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Author(s): Stephen W. Foster

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Reading Pierre Bourdieu

Stephen W. Foster

Department of Anthropology
University of California, Berkeley

In a critical introduction to recent sociology in France, Lemert (1981) points out that Americans may be puzzled by French scholarship because they are unfamiliar with its social context. The themes and styles prevailing in French sociology are responsive to the configuration of the "field" (*champ*), a term that refers not just to a "field of knowledge." In French, *champ* also suggests a "force field" or space of action and a "battlefield" or place of struggle. Thus, the field of sociology in France is both a social and semantic space. As one of its major figures, Pierre Bourdieu has helped to define French sociology while also pushing at its limits. His project is at once ethnographic, political, critical, and epistemological and must therefore be read in several registers.

Pierre Bourdieu is Professor of Sociology at the Collège de France and Directeur d'Études at the École Pratique des Hautes Études. His work spans the anthropology of Algeria and French colonialism as well as the sociology of culture and education in France today.¹ Lemert notes that "the French will speak of their educational and professional formation as a *trajetoire*" (1981:7); the trajectory of Bourdieu's work, which is evident in the accompanying interview, has been to problematize and reflect upon the human sciences as a locus of objective knowledge and as a legitimation of relations of power.

Bourdieu is at the apex of prestige at the Collège de France and controls a special series published by Les Éditions de Minuit. Like a handful of his colleagues in Paris and elsewhere in France, he also directs his own research institute, the Centre de Sociologie Européenne, which publishes

its own journal.² Lemert notes that Bourdieu authored 13 books (many with joint authors) between 1965 and 1971 (1981:20). He comments: "one marvels that so much is as good as it is and, accordingly, one need not be surprised that so much is repeated."³ He also reminds us that anonymity and detachment are difficult to cultivate in Paris or at the Maison des Sciences de l'Homme. As Lemert claims, "academic Paris is a small town" (1981:22). In addition, France lacks multiple academic capitals: there is no New York, Cambridge, Berkeley, and Chicago. Given the limited scale of this social milieu, relations and conflicts are inevitably managed and negotiated through publications, and not always straightforwardly.

The enmeshment that prevails in this setting often results in a rapid assimilation and dissemination of stylistic propensities and modes of thought. Bourdieu's work is thus at one level a mannered and indirect manifestation of what is *à la mode*, a dense interlacing of references not found in the references cited or bibliography. Yet it exhibits considerable stylistic individuality. Bourdieu has been the pacesetter more often than an appropriator, a critic whose orientation to criticism and research has been linked closely to trends in post-Enlightenment philosophy and the philosophy of science. He has been mistaken for a Marxist. His work actually owes much to Durkheim. Bourdieu was also obliged to respond to structuralism, a once dominant discourse, although he did so in a way that allowed him also to depart significantly from it.

In Paris, everybody reads everybody else, particularly given the close association between intellectual pursuits and being "well read." As Bourdieu and Passeron suggest,

It will be understood that in a situation in which the intellectual is required to

have a quasi-sociological knowledge of the entire intellectual field every intellectual act bears a load of over-determinants which at every instant compels every intellectual by virtue of his position in the whole to commit his entire position with respect to the whole. [1967:204]

French scholars are evidently eloquent enough in describing their "milieu," and in thus inscribing a measure of self-reflection in the research process. As will be evident from the following recapitulation of his *trajectoire*, Bourdieu has increasingly turned his attention to this theme and made it central to his work.

Bourdieu was first recognized in the English-speaking world with the publication of *The Algerians* (1962). A quick perusal of the book suggests an "ethnographic monograph" in the traditional sense; all the canonized "descriptive" rubrics are systematically rehearsed. But a closer examination of *The Algerians* belies this notion and anticipates Bourdieu's subsequent departure from ethnology at least in the straightforward sense of "ethnographic research" in other cultures. In his interview, he repeatedly stresses the "cross-overs" between ethnology and sociology.

The Algerians recounts the agonizing story of how Algeria ceased to be a society "which has been successful in achieving the highest degree of equilibrium compatible with the limited techniques at its disposal" (1962:119). Bourdieu argues that the dramatic changes in Algerian society under French colonialism resulted not only from "the natural and inevitable consequences of the contact between two civilizations," but particularly from "the disruptions that were knowingly and methodically produced in order to ensure the control of the dominant power and to further the interests of its own nationals" (1962:120). The agrarian policy of the French is a prime instance for Bourdieu of "social vivisection." This policy had devastating consequences. Commonly held land became private property (largely European held). The family no longer operated as a viable unit of economic distribu-

tion and exchange. Emigration from the rural hinterlands and a high birth rate among the disaffected peasantry led to the flashfire urbanization of the larger cities (particularly Algiers) and a convenient, cheap labor pool for European economic enterprises (for instance, wine growing and grain). These historical conjunctures are discussed under the heading, "The Total Disruption of Society"; Bourdieu is utterly candid about the dim view he takes of this state of affairs. He says that the colonial system "makes one think of a caste system" (1962:132). He provides a powerfully compelling image of change in the Algerian setting:

The face of the country was being changed: the accurately surveyed fields worked by machines and marked by regular furrows; the gigantic grain elevators; the fermentation plants; at the heart of the new domain, the house of the colonist. All these things indicate his complete appropriation of the land, his desire to introduce his own way of life and to enforce its adoption without making any concessions to the traditional order. This same attitude was evident in the colonial villages, which were then beginning to take on their present appearance. Thus the European gradually created an environment that reflected his own image and was a negation of the traditional order, a world in which he no longer felt himself to be a stranger and in which, by natural reversal, the Algerian was finally considered to be a stranger. [1962:131]

Bourdieu's work in Algeria became a "base line" for his subsequent studies on a variety of topics.⁴ The three essays collected in *Algeria 1960* (1979) also indicate Bourdieu's ambivalence to structuralism and his move away from it. "The Disenchantment of the World" is an exposé on the problems and prospects of postcolonial development. "The Kabylia House" and "The Sense of Honor" are elegant structural studies (now classic in the literature) of the fabric of symbols that regulated village life and gave it meaning. A significant discontinuity is evident between the struc-

turalist interpretations and the discussion of development and change. A disenchantment with the "floating" models of structuralism emerges clearly and a priority is placed on process and practice. In Bourdieu's interview, he stresses the separation of rules of practice stated by players of the "social game," juridical codes, implicit norms, rules summarizing regularities in practice, and explanatory constructs. Structuralism, he suggests, is less than clear on its relation to these often disjunctive domains. These themes and others are given concentrated attention in *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (1977), an exhilaratingly complex, sometimes bewildering tangle of demonstrations in critical tension with structuralism, ethnology and Durkheimian sociology. This book is a centerpiece and major transition point in Bourdieu's *oeuvre*.

Outline of a Theory of Practice is a questioning of objectivism, an attempt to understand the relation between the knower and the known as that relation shapes putative knowledge, and the proposal of concepts designed to encompass and explicate how social reproduction is possible. For Bourdieu, ethnology is a prime example of objectivist science.⁵ Ethnology has failed to come to terms with social practice because it involves a rule-based approach to description rather than one that takes account of how people utilize custom strategically. He warns the researcher not to take "official" informants' "official" statements as simple description, since a group's official account of itself often represses other, more telling definitions of social realities. For example, the usual "genealogical method" unwittingly brackets practical usages of kin relations, terms and connections. Abstract, "official" genealogies are like "abandoned roads on an old map" (1977:38) and say little about day-to-day practices. In the case of North Africa:

There is no doubt that the pre-eminent position enjoyed by parallel-cousin marriage in native accounts and consequently in ethnographic accounts, is due to the fact that it is the marriage most perfectly consistent with the mythic-rit-

ual representation of the sexual division of labor, and more particularly of the functions assigned to the man and the woman in inter-group relations. [1977:43-44]

He also draws attention to the role of strategies in negotiating marriages and other kinds of social ties. From a broad panoply of such instances, he shows that strategies and practices are not just a matter of "pure calculation." They refer to and are embedded in habitus, a concept reminiscent of the Geertzian notion of culture. In *The Algerians*, Bourdieu takes culture to be "a system of choices which no one makes" (1962:111).⁶ This formulation anticipates Bourdieu's subsequent proposal of habitus as an interpretive device. Habitus is "the social inscribed in the body," "a system of dispositions," a feel for or sense of "the social game," "the source of most practices," "a tendency to generate regulated behaviors apart from any reference to rules." Habitus is the background of and resource for playing the social game. Habitus is interior to history, yet as a general environment for practice, pervades or saturates social processes.

But Bourdieu stresses that different people in different social positions and with different social histories have differential access to "symbolic capital." Some people are better equipped and better situated to use symbolic elements in "playing the game," that is, in their efforts at social production. Their success depends upon the symbolic capital available to them as well as upon the strategies they employ. Symbolic domination is actualized, reproduced, and furthered through a set of practices, not simply given a fixed or timeless system of differences. Who dominates is in part a question of "who knows" as well as "whom one knows." In thus specifying the scope of the sociological project in its broadest terms, Bourdieu forcefully argues that: "The theory of knowledge is a dimension of political theory because the specifically symbolic power to impose the principles of the construction of reality—in particular, social reality—is a major dimension of political power" (1977:165).

After writing *Outline of a Theory of*

Practice, Bourdieu followed the route already taken by returning colonists and Algerian migrant workers, and began to investigate the question of social reproduction at home in France. The crystalline geometries of social forms conveyed by representations of an "ethnographic present" could not encompass the enormous upheavals that marked the history of colonial Algeria and decolonization. Bourdieu developed a meticulous, microscopic style of research in order to understand symbolic domination and its tenacity. This hyper-vigilant gaze is impressively reinvested in his studies of modern France.

Social reproduction implied the reproduction of social difference. The question of how a differential distribution of symbolic capital is perpetuated induced Bourdieu to turn to the sociology of education and culture. He finds in educational institutions—popularly supposed to be a major channel for upward mobility—a major means of maintaining social distinctions. The implications of "symbolic capital," its connection to socialization on the one hand, and to strategizing on the other, open the consideration of a wide range of important questions that were invisible to structuralist ethnology. Structuralism manifested "the impeccable neutrality of science" (1984:12), and constantly raised the false problem of rules and rule breakers. In Bourdieu's view, ethnology is unable to display the *process* of social practice.⁷ He refuses ethnology's distant gaze and its pretenses of omniscience.

In a series of studies on higher education in France, Bourdieu explores the relation of the educational system and social class structure, arguing that education maintains social inequalities. Modern systems of power rely on symbolic forms of coercion rather than more direct kinds of intervention. As an aspect of modern power, education regulates the distribution of social capital (networks and social contacts) and cultural capital (diplomas and nonformalized cultural knowledge). Social and cultural capital can in turn be parlayed into economic advantage. These are particulars of the association that Bourdieu established between education and stratification. This association is detailed in *The*

Inheritors (Bourdieu and Passeron 1979), avidly read during the 1968 upheavals in Paris, in *Reproduction* (1977), and in a number of essays in English (e.g., 1967, 1974). *Reproduction* further suggests a connection between the particular linguistic skills and style that upper class students learn at home and that allow their academic and social success.

Another aspect of modern power, what may be called "the culture industry," becomes a subject of study in Bourdieu's sociology of culture (1965, 1968) and particularly in *Distinction* (1984). The production and elaboration of culture, that is "high" culture (Gans 1974), and its identification with culture in general becomes for Bourdieu, a major entrée into understanding France as a complex society. In *Distinction*, his major point is that "art and cultural consumption are predisposed, consciously and deliberately or not, to fulfill a social function of legitimating social differences" (1984:7). The interesting twist involves the way that this process and the distortions it introduces are systematically mystified, masked, and otherwise kept out of visibility. The production of discourse is part of a social objectification of society that is a rather inaccurate construction, possibly a false consciousness. "The objectification is always bound to remain partial, and therefore false, so long as it fails to include the point of view from which it speaks and so fails to construct the game as a whole" (1984:12).

In taking this position as a starting point for his sociology of culture, Bourdieu shows himself again to be in touch with a laudable and longstanding tradition in philosophy and the human sciences which is critical of "the distant gaze." The notion that there is no "outside" perspective, no Archimedean point, no uninvolved objectivity in the human sciences has been belabored again and again in recent decades.⁸ In *Distinction*, Bourdieu neatly integrates it into his argument as a whole:

There is no way out of the game of culture; and one's only chance of objectifying the true nature of the game is to objectify as fully as possible the very

operations which one is obliged to use in order to achieve that objectification. . . . Paradoxically, the games of culture are protected against objectifications which the actors involved in the game perform on each other: scholarly critics cannot grasp the objective reality of society aesthetes without abandoning their grasp of the true nature of their own activity; and the same is true of their opponents. The same law of mutual lucidity and reflexive blindness governs the antagonism between "intellectuals" and "bourgeois" (or their spokesmen in the field of production). And even bearing in mind the function which legitimate culture performs in class relations, one is still liable to be led into accepting one or the other of the self-interested representations of culture which "intellectuals" and "bourgeois" endlessly fling at each other. [1984:12]

In regard to the "culture industry" in particular, aesthetic distinction is produced by (deceptively) inscribing (aesthetic) value in objects per se, thus obviating the contingencies of the market and elite networks that sanctify such attributions: "Cultural consecration does indeed confer on the objects, persons and situations it touches, a sort of ontological promotion akin to a transubstantiation" (1984:6). The symbolic ascendancy thus conferred on cultural productions, *objets d'art*, theatrical productions, musical performances and privileged localities, is taken a step further as their privileged ("superior") qualities become, it would seem, bound up with and finally intrinsic to the social categories that have already sponsored and appropriated them. Although this process is eminently social, it is made to appear as a game of truly objective qualities; its play of discourses are re-situated beyond discourse. The game is located "purely" in the nondiscursive, that is, in pleasure, in relation to an "immediate" and untrammelled emotion. Distinction as a social process thereby becomes undebatable and inarguable so as to be regarded as an inevitability. The pleasure of art, or the pleasure of the love of art is for the player of this game,

a pure pleasure, in the sense that it is irreducible to the pursuit of the profits of distinction and is felt as the simple pleasure of play, of playing the cultural game well, of playing on one's skill at playing, of cultivating a pleasure which "cultivates" and of thus producing, like a kind of endless fire, its ever renewed sustenance of subtle allusions, deferent or irreverent references, expected or unusual associations. [1984:498]

A critical analysis of distinction as essential to modern social forms already assumes Bourdieu's sociology of education as a means of specifying who is prepared and how they are prepared to play this game; his studies on education clearly fit into this larger project. In his most recent book, *Homo academicus* (1984a), Bourdieu brings together a number of the themes that he had already dealt with separately. He integrates his sociology of education and culture in a fascinating investigation of the Academy itself. Elites, professors, faculties, and universities and their significance in France are explored in detail. The Academy is enmeshed in the minute filigrees of modern power and is one of its nodal points precisely because it is "research" that legitimates what knowledge is. Questions of hierarchy, social inequality, symbolic domination, social and cultural reproduction and modern power are considered in light of what Bourdieu calls *le regard réflexif* (1984a:18). The importance of this perspective becomes clear only by taking seriously Lemert's advice of reading sociologists like Bourdieu for half-submerged contentions, agendas and innuendos. In fact, the stylistics that Bourdieu utilizes in his most recent books invites such a reading. *Distinction* and *Homo academicus* are each something of a pastiche. Anecdotes, philosophical digressions, empirical "data," sometimes torturous theorizing, intriguing speculations, and literary conceits are unexpectedly juxtaposed, provoking a reading on various levels.

Bourdieu's philosophical stance vis-à-vis objectivity clearly represents a shift away from naively scientific sociology, but it does not imply a rejection of objec-

tivity. He points out the blind spots that are intrinsic to pretenses of sociological omniscience and resituates the researcher as a historical agent with a historical connection to what is studied. Interpretation as Bourdieu practices it involves a "tacking back and forth" between actors' "subjective" perceptions of their "objective condition" and the "objective" historicity of the context of practice. Given his understanding of cultural action as public, Clifford Geertz might well be sympathetic with Bourdieu's insistence on practice as embedded in relations and externalities. Yet Bourdieu would object to the intellectualist project of Clifford Geertz whose semiotics seems comparatively remote from the immediacy of rough-and-tumble social practices.

Bourdieu's return from Algeria to France as a field site is emblematic of this movement in his work, a sea change that indicates a decision on the level of epistemology to encompass objectivity. Science becomes for him a subject of study just as does France. Ethnology could not fully and critically represent the realities of colonial Algeria and its decolonization. Just as the fate of Algeria under the French was not adequately visualized through ethnology, its claims and pretensions had to be critically reassessed. But in addressing this issue, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* does not send science packing. It attempts to develop a mode of "contingent" objectivity, a kind of knowing in which science still authorizes understanding, but an understanding that is also situated historically by means of *le regard réflexif*. Bourdieu's relation to science is more serious and more critical than that of Clifford Geertz who utilizes science for the most part as a rhetorical trope.

Bourdieu's decision to study France can thus be regarded as a sociological enactment of *le regard réflexif*. Science still authorizes the work, but in a significantly modified form, since the analysis of symbolic domination, social and cultural reproduction, and modern power in France reflects more or less directly upon the context of his work in Algeria. It illuminates the structure of colonialism from the side of the dominant society and explicates the

social context of ethnology that it had sought to hide from itself. *Le regard réflexif* authorizes and motivates Bourdieu's move to France, but not merely as a vehicle for sentimental or liberal "consciousness raising." *Le regard réflexif* instead becomes a strategic necessity for understanding modern power in its various guises, at home and in the colonies as well.

Bourdieu thus engages in a dialogue with fellow practitioners of the human sciences while addressing the complexity of social reproduction in France. This work, of impressive empirical range and conceptual sophistication, recommends how to practice the human sciences, that undertaking being an art of its own rather than merely a technical project. Bourdieu's sociology is critical, committed, historically situated yet at times also appropriating and promulgating *avant garde* transgressions. The trajectory of this work, a variegated but coherent deployment of texts and discourses, suggests that there still remains the serious possibility of setting forth and formalizing an understanding of social processes and practices both external and internal to sociology itself. The same determinations pertinent to its subject matter operate in the modes of production constituted by "research."

Bourdieu has not greatly modified the form of his writing or the stage of his texts as his work has evolved. American anthropologists critical of traditional canons of ethnography have sought to pose alternatives that are conscious of *le regard réflexif*, but which also attempt to transcend "objectivity" through the exploitation of literary conceits, polyphonic combinations of narrative, dialogue and speculation, self-consciously chosen metaphors and rhetorical figures.⁹ Like many of his colleagues in France, Bourdieu has not been seduced by this detour, although many of the premises on which it is based resonate closely with Bourdieu's own presuppositions. As Paul Rabinow says, "Bourdieu would gladly participate in splashing the corrosive acid of deconstruction on the traditional subject" (1982:175). Although Bourdieu's style is perhaps more traditionally magisterial than that of his innovative American colleagues, he has been more

adventurous in and demanding of his interpretations. He practices a meticulous and unrelenting art of nuance, an interpretive virtuosity that is transparent to the vibrancy, pathos, and stridency of life in the metropole, is tolerant of the ironies of practicing the human sciences, yet insists upon the possibility of a serious science of society, power, and inequality.

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Notes

¹Bourdieu's publications are extensive, and it is impossible even to mention them all in an essay of this scope. The Appendix and References Cited include major works in English (with date of initial French publication noted in parentheses at the end of each reference), a few of the shorter pieces most directly relevant to the present discussion, and a few of the less familiar pieces.

²*Current Research* (Centre de Sociologie Européenne 1972) lists all of the Center's publications up to that date and provides (in English) a useful overview of work in progress.

³Schematically, Bourdieu's published work falls into at least four categories: (1) on Algeria; (2) on the philosophical and critical foundations of the human sciences; (3) on education as a means of reproducing social groups and hierarchies and controlling the distribution of "symbolic capital"; and (4) on the sociology of culture.

⁴Bourdieu's other earlier work on Algeria also includes Bourdieu, Darbel, Rivet and Seibel (1963) and Bourdieu and Sayad (1964).

⁵Since the influence of structuralism on ethnology in France was far more penetrating than in the US., ethnology as a term for Bourdieu more immediately evokes structuralism than it does for the American anthropologist. This connotative difference must be kept in mind when thinking about Bourdieu's (often stringent) criticisms of (structuralist) ethnology.

⁶In the original text, "makes" is italicized, presumably to take note of the historical embeddedness of cultural innovations.

⁷For a fascinating study of this process, see Michel de Certeau (1984).

⁸See Rabinow and Sullivan (1979) and Foster (1981) for further reflections on these issues.

⁹See Clifford and Marcus (1986) for an exhaustive discussion of this "detour" by

authors who spearheaded it.

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From Rules to Strategies: An Interview with Pierre Bourdieu

Pierre Lamaison

*Terrain: Carnets du Patrimoine
 Ethnologique*

P.L.—I would like for us to talk about the interest you have shown, in your work from "Béarn" and the "Trois études d'ethnologie kabyle" through to "Homo academicus," in questions of kinship and inheritance. You were the first to address the question of the choosing of marriage partners in a French population (cf. "Célibat et condition paysanne," *Études rurales*, 1962, and "Les stratégies matrimoniales dans le système des stratégies de reproduction," *Annales*, 1972) and to emphasize the correlation between modes of property inheritance—nonegalitarian in this case—and the logic of alliances. Each matrimonial transaction is to be understood, you said, as "the outcome of a strategy" and can be defined "as a moment in a series of material and symbolic exchanges . . . which depend largely on the position that this exchange occupies in the matrimonial history of the family."