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Contexts and approaches

As well as being, in the words of Richard Shusterman, 'France's leading living social theorist' (Shusterman 1999: 1), Pierre Bourdieu is, along with Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida, one of the most influential of those French thinkers 'whose work succeeded structuralism' (Calhoun et al. 1993: 7). There are few aspects of contemporary cultural theory (which crosses fields such as cultural studies, literary studies, anthropology, sociology, philosophy, gender studies, psychoanalysis and film and media studies) to which Bourdieu has not made a significant contribution. His concepts of habitus, field and capital, for instance, constitute what is arguably the most significant and successful attempt to make sense of the relationship between objective social structures (institutions, discourses, fields, ideologies) and everyday practices (what people do, and why they do it). Most of the 'big' theoretical issues being debated and explored in the world of contemporary theory—gender and subjectivity, the 'production' of the body, communicative ethics, the public sphere and citizenship, the politics of cultural literacy, the relationship between capitalism, culture and cultural consumption, 'ways of seeing', the transformation of society through the forces of globalisation—are to some extent explicable in terms of, and have benefited from, Bourdieu's 'technologies' of habitus, field and capital.

And yet, 30 years after his books started becoming widely available in English translation, Bourdieu's status is far more

peripheral than that of Foucault, with whom he shares so many theoretical interests and inclinations; and his work 'continues to befuddle many of his Anglo-American readers' (Wacquant in Calhoun et al. 1993: 237). Loïc Wacquant has put forward a number of explanations for this phenomenon, ranging from the inability of critics to categorise satisfactorily Bourdieu's body of work, to the 'vociferous indignation' (1993: 237) that has sometimes greeted his writing style.

The second explanation does not really hold water: as Wacquant himself writes, other 'difficult' writers such as Foucault and Habermas 'do not elicit the same level of protestation as the author of *Distinction*' (1993: 247). The first explanation, however, requires more attention. Calhoun et al. have noted that 'In a series of research projects and publications starting in the 1950s, Bourdieu has addressed an astonishing range of empirical topics and theoretical themes' in areas such as 'education, labor, kinship, economic change, language, philosophy, literature, photography, museums, universities, law, religion, and science' (1993: 1). One of the consequences of this eclecticism is that unlike, say, Foucault, there is no clear sense of theoretical 'progression', no easily identifiable 'stages' or paths, to Bourdieu's career.

Bourdieu's eclecticism

The narrative of Bourdieu's theoretical and disciplinary interests and affiliations is certainly peripatetic. He started out as a philosopher influenced by the work of Martin Heidegger and the phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty, but his interest in Algeria saw him forego philosophy for anthropology, which was then very much under the influence of structuralists such as Claude Lévi-Strauss. However, his dissatisfaction with the inability of structuralist anthropology to take into account or make sense of the practical (and strategic) dimensions of everyday life led to two of his most famous critiques of anthropology, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (1977a) and *The Logic of Practice* (1990b).

Bourdieu also turned his attention to two other areas of study: education and culture. His works on education focused on the role that secondary and tertiary education play in reproducing social and cultural classification and stratification; the 'education' books that have attracted most attention in the English-speaking world include *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture* (1977b) and *Homo Academicus* (1988). Perhaps the best known of his books in English, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (1984), is an empirically based critique of Kantian aesthetics. More recently, Bourdieu has extended his interest in the field of cultural production by writing the strongly polemical *On Television* (1998c); and this more openly 'interventionist' approach has also resulted in books on the politicising of arts funding (*Free Exchange* (1995), with the German artist Hans Haacke), gender relations, in *Masculine Domination* (2001), the everyday pressures and predicaments of lower class groups in contemporary France in the multi-authored *The Weight of the World* (1999a) and globalisation and the withdrawal of the state from social life, in *Acts of Resistance: against the New Myths of our Time* (1998b). Finally, he has recently written three books—*Practical Reason: on the Theory of Action* (1998d), *Pascalian Meditations* (2000) and *Masculine Domination* (2001)—which clarify and elaborate upon, in a quite personal way, his work, methodologies, theories and relations to different fields such as philosophy, history and sociology.

Bourdieu can be categorised as a social scientist, but his work, in Loïc Wacquant's words:

> throws a manifold challenge at the current divisions and accepted modes of thinking of social science by virtue of its utter disregard for disciplinary boundaries, the unusually broad spectrum of domains of specialized inquiry it traverses . . . and its ability to blend a variety of sociological styles, from painstaking ethnographic accounts to statistical models, to abstract metatheoretical and philosophical arguments. (1992d: 3)

Bourdieu not only consistently makes use of both empirical and theoretical methodologies; he considers them inseparable. This

has tended to set his work apart from much of the Anglo-American social sciences, which tend to be positivist and largely eschew theory; and the more philosophically-oriented fields (philosophy, literature, cultural studies), which are highly suspicious, if not downright disdainful, of empirical methodologies.

Throughout his academic career Bourdieu has usually found himself writing as a sociologist 'in someone else's field'; or at least writing on topics (education, art, philosophy, literature, language) that are claimed as the domain of specific fields, and are largely understood in terms of the discourses, debates, traditions, theories, methodologies and imperatives of those fields.

This eclecticism provides Bourdieu's work with two distinctive virtues. The first is that as a 'visiting' non-specialist, he is relatively free to move across fields such as art history or linguistics without being directed by the 'ways of seeing' of that field. And, as a corollary, he is also free both to ignore issues or problems which practitioners might consider essential to their thinking or enquiries, and to ask questions, or pursue lines of enquiry, which might be unthinkable to those closely involved with the field and its ways of thinking.

The second advantage Bourdieu takes from his eclecticism is that he is able to use insights derived from different theorists to transform bodies of knowledge and give them a practical—that is to say, political—'edge', or dimension. The best example of this is probably his extension of the sociolinguist J.L. Austin's work on speech act theory. Austin does a great deal to describe and analyse the conventions that inform practices of speaking but, more or less typically of his field, he pays very little attention to the institutional contexts that produce, govern and direct those conventions. In *Language and Symbolic Power* (1991a), Bourdieu builds on Austin's work in order to investigate how speech act conventions are naturalised, and which groups benefit from them.

The politicising of theory

An example of the difference between the two approaches can be seen if we look at what is involved when a judge declares, say,

that a group of people are guilty of terrorism. For Austin, what is important are the details (certain court rituals and procedures, the sort of language used, the judge's title and robes, the arrangement of furniture in the courtroom) which determine whether the act is 'felicitous' (in other words, that it is a real judge in a real court, and the words 'I find you guilty of terrorism' have real consequences), or 'infelicitous' (that is, it is just someone acting out a part, and the consequences of the words cannot be enforced).

For Bourdieu, on the other hand, there are other, more important issues that need to be followed up, such as the fact that a representative of the government, the legal system and the upper classes is in a position to evaluate certain behaviour (say, opposition to the government, the legal system and the upper classes) as 'terrorism', and to treat the 'terrorists' accordingly. Terrorism is not an unequivocal or unchanging state, regardless of what 'legitimate authorities' say. There is a joke in the British comedy series *Yes Minister* where Sir Humphrey points out that one thing that many of the great world leaders have in common is that they were all imprisoned, at one time, by the British. Nelson Mandela is another example of this process: he was convicted (by legitimate institutions) of terrorism, but his activities are now understood as a struggle for freedom.

Marx, Wittgenstein, Nietzsche and Pascal

This development of Austin's speech act theory is quite typical of Bourdieu's work. Austin's formalist analysis is 'taken somewhere else' by Bourdieu—in short, it is politicised. In this section we will provide a brief, introductory description of the theories and approaches—pre-eminently taken from Friedrich Nietzsche, Karl Marx, Blaise Pascal and Ludwig Wittgenstein—which we argue have provided Bourdieu with this 'politicising disposition'.

We pointed out that Bourdieu is one of the most eclectic of contemporary cultural theorists, drawing on important scholars from a number of historical periods and geographical locations,