

Pierre bourdieu professor of sociology

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Pierre Bourdieu (1930–2002), Professor of Sociology at the Collège de France, might come into view as an unlikely candidate for inclusion under the rubric of critical theory. An erstwhile structuralist, whose work sometimes appeared to run equivalent to that of Foucault, an erstwhile anthropologist and former student of Lévi-Strauss, he was in numerous respects a characteristically ‘French’ theorist.

However he distanced himself from the ‘objectivism’ of structural anthropology, at the same time as remaining stubbornly opposed to post-structuralist deconstruction (Bourdieu, 1977; Bourdieu, 1984, p. 495). Furthermore, his work engaged very directly with both Marxist and Weberian traditions in social theory. One critic has even observed that it “is best understood as the attempt to push class analysis beyond Marx and Weber” (Eder, 1993, p. 63).

Definitely, if critical theory is described in terms of its objective to change the world, then Bourdieu was as significant a theorist as any. Throughout the late 1990s, he appeared as by far the most well-known academic intellectual to join in active solidarity with the new ‘antiglobalisation’ movements. His *La Misère du monde*, first published in volume in 1993 and in paperback in 1998, turned out to be a bestseller in France and a main source of political motivation to the movement, both in the original and in its English translation as *The Weight of the World*.

He was directly implicated in militant ‘antiglobalisation’ activism, speaking at mass meetings of striking railway workers in 1995 and unemployed workers in 1998 (Bourdieu, 1998, pp. 24n, 88n); he initiated the 1996 formal request for an ‘Estates General of the Social Movement’ and its May

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Day 2000 successor, the petition for a pan-European Estates General; he cofounded the radical 'Raisons d'agir' group and its associated publishing house; he overtly called 'for a left Left' (Bourdieu, 1998a); and he was a regular contributor to the radical French monthly, *Le Monde diplomatique*.

We may add that, like Marx, Bourdieu attached a distinguishing subtitle to what is still his best-known work *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (Bourdieu, 1984). Bourdieu's reputation as a sociological thinker revolves around the 'theory of practice', in which he tried to theorise human sociality as the result of the tactical action of individuals operating within a constraining, however not determining, context of values.

Notably, the term Bourdieu coined to explain this was 'the habitus' (Bourdieu, 1977), by which he meant "an acquired system of generative schemes objectively adjusted to the particular conditions in which it is constituted" (p. 95). It is at the same time structured and structuring, materially produced and very frequently generation-specific (pp. 72, 78). Elsewhere, he explained it as 'a kind of transforming machine that leads us to "reproduce" the social conditions of our own production, but in a relatively unpredictable way' (Bourdieu, 1993, p.

87). Like Marx and Weber, Bourdieu thinks contemporary capitalist societies to be class societies. However for Bourdieu, their dominant and dominated classes are discernible from each other not simply as a matter of economics, however as well as a matter of habitus: 'social class, understood as a system of objective determinations', he insisted, 'must be brought into relation ... with the class habitus, the system of dispositions (partially) common to all products of the same structures' (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 85).

Bourdieu's most extensively cited study, though, and undoubtedly the most powerful in cultural studies, has been *Distinction*, a work that takes as the object of its critique specifically the same kind of high modernism as that privileged in Frankfurt School aesthetics. Where Adorno and Horkheimer had insisted on a radical discontinuity between capitalist mass culture as well as avant-garde modernism, Bourdieu would focus on the latter's own profound complicity with the social structures of power and domination.

The book was footed on an extremely thorough sociological survey, conducted in 1963 and in 1967/68, by interview and by ethnographic observation, of the cultural preferences of over 1200 people in Paris, Lille and a small French provincial town (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 503). Examining his sample data, Bourdieu recognized three main zones of taste: 'legitimate' taste, which was most extensive in the educated sections of the leading class; 'middle-brow' taste, more extensive among the middle classes; and 'popular' taste, prevalent in the working classes (p.

17). He characterised lawful taste mainly in terms of what he named the 'aesthetic disposition' to state the 'absolute primacy of form over function' (pp. 28, 30). Artistic and social 'distinction' is consequently inextricably interrelated, he argued: 'The pure gaze implies a break with the ordinary attitude towards the world which, as such, is a social break' (p. 31).

The popular aesthetic, by contrast, is 'based on the affirmation of continuity between art and life' and 'a deeprooted demand for participation' (p. 32). The distinguishing detachment of this 'pure gaze', Bourdieu argued, is part of a more general disposition towards the 'gratuitous' and the 'disinterested', in which the 'affirmation of power over a dominated

necessity' implies a claim to 'legitimate superiority over those who ... remain dominated by ordinary interests and urgencies' (pp.

55–6). Bourdieu's general sociology had posited that, without exception, all human practices can be treated as 'economic practices directed towards the maximizing of material or symbolic profit' (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 183). Therefore his leaning to view the intelligentsia as self-interested traders in cultural capital. For Bourdieu, it followed that professional intellectuals were best measured as a subordinate fraction of the same social class as the bourgeoisie.

Defining the leading class as that possessed of a high overall volume of capital, whatever its source whether economic, social or cultural he located the intellectuals in the dominant class by virtue of their access to the latter. The dominant class therefore comprises a dominant fraction, the bourgeoisie proper, which excessively controls 'economic capital', and a dominated fraction, the intelligentsia, which disproportionately controls 'cultural capital'. The most apparently disinterested of cultural practices are thus, for Bourdieu, fundamentally material in character.

Even when analysing the more 'purely artistic' forms of literary activity, the 'anti-economic economy' of the field of 'restricted' as opposed to 'large-scale' cultural production, he noted how 'symbolic, long-term profits ... are ultimately reconvertible into economic profits' (Bourdieu, 1993a, p. 54) and how avant-garde cultural practice remained dependent on the 'possession of substantial economic and social capital' (p. 67). Finally, Bourdieu comes to discuss current practices in the visual arts. He sees the current

bureaucratization and commercialization of the limited modernist field as a threat to artistic autonomy.

He registers with disquiet certain recent developments which put at risk the precious conquests of the elitist artists—the interpenetration of art and money, through new patterns of patronage, the growing dependence of art on bureaucratic control, plus the consecration through prizes or honours of works successful merely with the wider public, alongside the long-cycle modernist works cherished by artists themselves. Bourdieu's critique of idealized artistic disinterestedness has been incorrectly reinterpreted as a theory of extensive egoistic domination, not least by the 'consecrated' avant-garde.

Bourdieu's socio-analysis of the artists has shown, in spite of charismatic ideology, that in practice the Impressionists and subsequent modernists lived a comfortable existence by the time of their middle age, and that usually gallery owners or dealers sold their works on their behalf, therefore relieving them of attention to the 'Vulgar' needs of material existence. Bourdieu as well accounts for certain recurrent features of the closed worlds of art, for example the social reality of artists' struggles over cultural politics, which the spiritualistic account cannot explain.

Contrary to the orthodox expectations of sublimated suffering, Bourdieu cites numerous examples where the conflicts between artists over their specifically artistic interests caused open violence: the Surrealists' fight, in which André Breton broke a fellow artist's arm, is a case in point. Nor did the idealized expectations of art stop numerous cultural producers collaborating with the Vichy regime in the 1940s. In *The Rules of Art*, Bourdieu resumed <https://assignbuster.com/pierre-bourdieu-professor-of-sociology/>

many of the themes first broached in *Distinction*, particularly the role of cultural discernment as a marker of class position.

Here he elucidated how Flaubert, Baudelaire and Manet had been critical to the institution of an 'autonomous artistic field' of salons, publishing houses, producers, commentators, critics, distributors, and all that; and to the establishment of an idea of 'art for art's sake', which measured legitimacy as 'disinterestedness'. For Bourdieu, the latter concept marked the genesis of the modern artist or writer as 'a fulltime professional, devoted to one's work in a total and exclusive manner, indifferent to the exigencies of politics and to the injunctions of morality' (Bourdieu, 1996, pp.

76-7). This new artistic field had created a zone of autonomy, free from both the market and politics, in its 'heroic' phase, throughout the latter part of the 19th century. But in the 20th century, Bourdieu argued, modernist art had developed not as a critique of the 'iron cage' of instrumental rationality, however as a function of the power games of the dominant classes, its capacities for critical distance gradually eroded through cooption by both the market and the state education system.

Bourdieu detected analogously 'interested' processes at work in the academic intelligentsia. The academic profession is a competitive struggle for authenticity and cultural distinction, he elucidated, which functions to reproduce the wider structures of social class inequality: whether applied to the world, to students, or to academics themselves, academic taxonomies are 'a machine for transforming social classifications into academic classifications' (Bourdieu, 1988, p.

207). Afterwards he would stress the central significance of the elite graduate schools, the alleged 'grandes écoles', to the power of the French social and economic elite, showing how their credentialism operated as a kind of 'state magic' for a supposedly rationalised society (Bourdieu, 1996, p. 374).

Tracing the growing incidence of academic credentials among the chief executives of the top 100 French companies, he concluded that the obvious substitution of academic for property titles in fact performed a vital legitimating function: company heads 'no longer appear ... the heirs to a fortune they did not create', he wrote, 'but rather the most exemplary of self-made men, appointed by their ... "merits" to wield power ... in the name of "competence" and "intelligence"' (p. 334).

Where the Frankfurt School had worked with a model of theory as overtly critical, Bourdieu tended to have an effect on a quasipositivistic objectivism, in order that the moment of critique was often concealed behind a mask of scientific 'objectivity'. In *The Weight of the World*, he used a mixture of ethnographic interviews and sociological commentary to mount a stunning condemnation of contemporary utilitarianism in the shape of 'economic liberalism' as creating the preconditions for 'an unprecedented development of all kinds of ordinary suffering' (Bourdieu et al., 1999).

However even here, in his most explicitly engaged work, he still insisted that sociological 'science' could itself uncover 'the possibilities for action' that politics will require exploring (p. 629). Where the Frankfurt School had conceived of intellectuals as considerably productive of critical sensibility, Bourdieu tended to detect merely material self-interest. This sort of 'reflexive' critique is essential, he argued, to break with the 'habits of

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thought, cognitive interests and cultural beliefs bequeathed by several centuries of literary, artistic or philosophical worship' (Bourdieu 2000, p. 7).

However such cynicism can easily cause a radical overestimation of the reproductive powers of the social status quo. Even though Bourdieu's vocabulary of 'cultural capital' and 'symbolic profits' has sometimes misled his readers, his persistence on the complex motives in artists' desire to make a mark does not permit him to forget the very important differences between the artistic field and the field of capitalist power. Bourdieu argues that the characteristic nature of artistic and other cultural fields is that they exist in the form of reciprocal gift exchange somewhat than being animated by money.

Further, he does not lessen artists to their class position, nor does he deny that artists may certainly be singular figures. Indeed, the comparison across the limited and expanded artistic fields sharpens approval of the differences between the autonomous artists and others. The sociological analysis of the artworks, which illustrates how they are necessitated by social situation and artistic position-taking, can therefore become a 'piquant sauce' which serves to intensify the pleasures of the works. References: Bourdieu, P (1977), *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. R.

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