

REVIEW ESSAY/ESSAI BIBLIOGRAPHIQUE

The Dialogical Bourdieu

Gorski, Philip S. ed. *Bourdieu and Historical Analysis*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2013. 422 pp. \$27.00 paper (9780822352730)

Burawoy, Michael and Karl von Holdt, *Conversations with Bourdieu: The Johannesburg Moment*. Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2012. 224 pp. \$27.50 paper (978-86814-540-9)

Only a year after my last review essay of books about Pierre Bourdieu (Frank 2012), two new books treat his contributions with no less serious engagement but a new sense of serious play. These books contain neither personal remembrances nor attempts to replicate or refute Bourdieu's research findings. Defense and attack are replaced by more flexible projects of sorting which parts of Bourdieu's legacy are good for opening up what issues, which ideas can be modified and updated, and what other theories can usefully complement Bourdieu. These writers all read Bourdieu with extreme care, but none seeks to propose definitive interpretations. His work has become an archive from which to learn, borrow, and adapt, according to the writer's particular need. The consistent tone of appreciation is enhanced by this absence of taking sides for or against Bourdieu.

The publication of both books within a year is remarkable serendipity, because their interests are so close to each other. Philip Gorski writes in his editor's introduction that the academic privileging of Bourdieu's middle-period writings makes it reasonable to regard him primarily as "a theorist of social reproduction" (2). Attending instead to his early writings on Algeria and his late writings on French worker movements and globalization suggests that he "was first and last a theorist of social transformation" (2). *Bourdieu and Historical Analysis*, based on a conference at Yale's Center for Comparative Research, collects thirteen essays that

seem described too narrowly as historical analysis. “Bourdieu as a theorist of transformation” would, in my reading, be more accurate. The collection is of remarkably consistent quality, and the book is a paradigm example of when essays deserve to be published together as a book. Each chapter gains greater significance when all are read together.

Conversations with Bourdieu is an equally excellent contribution to understanding Bourdieu as a theorist of change, but its title is also potentially misleading — this is not Bourdieu himself in conversation. The core of the book is eight lectures that Michael Burawoy presented at the University of Witwatersrand in South Africa. Each lecture brings Bourdieu into conversation — Burawoy also calls it dialogue — with another theorist: “Bourdieu Meets Bourdieu”, followed by Marx, Antonio Gramsci, Franz Fanon, Paolo Freire, Simone de Beauvoir, C. Wright Mills, and the culminating conversation, “Burawoy Meets Bourdieu”. Karl von Holdt, Burawoy’s host, provides afterwords to each lecture, relating its themes to multi-sided political struggles in South Africa, thus showing a social scientist using theory to make sense of a world that defies totalizing judgments.

Each of Burawoy’s lectures is a gem of concision and clarity, demonstrating that unlike Bourdieu’s own prose, complex theoretical thinking can be expressed in readily accessible writing. The commentaries by von Holdt are less polished, but their value may be in reminding readers how irremediably messy life is. The commentaries increase the multiplicity of voices, intensifying the question of how a Northern hemisphere theorist can be relevant in the Southern hemisphere, an issue Burawoy elaborates in his brief Epilogue. This book deserves careful consideration as a text in an advanced theory seminar, because it so clearly presents *theory* as an on-going conversation, on one level between theorists (Burawoy, Bourdieu, and others starting with Marx), and on another level between theory and political events (von Holdt’s struggles to be a responsible social scientific witness to his country’s times, with their blend of heroism and trouble).

Burawoy writes that Bourdieu “refused all systematisation” (13); in that spirit, to attempt to summarize these books would betray their dialogical imperative. The flavour of the books seems best illustrated by discussing two issues that receive repeated attention. One is the concept of habitus as an instance of what concepts are in a Bourdieusian understanding of *theory*. The other is fields, especially how new fields emerge and the permeability or rigidity of the boundaries of a field.

Authors in both books agree that Bourdieu does not intend theoretical concepts to be predictive. Mustafa Emirbayer and Erik Schneiderhan observe in a footnote that “An aristocratic habitus, for example, could

conduce to a conservative or Burkean type of politics in one historical circumstance but to a radical or reactionary politics in another” (157, n.11). Burawoy is more critical. “Since we have no way of measuring ‘disposition’ or ‘habitus’ independent of behaviour,” he writes, “the argument is simply tautological – immigrants and women are submissive because of their habitus of submission as demonstrated by their submissiveness” (188; cf. 197 for a similar statement). Yet, von Holdt, reflecting on colonial and post-colonial forms of violence and domination, demonstrates the utility of habitus as a concept that can be adapted: “the habitus too should be regarded as complex and contradictory, where different dispositions may be at odds with one another and a particular disposition may even be dogged by a shadow counter-disposition” (49)¹ Such counter-dispositions seem evident in two paradoxes that Burawoy identifies in Bourdieu’s career: the impossibility and necessity of the intellectual to be publicly engaged, and the need both to attack and to defend the autonomy of certain fields, especially cultural (18).

Habitus may be a tautology, but that matters less than it being a useful tautology, which raises the question of what a concept is, within what Bourdieu intends as *theory*. David Swartz, in Gorski’s volume, describes concepts as “agendas of questions for research rather than as ready-made answers” (20). Gorski invokes Herbert Blumer’s idea of “sensitizing concepts” as a way to understand Bourdieu (328). Habitus is tautological if proposed as an explanation of behaviour, but it is productive as an opening to questioning behaviour. Rephrasing Burawoy’s example, how could an immigrant understand submission as the right, even inevitable way to behave? What forecloses other behavioural possibilities? Writing in generalized terms, Swartz understands habitus as leading researchers to study how actors “align” to positions already existing in a field (31); again, the concept is a question, not an explanation.

As often as Burawoy disagrees with Bourdieu, he respects Bourdieu as a force that keeps the theoretical conversation going. His conversations are not about producing winners (except in his strong preference for Beauvoir on matters of gender). Instead, Burawoy uses each to push the other. As he puts it so well: “to converse in order to better understand others and, through others, learn the limits and possibilities of one’s own assumptions and frameworks” (22). Such a theoretical dialogue does not aim at synthesis, because that would bring closure to a conversation that must remain open.

1. The complex issue of how unified habitus is, and the work required to produce the sense of a unified habitus, is given detailed consideration by George Steinmetz in *Bourdieu and Historical Analysis*.

Another aspect of that conversation is how Bourdieu's concept of *field* is discussed in most of the chapters in *Bourdieu and Historical Analysis*. Swartz begins the conversation by understanding a field as an "arena of struggle" (27). Again, what counts are the questions that the concept instigates: "Who are the entitled? Who self-exclude?" (32). Field is discussed differently in Gil Eyal's chapter on his own ethnographic research on Israeli intelligence services. Eyal puts Bourdieu in conversation with Bruno Latour, asking what a dispositional approach can explain compared to a network approach. Both Bourdieu and Latour seek to overcome dichotomies between internal and external, subjective and objective, but their respective analyses are most useful in understanding different aspects of the intelligence field. To cut to Eyal's well-earned summary, "I give fields to Bourdieu and the spaces between them to Latour ... each is strongest precisely where the other is weakest, and each privileges precisely what the other discounts" (164-65). Eyal makes a significant contribution calling attention to spaces "in the volume of the boundary" between fields (174). He notes the fluid movement of actors between academic, military, and intelligence fields, raising questions of what kind of habitus provides for that movement, and what conversions of capital enable it?

Charles Camic, studying fields of knowledge and artistic production, emphasizes how fields mediate external effects: "'the field *refracts*,' receiving and filtering the force of external factors differentially at disparate locations within the field" (187). This refraction then affects how actors take positions in the field, based on what capital they possess (190). Actors take positions in fields that are more or less autonomous (struggles over capital and its value are determined internally) or heteronomous (terms of valuation depend on external alliances and interventions).

Field autonomy and heteronomy are core themes of Gorski's richly argued analytical epilogue, the centrepiece of which may be his proposal of eight "general propositions" on the relation between field boundaries (autonomy and heteronomy), capital and exchange rates between forms of capital, and degrees of hierarchy and orthodoxy in a field. For example, number three states: "Changes in the relative heteronomy of a field will be accompanied by the increasing use of foreign capital as the dominant medium of exchange or currency regime within the field" (342). These propositions show how Bourdieu's ideas can be tested — as Burawoy also tests them in an historical case study — but such propositions are only one side of Bourdieu's more expansive theoretical view. There is also, always, the subjective side, and as much as Bourdieu emphasizes actors' subjectivity, I appreciate Gorski's judgment that he

“really does not give us too much guidance here” (334). Perhaps sociology cannot analyze everything that it recognizes as significant.

The only conclusion to this wealth of material is the obvious observation of the continuing fruitfulness of Bourdieu to instigate thinking. In the spirit of conversation, here are three last words on how best to read Bourdieu. The first is by Gorski: “For Bourdieu, there is no single, final, or even correct explanation of anything, only more complete, developed, adequate explanations” (356). Buroway points in the same direction: “His works are incomplete, full of fissures and paradoxes, a labyrinth that provides for endless discussion, elaboration and critique” (13). And finally Swartz: “He wishes to change the world by changing the way we see it” (25). These books are eloquent testimony to Bourdieu’s success in changing how the world can be seen. The question remains who Swartz’s “we” ought to be, and how the academic “we” can affect how the public “we” sees the world differently, using Bourdieu.

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REFERENCE

Frank, Arthur W. 2012. Bourdieu: The Master. *Canadian Journal of Sociology* 37(3): 319-330.

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