University of California, Los Angeles

From the SelectedWorks of Rogers Brubaker

1993

Social Theory as Habitus

Rogers Brubaker, UCLA

Available at: https://works.bepress.com/wrb/20/
A volume on the social theory of Pierre Bourdieu is not without its incongruities and its risks, not least because it may engender just the sort of “theoretical theory” that Bourdieu has so sharply criticized (1985a: 11). How, in this social setting, can one resist the temptation to “talk about concepts” instead of “making them work” (1979c: 3)?

Bourdieu himself furnishes a clue, suggesting a way in which one can talk about concepts by making them work. Characterizing scientific theory as a “modus operandi which directs and organizes . . . scientific practice” (1985a: 12), he invites us, in effect, to substitute a dispositional for a logocentric understanding of theory — to treat theory as habitus. I want to follow up this suggestion by discussing Bourdieu’s own theory in this way, treating it as a particular sociological habitus. Thinking of theory as habitus permits one to talk about Bourdieu’s concepts by applying them reflexively to themselves, to examine his schemes of sociological vision with the aid of those same schemes, and to turn his sociological habitus back on itself in a manner fully consistent with his program for a reflexive sociology.

The first section below argues in general terms for a practical and dispositional, rather than a purely logical and propositional, approach to social theory. The second argues that a theoretician, logocentric approach is particularly ill suited to Bourdieu’s work. The third analyzes Bourdieu’s sociological habitus — the core intellectual dispositions that inform and organize his work. The concluding section raises a set of critical questions about the sociological habitus in general and Bourdieu’s sociological habitus in particular.

SOCIAL THEORY AND SOCIOLOGICAL HABITUS

What are we talking about when we talk about social or sociological “theory”? This, of course, is a heatedly contested question; for the prestige that attaches to “theoretical” work generates social struggles to impose and institutionalize particular definitions of the sort of work that can legitimately pretend to this dignity. Yet the struggles to define what counts as theory should not obscure the wide agreement among sociologists about what theory is supposed to do: namely, to “inform” research.

What is it about theory that enables it to inform research? This is not at all clear from most discussions of sociological or, more generally, scientific theory. These tend to be framed in logical terms, characterizing theory as a structure of logical entities (concepts, variables, axioms, propositions, and so forth) possessing certain logical properties (generality, abstractness, precision, and so on) and standing in certain logical relations with one another (consistency, contradiction, implication, and the rest), on which one performs certain logical operations (deduction, generalization, specification, codification, and so on). Such logocentric discussions of theory cannot illuminate the practical directive and generative power that theory is supposed to have. The practical efficacy of theory, I think, is better captured in the sociological terms suggested by Bourdieu. As a social practice like others, social research is governed and informed by internalized dispositions, not by codified propositions, by the practical logic of the habitus, not by the theoretical logic set forth in treatises and textbooks.

Every sociological practice, theoretical or empirical, is governed and regulated by a particular sociological habitus, a particular sociological sens pratique, a particular “feel for the scientific game” (1989b: 5; cf. Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 223). Like any other habitus, the sociological habitus is a “system of lasting, transposable dispositions.” Like any other habitus, this system of dispositions “functions . . . as a matrix of perceptions, appreciations, and actions.” Like any other habitus, it can engender an infinite variety of practices “thanks to analogical transfers of schemes” from one task to another (1977c: 82–3). It is the sociological habitus that generates the “regulated improvisation” (p.79) of sociological perceptions and operations through which one grasps the world as a sociologist. It is the habitus that determines the kinds of problems that are posed, the kinds of explanations that are offered, and the kinds of instruments (conceptual, methodological, statistical) that are employed. More important, the habitus determines the manner in which problems are posed, explanations constructed, and instruments employed.

To which it may be objected: isn’t this an instance of what Giovanni Sartori calls “conceptual stretching” (1970: 1034)? Doesn’t it push the concept of habitus beyond its intended domain of application? Bourdieu
himself, after all, treats the habitus as one mode of regulation of practice among others, existing “alongside the explicit norm or the rational calculation” (1987a: 94; cf. 1980c: 89). The distinctiveness of the habitus, as a particular mode of the regulation of practice, is that it generates practices in an unconscious, unintentional manner; it is a “modus operandi that is not consciously mastered,” a “spontaneity with neither consciousness nor will” (1980c: 95, 94). As such, the habitus has a particularly important regulative role “in societies where few things are codified” (1987a: 94); it is, by implication, less important in rationalized, codified, highly differentiated societies. How, then, can the habitus be said to govern scientific research, with its requisite conscious self-monitoring and rational self-scrutiny? Doesn’t Bourdieu himself expound, in *Le Métier de sociologue* (Bourdieu et al. 1968), a rationalist philosophy of science founded on the hyper-rationalist, hyper-conscious notion of epistemological vigilance? What place can there be in science for the unconscious, unwilled strategies of the habitus?

This objection rests on a double misunderstanding. In the first place, it rests on a misreading of *Le Métier de sociologue*. Bourdieu would not write this book today, at least not in the same way. Still, the epistemological rationalism expounded in it not something disembodied or free-floating. Scientific rationality does not depend on a hyper-rationalist “pure knowing subject.” Logical control and epistemological vigilance are sociologically grounded; they are embedded in institutions and embodied in dispositions. They depend on the institutionalization of certain patterns of criticism (Bourdieu et al. 1968: 95, 102–5) and on the internalization of certain habits of thought (p. 16). And these institutionally supported, internalized habits of thought – habits of reflexive self-monitoring, above all – are nothing other than a particular intellectual habitus.

The second misunderstanding concerns the domain of application of the concept of habitus. To treat the habitus as engendering practices in an unconscious and unintentional manner is not to limit its domain of applicability to undifferentiated and unrationalyzed regions of social space and time. All sorts of specialized practices are regulated by incorporated dispositions. This is most immediately evident in the case of activities requiring trained bodily movements: playing a musical instrument, dancing, athletic activity of any kind, typing, driving, or skilled manual work. But it is no less the case for activities requiring the manipulation of symbols – think of proofreading, writing, or constructing geometric proofs. Persons skilled in any of these activities will not carry them out in a sequence of consciously deliberated and intended moves. To do so would be impossibly inefficient. The proofreader develops an “eye” for errors, the writer an “ear” for rhythm and diction, the geometer a “feel” for proofs.

Nor is it otherwise for the sociologist. One could, indeed, construct a dispositional definition of sociology (as distinguished from a credentialed or a “territorial” definition) by specifying a set of dispositions that structure sociological perception and practice – for instance, the disposition to uncover the mechanisms that are responsible for producing an observed order, to treat as problematic what others would take for granted, to attend to clues that others would miss, to think relationally and comparatively, to perceive structured patterns amidst apparently disorderly variation, and so on. Moreover, it is not only sociological perception that is governed by the ingrained dispositions of the sociological habitus, but even, to a considerable extent, the sort of general and abstract thinking called theorizing.

This is not to say that sociological work is or ought to be governed by the habitus alone. Quite the contrary: the “intentionless invention” of the habitus is and must be complemented, controlled, and corrected by other regulative techniques and mechanisms. This control occurs in and through writing. As an objectified product of the habitus, written (or otherwise recorded) work is amenable to modes of inspection and control that the habitus itself and its nonobjectified products necessarily escape. Writing makes it possible to “return to what one has said,” and this in turn makes possible the “confrontation of successive moments of discourse” that is the basis for all “logical control.” “Logic is always conquered against chronology. . . . Writing synchronizes . . . [and thus] makes it possible to seize in a single glance, that is, simultaneously, the successive moments of practices which were protected against logic by the flow of time” (1987a: 100). Control is further enhanced through publication. Codified, public writing is a particularly effective vehicle of social and logical control. To codify is to institute “explicit normativity,” to “transform a practical scheme into a linguistic code,” to makes things “simple, clear, communicable” (pp. 98, 100, 101).

Writing thus permits the social and logical control of sociological work. Yet this social and logical control itself has a dispositional, as well as a technical and institutional, base. Writing – in particular, the condensed and codified writing that comprises theories, or what Merton calls “analytical paradigms” – makes logical control possible by permitting the “simultaneous inspection of all terms entering into the analysis” (Merton 1967:70). But the effective exercise of this control will depend on patterns of institutionalized criticism within the scientific field and on dispositions – in particular, what Bourdieu calls the “critical or reflective disposition” (1987a: 27). The social and logical control of the
sociological habitus, in other words, must be built into that habitus itself. If
reflexivity distinguishes science from other practices, this is in part
because it distinguishes the scientific habitus from other habituses.
Reflexivity can and should be incorporated into the habitus, in the form
of a disposition to monitor its own productions and to grasp its own
principles of production. The reflective regulation of the unconscious
workings of the habitus, in short, can be inculcated as part of the habitus.
Criticism – and the growth of knowledge – has a dispositional, as well as
an institutional, anchorage.

READING BOURDIEU: MODES OF APPROPRIATION OF
SOCIOLOGICAL THEORY

What implications does this have for the way in which one reads, or
ought to read, the sociological work of Bourdieu? Persons with access to
Bourdieu’s atelier or his seminar room are structurally disposed to come
to terms with that work in a practical manner. They are likely, that is, to
appropriate his work by appropriating to some extent and in some
manner the dispositions that produced it, by undergoing a partial
professional resocialization, by acquiring a partly restructured sociologi-
cal habitus. This practical mode of appropriation corresponds to
Bourdieu’s pedagogy and propaganda, to his efforts to inculcate and
propagate a particular way of sociological thinking, a particular
sociological habitus.

But those of us without access to the atelier or the seminar room,
confronted with certain published texts, with certain objectified products
of his sociological habitus, but not with the mode of work that produced
them, are structurally disposed to come to terms with the work in a more
theoretical manner (in the ordinary, logocentric sense of that term). This
holds for my own earlier review of Bourdieu’s work (Brubaker 1985).
That paper set forth the logical structure and conceptual armamentarium
of the systematic meta-theory that, I argued, informed all Bourdieu’s
work; it showed how these meta-theoretical notions were employed in
empirical analyses; and it pointed up some ambiguities in their
application. My account was not mistaken in its content, but it was
mistaken, I now believe, in its perspective. Its reading of Bourdieu’s
work, I would now say, was too literal, too logical, too theoretical, too

sociologically naive – too respectful, I would almost say, of the texts,
edowing them with a dignity and a definitiveness that they were not
intended to possess.

Bourdieu’s work, it now seems to me, is particularly ill suited to a
conceptualist, theoretical, logocentric reading, one that treats it as
the bearer of a set of logically interconnected propositions framed
in terms of precise, unambiguous concepts. In the first place, the
core concepts are not – and are not supposed to be – precise and unam-
biguous. When I first encountered Bourdieu’s work, I collected a
dozens or so definitions – or what I took to be definitions – of “habitus”
in an effort to pin down its precise meaning. Only later did I realize
that the attempt was not only vain but misdirected, that Bourdieu was
not in fact defining but rather was characterizing the concept of habitus
in a variety of ways in order to communicate a certain theoretical stance
or posture, to designate – and inculcate – a certain sociological
disposition, a certain way of looking at the world. The same could be
said of the other fundamental concepts: interest, capital, strategy, field,
and so forth.

In the second place, Bourdieu’s texts are not the products of a pure
scientific reason; they are products – and instruments – of particular
intellectual strategies and struggles. Hence they must be read in relation
to the intellectual fields in and for which they were produced and the
intellectual strategies that define Bourdieu’s position and trajectory in
those fields. The emphaes vary considerably from text to text,
depending on the particular field or fields in which the text is situated
and the structure of those fields at the time the text was written. Reading
Bourdieu, then, one must correct for field-specific emphases, biases, even
polemics. Bourdieu is quite forthright about this last. Because sociology
must routinely contend with false but powerfully entrenched beliefs, it
may be necessary to exaggerate or ironize or polemicize in order to
“arouse the reader from his doxic slumber” (1987a: 68); it may be
necessary to “employ symbolic violence against symbolic violence” in
order to “break the circle of belief” (Acts 1 [1975]: 3).

A purely theoretical reading of Bourdieu, finally, mistakes the point
and purpose of his texts. Their point is not simply to interpret the world;
it is to change the world, by changing the way in which we – in the first
instance, other social scientists – see it. Since the world is in part a “world
of will and representation,” since “politics is essentially an affair of
words” (1987a: 69), since class struggles increasingly take the form of
classification struggles (1984), since the social world is “increasingly
inhabited by reified sociology” (1987a: 69), to alter the principles of sociological vision of the social world is to alter that world itself. Bourdieu’s texts are not simply an objectified trace of his way of thinking and seeing; they are among the instruments deployed as part of a practical strategy that aims at altering our way of thinking and seeing. Products of his intellectual habitus, they are intended to have an effect on ours. Hence Bourdieu’s elaborate attempts to control, through a variety of editorial, syntactical, and rhetorical devices, the manner in which we read. A purely theoretical reading fails to capture this practical, strategic dimension of Bourdieu’s writing. It fails to recognize that Bourdieu deploys concepts and propositions not simply in order to state things about the world, but in order to do things to our vision of it; that his texts have—and are intended to have—not only locutionary meaning and illocutionary force but perlocutionary consequences (cf. Austin 1975); that their fundamental aim is to transform our mode of sociological vision. Sociology, Bourdieu notes, is only apparently exoteric: it is in fact an “esoteric science – the initiation is very slow and requires a true conversion of one’s whole vision of the world” (1987a: 68). All sociologists, then, are converts, proselytes; and the point of Bourdieu’s work is to convert, to proselytize. It is not simply in the classroom or on the lecture circuit but also in and through his published texts that Bourdieu pursues his sociological pedagogy, propaganda, and proselytism, all of which are part of the same practical project of inculcating a set of thinking tools, a manner of grasping the world sociologically.

But there is a more fundamental point, one that is independent of the respects in which Bourdieu’s work is ill suited to a theoretical reading. If sociological work is indeed governed by practical dispositions rather than by theoretical logic, then there is no point in a purely theoretical reading of Bourdieu or anyone else. The only sociologically valuable reading of sociological work is a practical reading, one that enables us to appropriate – to make our own and make our own use of – the sociological habitus that produced it. Grasping the logic of a theory cannot help us do sociology or grasp the world sociologically. The only sociologically valuable consumption is productive consumption; and consumption will be productive only if we grasp and appropriate the dispositions that have produced what we are consuming.

Bourdieu himself is explicit on this point. The practice of productive consumption, he notes, is what makes the enterprise of social theory a cumulative one. Referring to the way in which his use of certain key concepts grew out of his critical reading in the sociological tradition, he notes that

the elaboration and the transmission of effective and fertile methods of thinking have nothing to do with the flow of “ideas” such as one normally imagines it. . . . To understand scientific works, which unlike theoretical texts, call forth practical application and not contemplation, . . . one has to make the way of thinking which is expressed [in such works] function practically à propos a different object, to reactivate it in a new act of production which is as inventive and as original as the initial act. . . . That is why . . . the active appropriation of a mode of scientific thought is as difficult and as rare . . . as its initial elaboration. (1985a: 15–16)

If sociology is to be a cumulative enterprise, despite its relatively uncodified state, it is necessary to “master practically, by incorporating as an habitus” the “thinking tools” available in the sociological tradition (1985a: 16, 12). Exactly the same thing can be said of Bourdieu’s own work: the reader should aim to master practically, to incorporate into his or her habitus, the thinking tools that Bourdieu makes available in the form of concepts, propositions, and theories.

It goes without saying—or it ought to go without saying, but probably doesn’t, in view of the accusations of “totalitarian” sociology or “intellectual terrorism” to which Bourdieu has been subjected—that the practical appropriation is not an uncritical one. The effort “to actively reproduce the best products of past thinkers by putting into use the instruments of production which they have left behind” necessarily involves both “continuity and rupture” (1985a: 14). Just as Bourdieu is fond of describing his relation with “canonical” theorists in terms of “thinking with a thinker against that thinker,”14 so too we can and should think with Bourdieu against Bourdieu. But we can do this only by appropriating his sociological dispositions, his thinking tools, making them ours and making our own use of them, testing in practice their practical productivity along with dispositions and thinking tools appropriated from other sources.

BOURDIEU’S SOCIOLOGICAL HABITUS

Granted that sociological work is regulated by practical dispositions, not by codified propositions, and that the best reading (critical reading included) of Bourdieu’s work must be a practical, sociologically
productive one, how can one best undertake such a practical, productive reading? Confronted with certain texts, certain objectified products of Bourdieu’s sociological habitus, how can one go about appropriating the dispositions that informed them? How can one proceed from texts to habitus, from the opus operatum to the modus operandi?15

This can best be done, I want to argue, by reading concepts as that is, by treating the concepts, propositions, and theories set forth in his works not, in the first instance, as bearers of logical properties and objects of logical operations, but as designators of particular intellectual habits or sets of habits. The more general and abstract the concept or proposition, the more important it is to read it in this dispositional manner. All of Bourdieu’s “meta-theory” – all general propositions about structures, habitus, practice, capital, field, and so on – must be read in this manner.

General concepts and propositions designate dispositions to see and interpret and construct the social world through certain schemes of appreciation and action. That these are schemes of intellectual action as well as schemes of appreciation is worth underscoring; the sociological habitus includes not only dispositions to see the social world in particular ways, but dispositions to act intellectually in particular ways, dispositions to perform certain intellectual operations on the world, to collect and utilize data in particular ways, for example, or to perform particular sorts of thought experiments. Also worth underscoring is that it is not only concepts and propositions, considered individually, that designate dispositions. Even theories in the usual sense – intricate and extended sets of logically interconnected propositions – designate dispositions to perform certain systematically linked sets of scientific operations, as well as institutionalized programs for carrying out such operations. A sociological “theory,” then, designates an internalized and institutionalized scheme of scientific perceptions and scientific operations. And, on the highest level of generality, Bourdieu’s universal theory of practice is best interpreted as a compact, objectified, public designator of his basic intellectual habitus.

Treating concepts and theories as designators of sociological dispositions permits us to move from text to habitus, from Bourdieu’s opus operatum to his modus operandi. Consider, for example, the central concepts of habitus and field. The concept of habitus designates the disposition to think in dispositional terms, – the disposition to think of social practices as engendered and regulated by incorporated, generalized, transposable dispositions rather than by rules or norms (as in much structuralist and functionalist social theory) or by conscious intentions, meanings, or calculations (as in much intentionalist social theory, including both phenomenological and rational-action theory).

To understand the sorts of sociological practices that this sociological disposition engenders and regulates, to appraise its value and limitations as a way of thinking, it may be useful to consider the social genesis of the concept of habitus. This is not a matter of conceptual genealogy (1985a: 12), not a matter of identifying conceptual progenitors and more or less distant conceptual cousins; it is a sociological, not a conceptual question. As such, it can be addressed with the help of the very thinking tools whose social genesis we wish to analyze. The concepts of habitus and field can be used to analyze their own sociogenesis.17

Like other professional dispositions, acquired relatively late in life, the disposition to think in dispositional terms can be thought of as the joint product of (1) certain prior dispositions and (2) the state and structure of certain intellectual fields. An intellectual or scientific habitus is always overlaid on, without superseding, earlier and more fundamental habituses. Intellectual and scientific dispositions are transformations, not simple successors, of anterior dispositions (cf. 1977c: 86–7). Bourdieu’s sociological habitus, including specifically the concept of habitus, the disposition to think in dispositional terms, is a transformation of a prior ethnological, philosophical, and general intellectual habitus. One key disposition, common to Bourdieu’s ethnological and general intellectual habitus, is the disposition to see the social world as structured by fundamental binary oppositions, or polarities – dominant and dominated, noble and base, male and female, right and left, inside and outside, and the like – and the corresponding disposition to see the intellectual world as structured by similar bipolar oppositions. Another is the disposition to transcend or overcome these basic structuring oppositions. This disposition finds political expression but also – and this is what concerns me here – intellectual expression. Thus the concept of habitus – or the disposition it designates – is a manner of thinking that enables Bourdieu to transcend a set of basic intellectual oppositions: between structure and action, determinism and freedom, reproduction and transformation, society and individual, and especially, encompassing all of the others, objectivism and subjectivism.

If Bourdieu could plausibly construe the French intellectual field as structured, and social theory as hampered, by such oppositions, this was not only because his penchant for binary oppositions disposed him to such a reading; it was also because the intellectual field was in fact well suited to such a reading. It is not only to Bourdieu’s general intellectual dispositions that one must look to explain the development of his sociological habitus; it is also to the synchronization of his formation as a
sociologist with certain states and transformations of the French intellectual field.

Born in 1930, Bourdieu came of intellectual age when phenomenology and existentialism, dominant in the immediate postwar years, were being challenged by structuralism, Sartre by Lévi-Strauss, the unconditional and unconditioned freedom of the subject by the unconscious determination of the structure. It is scarcely surprising that Bourdieu, generalizing from this confrontation in the French intellectual field and its analogs elsewhere, should interpret them as instances of a fundamental, pervasive opposition between subjectivism and objectivism.

Although Bourdieu adopted the critical posture of the "structuralist generation" vis-à-vis existentialism, phenomenology, "humanism," and "political moralism" (1987a: 14), and although his early ethnographic studies were those of a "happy structuralist" (1980c: 22), he became disenchanted with the faddish success of structuralism and increasingly critical of its "realism of the structure" and its correlative exclusion of active, inventive agents from social explanation. In this context, the notion of habitus could designate a posture of critical distance vis-à-vis then triumphant structuralist thought and vis-à-vis the subjectivist notion that structuralism had successfully challenged (1985a: 13; 1987: passim; 1980c: preface).

Like the concept of habitus, the concept and theory of fields designate a set of dispositions that regulate the sociological analysis of "modern," highly differentiated societies. These include (1) the disposition to seek out as units of analysis neither total "societies" nor single institutions or practices but "relatively autonomous social microcosms" governed by "specific logics" (Wacquant 1989: 39, cf. Bourdieu 1987a: 91); (2) the disposition to think "topologically," that is, to construct particular social "spaces" (by defining their most important "dimensions") and to situate the objects of study within those constructed spaces (1980b: 113–20); (3) the disposition to think systematically, characterizing positions in such constructed spaces not intrinsically, but in relation to the space of possible positions and the distribution of actual occupied positions (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 224–35; Bourdieu 1988e: 153–8); (4) the disposition to think comparatively, attending to structural properties and relational patterns common to all fields but also to the specificities of particular fields; (5) the disposition to see all practices (particularly those claiming to be disinterested) as interested practices, oriented (not necessarily consciously) toward the accumulation, legitimation, perpetuation, and reproduction of particular forms of power or "capital"; and (6) the disposition to grasp the specific logic (the Eigengesetzlichkeit, in Weberian terms) of particular fields by specifying the field-specific stakes, the particular forms of interest, capital, or power, the pursuit of which constitutes the fundamental dynamic of all fields.

This sociological disposition set, like that designated by the concept of habitus, developed through the transformation and extension of anterior dispositions—above all, in this case, the quintessentially structuralist disposition to think in relational rather than substantialist terms. If Bourdieu developed the dispositions designated by the concept of habitus in reaction to structuralist objectivism, he developed the dispositions designated by the concept of field by applying structuralist "relationalism."

The dispositional restructuring, the reorganization of intellectual habitus, that was involved in the gradual working out of field theory occurred in the context of a particular intellectual field—the field defined by the study of culture. Here again, Bourdieu's polarized vision of the intellectual world, his disposition to see it as fractured by fundamental binary oppositions, helped engender conceptual innovation. The study of culture, on Bourdieu's reading, was hampered by the opposition between "internal interpretation" and "external explication," between a "formalism born of the theorizing of an art which achieved a high degree of autonomy and a reductionism intent on directly relating artistic forms to social forms" (1985a: 16). Working out his own position through a sort of intellectual triangulation, defining his own perspective in critical opposition to two mutually exclusive one-sided alternatives, Bourdieu sought to grasp the social and "economic" dimension of cultural practices in a nonreductionist manner, to grasp the autonomous values, the Eigengesetzlichkeit of particular fields without sliding into idealism or internalist formalism.

QUESTIONS AND CRITICISMS

The reading of Bourdieu proposed here, which focusses on (and draws on) the sociological habitus that animates, generates, and regulates his work, suggests a number of questions and criticisms. Many of these cluster around five themes that I would like to explore in conclusion.

Homogeneity of habitus and collective sociological practice

For two decades, Bourdieu has sought to establish and institutionalize a collective sociological practice based on a shared habitus. This
institutionalization – crystallizing around the Centre de sociologie européenne, Bourdieu’s research seminar at the École des hautes études, and the journal *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales* – has generated a great deal of research governed by sociological dispositions that bear a strong family resemblance, as Wittgenstein says, to those of Bourdieu himself.23

The “collective practice of the same modus operandi,” Bourdieu notes, is “common in the more advanced sciences” (1985a: 12). And it is clear that it can enhance the productivity and cumulativity of sociological research. Yet is there not a correlative danger of epistemological closure? Bourdieu’s own account of the economies and efficiencies made possible by shared habitus suggests that there is:

> The homogeneity of habitus is what . . . causes practices and works to be immediately intelligible and foreseeable, and hence taken for granted. [This permits one ordinarily to dispense] with close analysis of the nuances of another’s practice and tacit or explicit inquiry (“What do you mean?”) into his intentions. Automatic and impersonal, . . . ordinary practices lend themselves to an understanding no less automatic and impersonal. (1977c: 80)

This account, to be sure, pertains to the habitus in general. Yet it applies, I think, to the sociological habitus as well. Bourdieu himself warns of the “epistemological isolation induced by institutional compartmentalization” and of the “restricted exchange” within a “mutual admiration society” that may result. “While restricted exchange is well suited to the community of implicit presuppositions [that is, to a shared habitus], generalized exchange requires the multiplication and diversification of types of communication and in this way favors making explicit epistemological postulates” (Bourdieu et al. 1968: 104).

A shared habitus, then, is epistemologically ambivalent. It fosters cumulative research and enhances intellectual productivity, permitting one to apply conceptual instruments without reinventing them. Yet its products find confirmation and validation only too readily within the circle of sharers. Habituses are never entirely shared, of course. And this inevitably imperfect overlap is all to the good. Without shared dispositions, science as a social institution would be unthinkable. Yet effective criticism depends, I think, on a certain heterogeneity of habitus.

How can one best manage the tension between the sociological productivity and cumulativity on the one hand and the epistemological slackness or closure on the other that the taken-for-grantedness and automaticity of mutual understanding may produce among persons endowed with similar sociological dispositions? How can one combine the efficiencies and economies of restricted exchange (that is, exchange among persons with similar habituses) and the critical benefits of generalized, cross-habitus exchange? And, as a teacher, how can one inculcate sociological dispositions that have proved fruitful in one’s own research along with the meta-disposition to appropriate such first-order dispositions in a critical manner?

**Reflective and unreflective moments**

The habitus governs practice in a subconscious, unreflective manner. The “practical mastery” of the schemes of perception and thought constitutive of the habitus “in no way implies symbolic mastery – i.e., conscious recognition and verbal expression of the procedures practically applied” (1977c: 88). Practical mastery may even be incompatible with conscious symbolic mastery: self-consciousness can inhibit or even destroy the practical efficacy of the habitus.

Yet conscious control and reflective self-monitoring are essential to the scientific enterprise. Such control, it was suggested above, must be both institutionalized and internalized. Institutionalized control depends on (limited) heterogeneity of habitus, on communication among persons whose sociological dispositions are sufficiently different to require conscious explication and self-conscious self-questioning (yet sufficiently similar to make communication possible). On what does internalized control depend?

The scientific habitus, it was suggested above, differs from other habituses in its reflexivity, in including a disposition to monitor its own productions and to grasp and make explicit its own principles of production. Yet it is not clear just what is involved practically in such a disposition. In what sense can we speak of an unconscious disposition towards conscious self-scrutiny, an unreflective disposition to reflect? How can scientists do what other agents cannot: consciously master their habitus without interfering with its workings – indeed, in a way that enhances its workings? We need a more fine-grained analysis of the scientific and in particular the sociological habitus – not simply an analysis of its objectifying posture, which Bourdieu has already undertaken, but an analysis of its capacity for self-monitoring and conscious self-mastery, for making the unconscious conscious. Having thoroughly “objectified the objectifiers,” Bourdieu might now usefully “subjectify the objectifiers.” He might analyze in greater detail the
practical workings of the sociological habitus, focusing on the relation between reflective and unreflective moments.

The stratified habitus

The habitus is the "past which survives in the present," the "immanent law... laid down in each agent by his earliest upbringing." Although modified by subsequent experience, it is "dominated by the earliest experiences. The habitus acquired in the family underlies the structuring of school experiences... and the habitus transformed by schooling, itself diversified, in turn underlies the structuring of all subsequent experiences" (1977c: 82, 81, 87).

The sociological habitus, then, is a tertiary or higher-order habitus, overlaid on, transforming without superseding, a primary familial and a secondary scholastic habitus. (In Bourdieu's case, the sociological habitus is overlaid on intervening philosophical and ethnological habitus as well.) One becomes a sociologist through a resocialization in which one's anterior intellectual dispositions are restructured but not erased.

Given the weight of familial and scholastic socialization and their persistence in the form of incorporated dispositions, what are the possibilities - and the limits - of the professional resocialization required for the making of sociologists? How are particular primary and secondary dispositions transformed and turned, for better or worse, to sociological use? What particular inflections do they lend to sociological vision? What sorts of school-inculcated dispositions survive in the sociological habitus? To what extent can one trace differences in sociological style back to differences in school-inculcated habitus? We need a stratified account of the sociological habitus, an account of the overlaying of professional on earlier habituses, an account, in particular, of the way in which anterior dispositions survive, even if in altered form, and continue to regulate professional practice.

Bourdieu's own sociological habitus owes many of its distinctive inflections to his prior scholastic, philosophical, and ethnological formation, and he has himself suggested in passing the importance of his temperament, his basic intellectual sympathies and antipathies, for his sociological formation (1987a: 37). Yet this mode of sociological self-analysis could be carried further. To what extent, for example, does Bourdieu's own sociological style reflect specific characteristics of French schooling, whose durable impress on French thought Bourdieu analyzed in his early article "Systems of education and systems of thought" (1971e)? To what extent does it reflect the intellectual training

Social Theory as Habitus

Bourdieu received at "that great lay seminary," that "national school for the upper intelligentsia," the École normale supérieure? Sociological self-analysis, Bourdieu's own perspective would imply, requires the critical analysis of one's own sociological habitus, in particular the carry-overs from earlier habituses.

False antinomies

So central to Bourdieu's work is his assault on the "false antinomies" that structure social theory and sociological practice - his habit of identifying "epistemological couples," criticizing them as "false alternatives" and "transcending" them with his own theory - that this operation has become a sort of intellectual trademark. A rapid and unsystematic foray yielded the following examples of oppositions to be overcome: structure and history, reproduction and transformation, statics and dynamics, nomothetic and ideographic, micro and macro, structure and action, individual and society, sociology and ethnology, research and theory, determinism and liberty, conscious and unconscious, symbolic and material, culture and economy, teleology and mechanical causality, and, above all, subjectivism and objectivism, characterized in the opening sentence of Le Sens pratique as "the most fundamental and costly of all the oppositions which artificially divide social science." Bourdieu's entire work aims to "transcend the antagonism which sets these two modes of knowledge against each other and at the same time to preserve the insights gained by each position" (1980c: 43).

It is doubtless a major merit - perhaps the major merit - of Bourdieu's sociological habitus that it equips him to capture in a remarkably rich and subtle manner the "intrinsically dual" nature of social life, at once objective and subjective, external and internal, material and symbolic, patterned yet improvised, constrained yet (conditionally) free, and to integrate these dimensions or moments in his sociological accounts. Yet I am less convinced by Bourdieu's polarized readings of the field of social theory, by the intellectual triangulation through which he invariably characterizes and locates his own "constructivist structuralism." Applicable to every domain of sociological study and always involving the identification and criticism of equally one-sided objectivist and subjectivist approaches to a problem, this intellectual triangulation calls to mind the intellectual technique described by Lévi-Strauss in Tristes tropiques (in a passage quoted approvingly by Bourdieu himself as an "admiring ethnological description of the intellectual and linguistic patterns [that is, the intellectual habitus] transmitted - implicitly rather than explicitly - by French education").
I began to learn how any problem, whether grave or trivial, can be resolved. The method never varies. First you establish the traditional “two views” of the question. You then put forward a commonsense justification of the one, only to refute it by the other. Finally you send them both packing by the use of a third interpretation, in which both the others are shown to be equally unsatisfactory. Certain verbal manoeuvres enable you . . . to line up the traditional “antitheses” as complementary aspects of a single reality: form and substance, content and container, appearance and reality, essence and existence, continuity and discontinuity. (Quoted in 1971: 189)

To which might be added: subjective and objective. Does some such school-inculcated habit of thought survive, in sublimated form, among the dispositions that comprise Bourdieus sociological habitus? And might it not engender, on occasion, rather strained and artificial readings of the sociological field, readings too exclusively governed by the idea of a fundamental opposition between subjectivism and objectivism? Might not such polarized readings exemplify the very sort of false antinomy that Bourdieus aims to transcend? Doubtless there are instances of hyper-subjectivist or hyper-objectivist social thought. But isn’t a reading of social theory that gravitates too closely around the subjectivism—objectivism pole bound to be a procrustean one? To think of social thought as fundamentally structured by the subjectivism—objectivism tension may be sociologically productive: it may help engender useful sociological dispositions, thinking tools well suited to capturing objective and subjective moments in social life. But might not this useful and productive principle of sociological thinking be less useful as a principle of sociological reading?24

Systematicity and messiness

The schemes of perception, apprehension, and thought that Bourdieus internalized in the course of his philosophical and ethnological formation predispose him towards highly integrated, systematic sociological accounts, structured around correspondences, symmetries, homologies, fundamental oppositions, and “elementary forms.” I do not mean to suggest that Bourdieus schemes of sociological vision make no place for tension, conflict, dissonance, or transformation. Of course they do. But they dispose him to see tension and conflict in systematic terms, as structured by a small number of fundamental oppositions.

Bourdieus intellectual habitus may incline him to read the social world, or at least some relatively messy social worlds, in too systematic a manner. Wittgenstein remarks somewhere that “mere description is so difficult because one believes that one needs to fill out the facts in order to understand them. It is as if one saw a screen with scattered colour-patches and said: the way they are here, they are unintelligible; they only make sense when one completes them into a shape. – Whereas I want to say: Here is the whole. (If you complete it, you falsify it.)” Now I am not advocating a hyper-empiricist descriptive sociology, dependent on the uncritical use of the “prenotions” of everyday life (Bourdieu et al. 1968: 27–9). Yet the bias towards systematicity that is, I think, built into Bourdieus intellectual habitus does raise a cluster of related questions.

Do social worlds differ in their “messiness,” and consequently in their suitability for systematic readings? Might certain schemes of thought and apprehension, well suited to bringing out the immanent systematicity of certain sorts of social worlds, be less well suited to others? Concretely: how well suited is Bourdieus sociological habitus to the study of contemporary American society? Is it better suited, in some respects, to the study of French society? Or is it equally applicable to both? Bourdieu presents his social theory as a “universal anthropology” (1989b: 4). Yet is it in fact entirely domain-indifferent?

To raise these questions is not to invoke some postmodern fantasy of fluid and unstructured social space. Of course there are systematic oppositions among practices and dispositions in contemporary America as elsewhere. Yet Bourdieu himself acknowledges a specific and distinctive fluidity about American society, an “indeterminacy . . . in the relation between practices and positions” that accounts for the peculiar “intensity of symbolic strategies” of the sort anatomized by Goffman (Bourdieu 1987a: 159). I would like to hear more from Bourdieu on this and other cross-national differences and their implications for his sociological habitus. Bourdieus style of sociological work is intrinsically comparative; but so far he has devoted much more attention to cross-field than to cross-national comparisons. It is to be hoped that the latter will receive more attention in the years to come.

NOTES

1 References are given in this chapter only for direct quotations, not for concepts borrowed from Bourdieu, since the whole chapter, which analyzes Bourdieus work in terms drawn from that work, is an exercise in borrowing or appropriation. A series of conversations with Loïc Wacquant enabled me to try out, clarify, and extend the perspective adopted here.
This is not to say that there is no point in codification (see below). But codified bodies of propositions are not, in the first instance, what governs or informs research.

This point of view, long implicit in Bourdieu’s work, has only recently received the beginnings of an explicit elaboration (Bourdieu 1985a; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, part 3). To the best of my knowledge, the perspective has yet to be developed in detail, despite the rich indications in these works.

Bourdieu’s earlier discussions of theory and theorizing (especially Bourdieu et al. 1968 and Bourdieu 1968b) are much more theoreticist. The article on structuralism, for instance, sets forth the “theory of sociological knowledge,” comprising “the system of principles and rules governing the production of all [scientifically grounded] sociological propositions.” Sociological work, it argues, “is scientific only to the extent that it makes use of the epistemological and logical principles of the theory of social knowledge, that is, of sociological meta-science,” which, in view of the “unity of meta-science,” are simply the “principles upon which all science, including the science of man, is founded” (1968b: 681–2).

The philosophy of science outlined in this article is one to which Bourdieu probably still subscribes. And the manner of sociological thinking it recommends—emphasizing the need to think relationally—is one that Bourdieu continues to advocate. Yet Bourdieu’s manner of thinking and talking about sociology has changed considerably: it has become less theoreticist, more practical, more sociological. He talks less of “epistemological and logical principles,” and more of sociological dispositions. Bourdieu’s account of sociological practice has become more consistent, more sociological over the years; sociological practice is increasingly treated as one practice among others, governed largely by the sociological habitus. If, in Le Métier de sociologue, principles are fundamental, while the sociological habitus is treated as “the internalization of the principles of the theory of sociological knowledge” (Bourdieu et al. 1968: 16), today it is the sociological habitus that is fundamental, while theoretical principles are treated as one of its highly specialized and objectified products.

He characterized the book in a recent interview as a “didactic, almost scholastic book” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1989: 5).

Bourdieu has underscored this point in a recent interview that merits quotation at length, since, to the best of my knowledge, he has not made the point so explicitly and emphatically elsewhere:

The theory of the habitus imposes itself with particular evidence in cases of societies where the work of codification of practices has not gone very far. . . . But it also applies to highly differentiated societies. All of the relatively autonomous social worlds that I call fields—artistic field, scientific field, philosophical field, etc.—require of those who are engaged in them. . . . a practical mastery of the laws of functioning of this social world, a sense of the game, that is to say a habitus acquired by prior socialization or by the socialization that is exercised in the field itself. The most highly specialized fields, those most profoundly permeated by the requirements of scientific and technical reason, like the economic field or even the scientific field, presuppose and call forth quasi-bodily dispositions. . . . a practical mastery of the tacit laws governing the field, a mastery of the categories of perception and appreciation that permit one to apprehend important problems, and so on. Various operations of the daily routine of science have as their principle the scientific habitus, about which one could say what Marx said about customary law: that it is obeyed by a sort of “instinct almost as blind and unconscious as that which produces certain movements of our bodies.” (1989b: 4–6)

In “Program for a sociology of sport” (1988e) Bourdieu notes the scientific promise of the sociology of sport: “The problems raised by the teaching of bodily practices seem to me to comprise a number of theoretical questions of utmost importance, insofar as the social sciences endeavor to construct theories of actions that are for the most part generated at a subconscious level, and are learned by means of a silent, practical communication, from body to body as one might say” (p. 160).

The remarks just quoted are drawn not from an analysis of science but from a general discussion of codification. Their bearing on social and logical control in science reinforces the general point, central to Bourdieu’s work and to this essay, that the sociological analysis of sociological practice, including theoretical practice, does not require special categories. Which is not to say that theoretical practice, or scientific practice in general, is not a distinctive sort of practice. It is, but its very distinctiveness can be captured in terms of categories applicable to all practice.

In the terms of Bachelard’s “exponential” psychology, an extract from which Bourdieu includes in Le Métier de sociologue (Bourdieu et al. 1968: 117–20), we could distinguish habitus₁ from habitus₂, such that habitus₃ is a set of dispositions to regulate the products of habitus₁.

For the best statement of this pedagogy, see Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 221–4, the written version of Bourdieu’s introductory remarks to his seminar at the École des hautes études en sciences sociales in October 1987 (my translation is from the original):

One can acquire the fundamental principles of a practice—and scientific practice is no exception—only by practicing it at the side of a sort of guide or trainer, who assures and reassures, who sets an example and makes corrections by specifying, in a particular situation, precepts directly applicable to a particular case. . . . The teaching of a métier. . . . requires a pedagogy quite different from that required for the teaching of a body of knowledge. As one can easily see in societies without writing or schools (but this remains true in societies with schools and
even in these schools), numerous modes of thought and action – and often the most vital – are transmitted from practice to practice, through practical modes of transmission, based on direct and lasting contact between the one who learns and the one who teaches (“do as I do”). . . . A very large part of the métier of the scientist is acquired through thoroughly practical modes of acquisition . . . . The sociologist who seeks to transmit a scientific habitus is more like a highly skilled sports trainer than a professor . . . . He talks little in terms of principles and general precepts . . . . He proceeds via practical indications, very similar in this respect to the trainer who mimes a movement (“in your place, I would do this”) or by “corrections” made to practices as they are being undertaken, and conceived in a practical spirit (“I wouldn’t ask that question, at least not in that form”).

10 “Propaganda” in the technical, nonpejorative sense of the word. The effort to propagate and institutionalize a particular way of sociological thinking, to establish “the collective practice of the same modus operandi” (1985a: 12), is central to Bourdieu’s scientific project. (See pp. 223 ff. below.)

11 For both “scientific and political reasons,” Bourdieu goes so far as to explicitly repudiate the ideals of clarity and common sense (bon sens) (1987a: 67).

12 As Bourdieu put it in a recent interview with Loïc Wacquant, “I do not like definitions much” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1989: 5).

13 Hence the rhetorical exploitation of oxymoron as in “symbolic violence,” “cultural capital,” etc.

14 I have often recalled, particularly with respect to my relation with Max Weber, that one can think with a thinker against that thinker. For example, I constructed the notion of field simultaneously against Weber and with Weber, by reflecting on his analysis of the relations between priest, prophet, and magician. . . . One can think with Marx against Marx or with Durkheim against Durkheim and also, of course, with Marx and Durkheim against Weber” (1987a: 63–4).

15 The point, of course, is not to talk about dispositions but to appropriate them, to master them practically. Yet to focus our talk on dispositions, instead of on theory, increases the chance of mastering them practically, especially since we can talk about Bourdieu’s sociological habitus by appropriating parts of that habitus: we can use his concepts of habitus and field to talk about the dispositions that make up his sociological habitus.

16 The function of concepts, Bourdieu himself remarks, is “to designate, in stenographic manner, within the research procedure, a theoretical stance, a principle of methodological choices, negative as well as positive” (1985a: 12).

17 Thus Bourdieu notes that his initial formulations of the concept of habitus “were the product not of a theoretical calculation. . . . but of a practical strategy of a scientific habitus, a kind of ‘feel’ for the game which does not need to calculate in order to find its direction and place” (1985a: 14; cf. 1987a: 29–30).

18 See the long preface to Le Sens pratique (1980c) and “Fieldwork in philosophy,” in Choses dites (1987a).

19 Bourdieu tends to locate himself in intellectual space through a characteristic sort of intellectual triangulation, almost always representing his position as equidistant from two other mutually exclusive intellectual positions.

20 Thus Bourdieu suggests that all fields (e.g. the academic field, the artistic field, the economic field, even the encompassing, higher-order “field of power”) have the same “chiastic” structure, based on the cross-cutting of economic and cultural principles of domination (1989c: 383). Yet each field also has its distinctive logic, its specific stakes.

21 The “essential novelty” of structuralism was to introduce into the social sciences the structural method, or, more simply, the relational way of thinking that, breaking with the substantivist way of thinking, leads one to characterize every element by the relations that unite it to the other elements in a system, and from which each element gets its meaning and its function” (1980c: 11). For an extended account, see “Structuralism and the theory of sociological knowledge” (1968b).

22 The collective dimension of Bourdieu’s own work has been insufficiently remarked. It is a striking fact that, of Bourdieu’s first ten books, all but the very first, a slim textbook on Algeria, were written in collaboration with one or more co-authors.

23 Loic Wacquant has compiled a useful list of works drawing on Bourdieu’s theory and published in Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales. See Appendix 2 to Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992.

24 To contrast, e.g., the “idealized and naïvely heroic vision” of Merton with the “reductionist and naïvely cynical vision” of the exponents of the Strong Program in the sociology of science, as Bourdieu has done in a recent article, is to give a rather reductionist reading of the field of the sociology of science. It may be an intellectually productive reading; it may encourage Bourdieu to develop intellectual tools for capturing the intrinsic duality of science as a social activity. Yet it is simply not the case that Merton “omits to raise the question of the relation between, on the one hand, the ideal values proclaimed by the ‘scientific community’ . . . . and the norms which it professes . . . . and, on the other hand, the social structure of the scientific universe, the mechanisms which tend to assure ‘control’ and communication, evaluation and reward, recruitment and training” (1990a: 298). The point of Merton’s work in the sociology of science, it seems to me, is precisely to pose this question: Bourdieu has in fact given a rather good resumé of the central tendency of Merton’s sociology of science.

REFERENCES


Bourdieu in America: Notes on the Transatlantic Importation of Social Theory

Loïc J. D. Wacquant

If it is true that “the meaning of a work (artistic, literary, philosophical, etc.) changes automatically with each change in the field within which it is situated for the spectator or reader” (Bourdieu 1983a: 313), then proper understanding of any given author calls for a double work of elucidation: of his or her ideas and of the intellectual universes in which these come to circulate. It requires that we decode the author’s mental space – that is, the categories and postulates that undergird his or her way of thinking and substantive theories – and also that we attain some knowledge of the scholarly space in which his or her writings become inserted.

This twofold hermeneutic is particularly necessary in the case of the international export of social theory. The transatlantic journey of the work of Pierre Bourdieu is a good case in point. I have attempted elsewhere to explicate the internal economy and intellectual roots of Bourdieu’s work (Wacquant 1992), arguing that it is best understood as a generative anthropology of power with special emphasis on its symbolic dimension – that is, on the mechanisms that mask and help perpetuate domination by misrepresenting it, to those who wield it no less than to those who bear it. This enterprise is advanced by means of a generalized method (a limited set of concepts, problems, and analytical procedures for solving them and for comparing and linking solutions) that Bourdieu applies to a variety of objects across an unusually wide range of empirical...

I would like to thank David Stark, William Rogers Brubaker, Craig Calhoun, Randall Collins, Paul DiMaggio, David Laitin, and Don Levine for their critical comments and suggestions on an earlier version of this chapter, as well as the participants in the conference whose collective and individual reactions provided an excellent test in vivo for some of the propositions it puts forth and for which I alone bear responsibility.