between the habitus and a field, between incorporated history and objectified history, which makes possible the near-perfect anticipation of the future inscribed in all the concrete configurations on the pitch or board' (p. 66).

'Perfectly and immediately successful adjustment to the objective conditions provides the most complete illusion of finality, or - which amounts to the same thing - of self-regulating mechanism' (p. 62).

These descriptions of habitus put one in mind of The Hitch-hikers Guide to the Galaxy's explanation of the solution to the many possible contradictions inherent in time travel, such as the danger of meeting yourself and changing history to one in which you don't exist: 'It all just works out in the end'. Like a 'just so' story in the form of a reification, the concept of habitus seems dangerously close to functionalism in which, as Alex Callinicos (1999: 294) notes,

a phenomenon is explained by its beneficial consequences (in this case the reproduction of social structures) without the mechanism responsible for this process being specified. Bourdieu has vehemently repudiated this criticism, without however, more than restating his original claim.



(Fig. 1)

Another feature arising from the conceptual framework is a deep sense of feeling trapped within the self-perpetuating structures of habitus and field. For example, 'the strategies produced by the habitus ... always tending to reproduce the objective structures that produced them' (Bourdieu 2009:61), and, 'this system of dispositions – a present past that tends to perpetuate itself into the future by reactivation in similarly structured practices' (p.54).

Even struggle against the dominating structures seems to reproduce them: 'what the competitive struggle makes everlasting is not different conditions, but the difference between conditions', thus 'social contradictions and struggles are not all, or always, in contradiction with the perpetuation of the established order' (1984: 164). Although, struggle can take place, it is seen more as a competitive struggle within each field for scarce resources, rather than a potentially transformative one.

Merely wanting a way out of this does not make Bourdieu's theories wrong, but it does encourage an exploration of what may be missing in his theory in order to find such a way out. The main noticeable absence is a strong role for consciousness in his concept of agency.

## Where is my mind?

'The habitus is a spontaneity without consciousness or will' (2009: 56)

'Practical sense, social necessity turned into nature, converted into motor schemes and body automatisms, is what causes practices, in and through what makes them obscure to the eyes of their producers, to be sensible, that is informed by a common sense' (p. 69)

Is agency without consciousness, or with a consciousness that is at best one generated by the structured and structuring structures of habitus, "an automaton... lead(ing) the mind unconsciously along with it" (p. 68), really agency? To explore this question it is useful to begin with Bourdieu's favourite metaphor for the inter-relation between habitus and field, that is, the 'feel for the game'.

He decides in terms of objective probabilities, that is, in response to an overall, instantaneous assessment of the whole set of his opponents and the whole set of his team-mates, seen not as they are but in their impending positions, And he does so 'on the spot', 'in the twinkling of an eye', 'in the heat of the moment', that is, in conditions which exclude distance, perspective, detachment and reflexion (p. 81).

The sense of this is somewhat akin to Duhamel's response to film: 'I can no longer think what I want to think, my thoughts have been replaced by moving images', or as Benjamin puts it, 'The spectator's process of association in view of these images is indeed interrupted by their constant sudden change' (Benjamin 1968: 238). Even in cinema however, it is possible to subvert this process of habituation in the context of distraction, as Godard's occasional Brechtian moments do. More importantly, the analysis of the effect of film in this regard is only possible because of its distinctive nature in comparison to much of the rest of life, including for those caught up in playing a game, where the possibilities of 'distance, perspective, detachment and reflexion' occur more frequently than Bourdieu allows.

An example, which perhaps best captures the sense of 'acting in the moment' in its sporting dimension, yet also points to some of the problems of extending this metaphor without adjustment to real life, is contained in the film 'Zidane, a 21st Century Portrait'. A remarkable film of an entire football match between Real Madrid and Villarreal where seventeen cameras are trained exclusively on the player Zinedine Zidane, rather than on the ball. Much of this film brilliantly echoes many of Bourdieu's themes, for example, as Zidane himself says 'the game, the event, is not necessarily experienced ... in real time' (Younge 2006), or in Bourdieu's terms, 'science has a time that is not that of practice' (2009: 81). In the film, we see brief bursts of activity where Zidane skilfully collects and releases the ball, where he 'sees in advance in the directly perceived present' (p. 81). Yet, these moments interrupt long passages where instead he 'prowls the field in deep concentration' (Younge 2006). This punctuated nature of the activity, ('until he saw the film ... he didn't realise how rarely he touches the ball'), is what allows for periods of contemplation, including of the sounds and feelings of the crowd, and, particularly, for conscious analysis of the patterns of play which then influence future activity.

**Defensive Organization**

- \* Team organized in a medium block. Medium defensive organization mainly due to the input they put on attack which leaves them exposed or with great imbalance in numerical terms: when they lose the ball there are a lot of players out of position (centrally or to the sides). Team that mixes aggressiveness with passiveness depending on opponent. It looks sometimes that they want to give the initiative to the opp. so that he feels the game is controlled and then suddenly they totally change their behaviour and want (and can) to kill the opp. straight away
- \* We can be highly successful in our long build-up as long as we do it through the flanks or if centrally, shorter than the central defenders z... one and ending up where Parker and Emre are. This kind of situation allows us to win 1st ball in the air and to create danger with flicks.
- \* Midfield pressure depends on system used. If they play classic 4x4x2, their behaviour has two different moments: 1) in 1st and 2nd phase if the opponent play balls into their midsiders facing their own goal they pressure very hard and try to force mistakes. 2) when oppo. is forcing the play (normally already in 3rd phase) they won't pressure and will just keep block compactness, shuffling from side to side and waiting for a mistake. If they play 4x4x2 diamond shape, their behaviour will be much more aggressive, space in the center will be highly controlled and playing to the midsiders involves a high risk of losing possession (on the other hand our full-backs will enjoy more freedom).
- \* Defence is highly inconsistent both due to individual mistakes (Boumsong mainly - exploit) or due to line uncoordination. They mix zonal with man marking and Boumsong as instructions to follow deep the opponent's striker. Because of that he's rarely in a position to cover Babayaro which in consequence result in further weakness on the left side. With Babayaro it's important to make full use of pace, rhythm and explosive changes of direction as he is slow to react. 1st vs 2nd angles of direction as he is slow to react. 1st vs 2nd angles of direction as he is slow to react. 1st vs 2nd angles of direction as he is slow to react.
- \* Given is highly inconsistent as well. 2nd balls from crosses or from shots are frequent so it's important that the opponent's striker follows through and believes.

**Defensive transition - after losing the possession of the ball**

- \* Medium change of attitude, but team is very broken, particularly on the right side where they have two players unable to recover quickly their position (Carr and Solano). This makes Parker the only possible block to stop our transition but spaces are too big for him alone to control: he can kill them with quick transitions.
- \* On the left N'Zogbia has excellent defensive transition and recovers quickly or closes in midfield- this accentuates the importance to kill them on their right side.
- \* The defence can be positioned too up in the field. There are spaces behind them that can be used in our offensive transitions. They can try off-sides but always believe in bad timing and bad judgement from both central defenders.

**Bouncing deep into midfield with opponents' striker - exposed depth**

**Double exposure on the right side in transition - Solano is inside and Carr is deep**

**With Owen - danger on the back passes to the GK (crosses and crosses)**

**Two behaviours in midfield: orientated pressure when opponent receives ball facing own goal**

**Two behaviours in midfield: when opponent loses play they give the initiative and just want to keep block compactness**

(Chelsea F.C. 2005)

These interventions of consciousness within a game such as football are multiplied if we take into account the wider training and analysis of opposition that teams engage in prior to a match. The image above is one page of many from a document prepared by one team for an upcoming game. These types of activity can represent attempts to internalise a conscious course of action through external repetition (in training), or can provide conscious tools to be used precisely to alter activity from what would be ingrained and automatic.

An incident a few minutes from the end of the Zidane film where he is sent off following a fight links to a discussion of these themes in a wider context. There is an obvious question to be asked about the deliberateness of this particular incident. In the closing moments of an already won game, does Zidane provoke a dramatic incident that will create a nice climax to the film? It is impossible to say, but even the fact that it is an option points to the possibility of dramatic moments in life, fuelled by conscious decision-making, that break with the regular routine of existence.

Consciousness can be seen to be inseparable from much of the type of habituated, embodied activity that Bourdieu discusses. As in the figured worlds of Dorothy Holland et al. (1998:277) this provides a 'second type of agency' to add to the 'improvisations' that can be seen in Bourdieu, where humans' ability to imagine and to manipulate language, signs and symbols can enable them to 'redirect themselves'. To connect this type of agency to transformative social agency requires an understanding of the importance of contradictions within consciousness.

Bourdieu tends to underestimate both the role of consciousness, and the range of subjective responses to the objective possibilities that people face. For example,

If a very close correlation is regularly observed between the scientifically constructed objective probabilities (for example, the chances of access to a particular good) and agents' subjective aspirations ('motivations' and 'needs'), this is not because agents consciously adjust their aspirations to an exact evaluation of their chances of success ... In reality, the dispositions durably inculcated by the possibilities and impossibilities, freedoms and necessities, opportunities and prohibitions inscribed in the objective conditions ... generate dispositions objectively compatible with these conditions and in a sense pre-adapted to their demands (2009: 54).

This contradicts the reality of, among many other examples, the student in one of my own mathematics classes who desired a Ferrari so much that he would always carry magazines about them, would constantly be drawing one in class, or when he did a photography course, only took photos of Ferraris, despite having little chance of ever attaining one. Or the working class students who understand the hierarchy of local universities but will apply in any case for the one most difficult to get in to, the one that is 'not for them'.

In a way more important than these omnipresent maladjustments, the fact of the general adjustment of dispositions to favour actual opportunities also misses the variety in attitudes of those in a similar position whose expectations do more sufficiently conform to the possibilities. A student who enters Manchester Metropolitan University as opposed to Manchester University may internalise their position in terms of their own abilities, '*I'm not good enough to go there*', or they may say, '*that place is for the wealthy, the ones with more opportunity than me, it's not fair*'. Often, a mix of both these ideas will exist in any one person's head, and it is the contradiction between them, the battle over which is the truth, that gives us a possibility of escaping the existing patterns of domination.

The roots of the contradictions within ideas can be illustrated by looking at the academic world. On one hand there is an individualised competitive pressure that says you have to bring money into your department, you have to publish, you have to get good feedback from students and so on. This applies a real pressure on academics to compete in order to preserve their position or livelihood. On the other hand, there is also a social pull on ideas. Academics are generally engaged in attempts to understand (and sometimes influence) the world around them which involves engaging with other's ideas. They may share a passion or concern for their subject. At the very least they will speak and write with words from a common language. These two pulls on ideas, the individual competitive and the social, are real forces that act on thought and behaviour, and it is the contradiction between the two that opens up the space for transformative social agency.

An example which helps illustrate this is the announcement of the closure of Visteon's car component plants in the UK in March 2009. At two of the plants, in Enfield and Basildon, on hearing the news of losing their jobs with no compensation, the workers headed for the pub to get drunk. At the plant in Belfast, something very different happened; they didn't leave directly following the announcement but stayed behind to discuss the implications of the pronouncement. Influenced by a recent successful occupation at the nearby Waterford Glass company, some of those present argued that they shouldn't leave the plant, but that they should occupy instead. After some debate, this is what they did, and as a result of taking this action, those involved won on average £50 000 each in compensation.

Habitus as a concept could perhaps explain these two very different responses, one of which seems to break with the entirety of ingrained experience of those workers up to that point, but, by doing so in the same terms, only at the risk of losing all explanatory power. Conscious intervention by agents and discussion and arguments between agents played a key role, not just in the near immediate response of one group, but equally in the later response of the other affected plants, who, on hearing of the Belfast occupation, could take the time to go through similar discussions and return to their own workplaces and do the same.

The contradiction between accepting the way things are and wanting something better no doubt existed in all of the plants, and in the heads of most of the individual participants. However, this enabled the possibility for a collective imagining that is shared and developed through discussion and argument which can go beyond the agency that is possible for an isolated individual.

### **Alienation and contradictory consciousness**

In essence the argument above is derived from Marxism. Marx's analysis of where ideas come from is an important starting point:

The ideas of the ruling class are the ruling ideas: i.e. the class which is the ruling material force of society is at the same time its ruling intellectual force. The class which has the means of material production at its disposal consequently also controls the means of mental production, so that the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are on the whole subject to it. (1977: 176).

The exploitation at the heart of the capitalist mode of production is hidden: 'the definite social relations between men...assume here, for them, the fantastic form of relations between things (Marx 1954: 77). This 'commodity fetishism' or in its wider term, 'alienation', is the key to understanding consciousness.

Labour is external to the worker...the worker feels himself only when he is not working, and when he is working he does not feel himself... This relationship is the relationship of the worker to his activity as something which is alien and does not belong to him, activity as passivity, power as impotence, procreation as emasculation, the worker's own physical and mental energy, his personal life... directed against himself (1975: 326).

This explains why most working class people, most of the time, accept and internalise the structures of the society they live in both in terms of consciousness and in the dispositions that Bourdieu talks of. That is not the end of the story though. The exploitation they suffer also provides an alternative pull on their ideas through its collective nature. As Gramsci outlines,

The active man-in-the-mass has a practical activity, but has no clear theoretical consciousness of his practical activity, which nonetheless involves understanding the world in so far as it transforms it. His theoretical consciousness can indeed be historically in opposition to his activity. One might almost say that he has two theoretical consciousnesses (or one contradictory consciousness): one which is implicit in his activity and which in reality unites him with all his fellow workers in the practical transformation of the real world; and one, superficially explicit or verbal, which he has inherited from the past and uncritically absorbed (1971: 641).

Generally, we only see flashes of the first type of consciousness. It emerges in stronger form as part of collective struggle, such as that in Visteon, and becomes hegemonic only at times of huge transformations at a societal level. It exists, however, in some form at all times. The investigation of how the contradiction

develops at an individual level and how that relates to society is beyond the scope of this paper, but explorations can be based, not only on the theories of Marx and Gramsci, but also on the works of Vygotsky, Volosinov and Bahktin who grappled, in different ways, with similar issues.

## **Bourdieu and Marxism**

Bourdieu's relationship with Marxism is an interesting one. He has often been accused of being a Marxist (see the discussion in Waquant 2001, for example), he quotes Marx frequently and positively as an authority and the general aim of exploring a dialectical relationship between subject and object seems straight from the heart of Marxism. Bourdieu has clearly stated his distance from Marxism however, first of all explicitly in terms of the role for consciousness:

The social world doesn't work in terms of consciousness; it works in terms of practices, mechanisms and so forth... By using doxa we accept many things without knowing them, and that is what is called ideology... We must move away from the Cartesian philosophy of the Marxist tradition towards a different philosophy in which agents are not aiming consciously towards things, or mistakenly guided by false representation. I think that is all wrong, and I don't believe in it (Bourdieu and Eagleton 1992).

Secondly, in opposition to 'economism', for example:

The failings of the Marxist theory of class ... result from the fact that, by reducing the social world to the economic field alone, it is confined to define social position with reference solely to the position within the relations of production. (Bourdieu 1991:244)

It can be argued however that in introducing the various forms of capital to counter this, Bourdieu replicates exactly the point that a non-determinist Marxism makes: that the social relations of the economy, commodification and competition come to infect and infest all aspects of our lives, not only those of the directly economic sphere. However, Marxism goes on to add the alternative influence, our social essence, and discusses how the contradiction between the two can be fought out in consciousness. In Bourdieu, we only have one-side, individuals competing for various forms of capital, and this is built into his framework as a starting assumption. In the process he effectively universalises capitalism and it is no surprise that transformative agency becomes so difficult to describe or explain within the terms of his framework.

Bourdieu was clearly on the side of those who want a better world. As he says poetically at the end of the preface to 'The logic of practice';

By forcing one to discover externality at the heart of internality, banality in the illusion of rarity, the common in the pursuit of the unique, sociology does more than denounce all the impostures of egotistic narcissism; it offers perhaps, the only means of contributing, if only through awareness of determinations, to the construction, otherwise abandoned to the forces of the world, of something like a subject (Bourdieu 2009: 21).

Unfortunately though, 'something like' a subject is not quite enough.

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