



How to do Fieldwork with Ample Philosophical Headroom. An Obituary for Pierre Bourdieu

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The French social analyst and intellectual Pierre Bourdieu died on January 24th, 71 years of age. His successful academic career forms a counterexample to his own theory about the difficulties of upward social movement and the stasis of the social hierarchy, which also simultaneously fueled and was fueled by his own attitude towards academia. Bourdieu never lived up to our prejudice about well-established academics as sedate, secure, and often more conservative than their younger peers. He was, as he writes in the introduction to the late philosophical work *Pascalian Meditations*¹, never quite at ease with the intellectual elite in France. He made it a point to counter the social norms and the *episteme* of the apex of academia. Thus his life was, in terms of both his theoretical work and his biography, his own *praxis*, characterized by the paradox of being inside and outside at the same time.

Bourdieu found a major part of his productive drive in his social indignation. Nevertheless, he never became a member of the communist party – contrary to many of his contemporaries – but remained a politically autonomous, though distinctly *gauche* or left wing, critic. Rather than taking up the analysis of social stratification through the Marxist understanding of infrastructure and superstructure he turned his critical gaze to the less intensively mapped relations of symbolic, rather than material, capital. In doing so he drew on the French heritage of Durkheim and Mauss, namely the interest in symbolic regimes and systems of representation, and the critical theory in the tradition of Gramsci and Althusser, the latter an explicit reference. His autonomy and urge to combine disciplines and perspectives rather than deepen the gorges of theory led him – in a way similar to how he avoided the dominant understanding of Marxism – to repel the kind of structuralism, which was in fashion in the sixties and seventies. Lévi-Strauss was, for his liking, far too mechanical and not sufficiently sensitive to the importance of particular, social space as opposed to language.

1 Pierre Bourdieu, 2000, *Pascalian Meditations*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

All in all, rather than joining the dominant trenches of French academia, Bourdieu turned his attention to the dispositional structures of the habitus, and the question of how the dialectics of society and individual can be analyzed through this concept. The concept of habitus offered a way to capture, with a quote from *The Logic of Practice*, “the active presence of the whole past of which it is the product.”² In describing the complex relations of individual, society, and history in practice, he combined hitherto segregated strands of social theory. The implications of his theoretical work were far-reaching, namely the breaking of the deadlock of subjectivism and objectivism in social theory.

The work of Bourdieu is characterized by an interest in relationalist thinking. Fueled by the knowledge that epistemic cultures are governed by dichotomic thinking, Bourdieu developed a social analytic based on the ambition to surpass the limitations of these inherent polarities by looking at them as contingent products of power-relations. Bourdieu believed that naturalized ways of thinking in a field, in his theory labeled *doxa*, cripple the ability to see and criticize unjust power structures. These naturalized mental categories become accessible for the analyst in fields as theoretical polarities such as objectivism versus subjectivism, materialism versus symbolism or metaphysics and determinism versus freedom. The point of relationalism is to avoid choosing either pole of a dominant dichotomy, and rather to analyze the way the dichotomy structures the field.

Bourdieu remained a fierce critic of the understanding of action and choice as rationally guided phenomena. Rather, inspired by phenomenology and the late Wittgenstein, Bourdieu kept the complexity of social action present through his career. He believed that the moment we begin to describe action rather than acting in a given event we distance ourselves from the event. We run the risk of what Bourdieu labels ‘theoreticism’ and hence the risk of reproducing flawed discourses on action. Here, the unconventional character of Bourdieu’s position becomes obvious in that he openly breaks with the powerful rationalist tradition within social theory.

The resistance to ‘scholasticism’ or non-critical reproduction of theoretical dogmas is reflected in the method of Bourdieuan analysis. But Bourdieu does not shun classical concepts. On the contrary, he juggles Greek concepts like any other ‘man of letters’, but with a rather different objective: he uses concepts like *doxa*, *hexis*, *praxis* and *skhole* as prisms or mirrors to access his empirical data in a new way. And in doing so, he develops and extends the significance of these concepts to the point where they become empirically instructive.

In a way, Bourdieu stood out as a late-modern representative of the autonomous yet politically engaged intellectual. He played an important role as critical intellectual, opposed to the development of socialism into a kind of disguised liberalism in both France and Britain. Bourdieu’s ways of achieving attention were often innovative and downright humorous, as in 1981, when he supported the comedian Coluche as

2 Pierre Bourdieu, 1990, *The Logic of Practice*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, p.56.

candidate for the French presidency. Outside the arena, which we traditionally label ‘the political’, he criticized academic and scientific authorities – either for their censorship and what he called “the imposition of form”³ or for their non-involvement in the important political and social issues of our time. He pointed out that the traditional distinction between politics and science cannot be upheld, and that academics and scientists should engage in political struggles. He was an outstanding example of that himself. The concept of globalization was central to this political concern of Bourdieu. He believed that the discourse of the global can be understood as the legitimization of dismantling the welfare state and the ideals of equality, and that intellectuals and academics should break with and criticize this discourse rather than reproducing it or – for which he often criticized his peers – simply meeting the demands of the dominant elite for persuasive academic rhetoric to justify the development of neo-liberalism.

It is customary in an obituary to list the most important and esteemed, canonical works from the author’s *oeuvre*. But since I am certain that Bourdieu himself would frown at the thought of such a canonization of himself as of others, I will restrict myself to the recommendation of only one, less well known, yet highly representative work. In the article ‘Identity and representation: Elements for a Critical Reflection on the Idea of Region’⁴ the reader will find a number of salient Bourdieuan features represented: the political indignation, the analytical skill and the incessant theoretical criticism.

In a word, the legacy of Bourdieu may be captured by the title of a recent documentary on his political engagement: *Sociology is a contact sport*.⁵ For him, it was obviously pointless to be a ‘desk-sociologist’. But as his work shows, the idea of entering the ring without proper critical theory and reflexivity should be considered equally futile.

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3 e.g. Pierre Bourdieu, 1991, *Language and Symbolic Power*. Oxford: Polity Press. p.137.

4 In: Pierre Bourdieu, 1991, *Language and Symbolic Power*. Oxford: Polity Press, p.220ff.

5 Pierre Carles, 2001, ‘Pierre Bourdieu: La Sociologie est un sport de combat’, Buena Vista Home Entertainment (video, French).