

## CONVERSATION 1

### SOCIOLOGY AS A COMBAT SPORT

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#### Bourdieu Meets Bourdieu

*I often say sociology is a combat sport, a means of self-defence. Basically, you use it to defend yourself, without having the right to use it for unfair attacks.*

Pierre Bourdieu

These sentences are taken from *La Sociologie est un sport de combat*, a popular film produced by Pierre Carles in 2001 about the life of Pierre Bourdieu featuring him at demonstrations, in interviews about masculine domination, in humorous banter with his assistants, in an informal research seminar with his colleagues, in the lecture hall, on television debating with Günter Grass and, in a final dramatic scene, facing the wrath of immigrants. We see Bourdieu voicing opposition to government policies and especially neoliberalism, but we also see him on the defensive – stumbling to explain sociology in simple terms to a confused interviewer, or sweating under pressure of interrogation or intensely nervous when he has to speak in English.

Is this sociology as a combat sport? If so, where are the combatants? We see Bourdieu, but where is the opposition? Where are the other contestants? It's like watching a boxing match with only one boxer. No wonder he can talk of sociology as 'self-defence'; no wonder he can seem so innocent and charming with the opposition absent. Where is the

reviled Bourdieu, 'the sociological terrorist of the left', 'the cult leader', 'the intellectual dictator'? Even the Spanish feminist interviewing him about masculine domination lets him off the hook when it comes to his own masculinity – at which point he leans on Virginia Woolf – or when he claims to understand masculine domination better than women do. Significantly, the only time he comes under hostile fire is when young immigrants tell him they are not interested in his disquisitions on oppression – after all, they know they are oppressed – whereupon Bourdieu goes on a tirade against their anti-intellectualism. It seems he has nothing to offer them but words. Here, only at the end of the film, are the first signs of combat.

This absent combat with the absent enemy is not peculiar to the film. Throughout Bourdieu's writings, combatants are slain off-stage with no more than a fleeting appearance in front of the readership. Sociologists, economists and philosophers come and go like puppets, dismissed with barely a sentence or two. What sort of combat sport is this? He says sociology shouldn't be used for unfair attacks, but how fair is it to tie up the enemy in a corner and with one punch knock him/her out of the ring? What is this combat without combat? I've searched through Bourdieu's writings to find elaborations of 'sociology as a combat sport', but to no avail. Minimally, if this is a true combat sport, there should be rules of play that allow all contestants to show their abilities – their strengths as well as their weaknesses. And the rules should apply equally to all. There is not much evidence of fair play either in the film or in his writings.

The purpose of these conversations, then, is to restore at least a small band of combatants who, broadly speaking, are Marxist in orientation. They are there in Bourdieu's 'practical sense' beneath consciousness, circulating in the depths of his habitus, and only rarely surfacing in an explicit and verbal form. To attempt such a restoration is to counter the symbolic violence of their erasure with a symbolic violence of my own. It involves a certain intellectual combat. Still, I restore these Marxists not so much as to issue a knock-out blow (as if that were even possible), but rather to orchestrate a conversation in which each learns about the other to better understand the self. In this opening conversation, however, I will probe the idea of sociology as a combat sport as it applies to Bourdieu's own practice, leading to his contradictory postures in academic and non-academic fields. I will suggest that a better model than combat is the more open and gentle one of conversation – a conversation between Bourdieu the academic theorist and Bourdieu the public intellectual – if we are to unravel the paradoxes of his life's work.

## COMBAT VS. CONSENSUS

I am struck by the translation of the film's title into English: *La Sociologie est un sport de combat* becomes *Sociology Is a Martial Art*. There is no warrant for translating combat sport as martial art. Both words exist in French as they do in English, so why this mistranslation? I can only conjecture that this is a manoeuvre to attract an English-speaking – and especially an American – audience for whom labelling an academic discipline as a combat sport would discredit both sociology and the film. It does not suit the self-understanding of US academics and would have an effect opposite to the one in France, where academics do indeed seem to relish the idea of combat sport, where struggles are held out in the open public arena, and where the academic world merges with the public world. In the United States, on the other hand, the academic world is at once more insulated from the public sphere and also more professional. It is dominated by ideologies of consensus formation and peer review. Here, 'martial art', with its connotations of refinement and science, is a more appropriate and appealing metaphor. Academic exchange does not operate according to explicit rules of combat, but with unspoken understandings based on a style of life. Thus, French-trained Michèle Lamont (2009) is fascinated by the exotic 'American' culture of peer assessment based on trust and mutual respect, just as ignominy befalls Loïc Wacquant when he displays French-style combat in the US academy.<sup>1</sup>

We can better understand Bourdieu's milieu and the work he produced by comparing him to Talcott Parsons, who was born and bred American. Both were the most influential world sociologists of their time. Both conquered their national fields of sociology from the summit of their respective academies – Harvard and Collège de France, respectively. Both reshaped the discipline around the world and in their homelands. Both exerted influence on a variety of disciplines beyond their own. Both wrote in difficult prose that only seemed to magnify their appeal. Both generated waves of reaction and critique, dismissal and contempt, as well as ardent disciples.

The parallels extend to the substance of their social theory. Thus, both were primarily interested in the problem of social order, which they tackled with parallel, functionalist schemes – Parsons through the internalisation of common values, Bourdieu through the constitution of habitus – constituting an enduring set of dispositions acquired through participation in multiple fields. Thus, socialisation figured equally prominently in both their accounts of social order. Both had difficulty developing an adequate theory of social change, and their thin theories of history relied on the idea of spontaneous differentiation – in Parsons the rise of

subsystems of action and in Bourdieu the emergence of differentiated fields. Neither saw the future as very different from the present: revolutionary change was not part of their conceptual repertoire.

Moreover, both were deeply committed to sociology as a science. Indeed, both conceived of sociology as the queen of the social sciences – other disciplines were a special case of or subordinate to sociology. At the same time, both drew heavily on the vocabulary and ideas of the discipline of economics, just as both were hostile to its reductionism. Despite their claims to universalism, their theories were distinctively products of the society they theorised, in the one case the pre-1960s United States and in the other the post-1960s France. They were both masters of the art of universalising the particular – the particular being the social structure of their own countries as they saw it – as neither took comparative research seriously.

But here the parallels cease. If Parsons's social order rested on *value consensus* that prevented a brutish Hobbesian war of all against all, then Bourdieu's rested on *symbolic domination* that secured silent and unconscious submission. Where Parsons endorsed value consensus as freedom, Bourdieu condemned symbolic domination as debilitating to both the dominant and the dominated. Accordingly, if Parsons was rather complacent about the world in which he lived, Bourdieu was consistently critical of it. If Parsons stood aloof from society, in the final analysis, Bourdieu was always deeply engaged with it. Where Parsons saw science and society as based on consensus, Bourdieu took an agonistic view, seeing society as always potentially contested. Science in particular was an arena of competition and struggle through which truth emerges. Where Parsons brushed aside intellectual and political antagonisms that divided the academy, Bourdieu made them definitive of the academic field, of scientific progress.

Their divergence is most clear in the way they built their theoretical frameworks. Parsons's (1937) voluntaristic theory of action, which, like Bourdieu, sought to transcend the dichotomy of structure and agency, laid claim to a grand synthesis of four canonical thinkers – Durkheim, Weber, Marshall and Pareto. Later, he would incorporate Freud. Parsons not only basked in the glory of canonical figures, but he actually created the canon himself by examining their writings in meticulous detail. He brought Durkheim and Weber to the centre of the US sociological tradition.<sup>2</sup> He is not alone in building on so-called founders: Jürgen Habermas (1984) follows a similar strategy in his two-volume theory of communicative action, building on the work of Marx, Weber, Durkheim, Simmel, Lukács and the Frankfurt School, as well as Talcott Parsons himself.

Bourdieu, by contrast, took a dismissive stance toward his competitors and forerunners, largely silencing the giants upon whose shoulders he was perched. There is rarely a systematic engagement with any sociological work other than his own. Marx, Weber, Durkheim, Lévi-Strauss, Pascal and others lurk in his writings, but he refers to them only in passing, as if to do otherwise might minimise his own contributions. He presents himself as the author of his own tradition, committing the sin he accuses other intellectuals of, namely their adhesion to the 'charismatic ideology' of autonomous 'creation', forgetting that the creator too has to be created (Bourdieu, 1996 [1992]: 167). In recreating sociology, Bourdieu fashioned himself after Flaubert, whom he regarded as the creator of the French literary field because he had such a subtle command of its elementary forces. If sociology is a combat sport, then Bourdieu was its grand master, so effective that the combat is invisible, taking place back-stage.

Parsons was the great systematiser, ironing out differences and contradictions, generating thereby his ever-more elaborate architecture of structural functionalism with its own concepts and vocabulary, liable to collapse under its own weight. Bourdieu, by contrast, refused all systematisation. His works are incomplete, full of fissures and paradoxes, a labyrinth that provides for endless discussion, elaboration and critique. As a gladiator he was the expert at defensive manoeuvres to elude his assailants. Whereas Parsons specialised in grand theory, at home with rarefied abstractions, far removed from the concrete, everyday world, Bourdieu rarely wrote without empirical reference. For all its difficulty – its long and winding sentences that continually double back and qualify themselves – Bourdieu's theorising is deeply engaged with lived experience and follows rich research agendas. Where Parsons's architectonic scheme disappeared without so much as a whimper once its founder passed away, its brittle foundations having lost touch with the world, Bourdieu's ideas outlive their author and are far more flexible in their wrestling with an ever-changing reality.

Unlike Parsons – and more like Marx, Weber and Durkheim – Bourdieu was steeped in the history of philosophy and, like them, his works are relentlessly empirical, ranging from the study of photography, painting, literature and sport to the analysis of contemporary stratification, education, the state and language. His writings straddle sociology and anthropology, including studies of peasant family strategies in the villages of the Béarn, where he was born, as well as his books on Algeria that dwelt on the social order of the Kabyle, written during the period of anti-colonial struggles and marking the beginning of his research career. His methods

range from sophisticated statistical analysis to in-depth interviewing and participant observation. His meta-theoretical innovations, relentlessly applied to different historical contexts and different spheres of society, revolve around his notions of field, capital and habitus. Even though Parsons was well versed in anthropology, economics and psychology as well as sociology, in the end even he cannot compete with Bourdieu's originality or scope, nor with his influence across such a range of disciplines in the social sciences and humanities.

Parsons was like a vacuum cleaner, sucking in everything that came into his sphere of influence, whereas Bourdieu was more like a mop, pushing backwards and forwards in all directions. The imagery of the one was consensus building; the imagery of the other was combat; their divergence was reflected in the social theories they developed. Let me turn to that link between sociology as a combat sport and the substance of Bourdieu's social theory.

## UNMASKING DOMINATION

Symbolic domination is at the centre of Bourdieu's sociology. It is a domination that is not recognised as such, either because it is taken for granted (naturalised) or because it is misrecognised – i.e. recognised as something other than domination. For Bourdieu, the prototype of symbolic domination is masculine domination that is not generally perceived as such, so deeply is it inscribed in the habitus of both men and women. He defines habitus – a central concept in his thinking – as a 'durably installed generative principle of regulated improvisations', producing 'practices which tend to reproduce the regularities immanent in the objective conditions of the production of their generative principle' (Bourdieu, 1977 [1972]: 78). We are thus like fish swimming in water, unaware of the symbolic domination that pervades our lives, except that the water is not just outside us, but also inside us. Drawing on his fieldwork among the Kabyle, Bourdieu (2001 [1998]) describes the way gender domination is inscribed in daily practices, in the architecture of houses and in the division of labour, so that it appears as natural as the weather.

In modern society, education provides one of Bourdieu's most important examples of symbolic domination (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977 [1970]; 1979 [1964]). The school appears as a relatively autonomous institution following universal rules and eliciting the active participation of teachers and students in the acquisition of labour market credentials. This meritocratic order obscures the bias of the school, whose pedagogy favours

those middle- and upper-class students endowed with cultural capital, i.e. those already equipped with the capacity to appropriate mental and abstract teaching – the symbolic goods on offer. The school advantages the dominant classes and reproduces their domination through the participation of the dominated, a participation that holds out the possibility of upward mobility, thereby misrecognising the class domination that it reproduces as its basis.

More generally, the dominant classes obscure their domination behind the distinction they display in the cultural sphere (Bourdieu 1984 [1979]). Their familiarity with high culture – what Bourdieu calls legitimate culture – is not viewed as an attribute of their class, but a gift of the individual. The dominated are ashamed of their inadequate appreciation of legitimate culture, sometimes pretending to claim knowledge of it that they don't have and endowing it with a prestige that obscures its basis in class-determined cultural capital. Dominated cultures are just that – dominated by material necessity, on the one hand, and by the distinction of legitimate culture, on the other.

We will have reason to interrogate these claims in later conversations, but for now I am concerned with the implications of symbolic domination for Bourdieu's conception of sociology as a combat sport. If society is held together by symbolic domination that misrecognises the grounds of class domination or gives it false legitimacy, then the task of the sociologist is to unmask the true function of the symbolic world and reveal the domination it hides. This, however, proves to be a most difficult task – symbolic domination is rooted in the habitus, i.e. in dispositions that lie deep in the unconscious, inculcated from childhood onwards. Even leaving aside the question of habitus, Bourdieu maintained that the dominant classes have no interest in unmasking domination, whereas the dominated do not have the capacity – the instruments of sociological knowledge – to see through domination:

The sociologist's misfortune is that, most of the time, the people who have the technical means of appropriating what he says have no wish to appropriate it, no *interest* in appropriating it, and even have powerful interests in refusing it (so that some people who are very competent in other respects may reveal themselves to be quite obtuse as regards sociology), whereas those who would have an interest in appropriating it do not have the instruments for appropriation (theoretical culture etc.). Sociological discourse arouses *resistances* that are quite analogous in their logic and their manifestations to those encountered by psychoanalytical discourse (Bourdieu, 1993 [1984]: 23).

From a theoretical point of view, therefore, dislodging symbolic power would seem to be virtually impossible, requiring 'a thoroughgoing process of countertraining, involving repeated exercises' (Bourdieu, 2000 [1997]: 172), but this never deterred Bourdieu from combatting it wherever and whenever he could.

## COMBAT IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE

From early on, Bourdieu's scholarly career went hand in hand with public engagement. Formative of his outlook on sociology and politics was his immersion from 1955 to 1960 in the Algerian war, first enlisted in the army and then as an assistant professor at the University of Algiers. It was here that he turned from philosophy that seemed so remote from the Algerian experience to ethnology, or what we might call a sociology of everyday life. His earliest writings displayed a fascination with the diverse traditions of the Algerian people, but it was not long before he broached the question of the day – the question of liberation – and how colonialism was creating struggles that were transforming the cultural and political aspirations of the colonised.

On his return to France, he would write blistering articles on the violence of colonialism. Soon, however, his sociological research led him away from brutal colonial violence to an analysis of symbolic violence, in particular the way education reproduced class domination. His two books on education, both written with Jean-Claude Passeron, especially the second and better known, *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture* (1977 [1970]), became controversial for their uncompromising refusal to entertain the view that education can transform society. In the 1970s, rather than write of burgeoning social movements from below, as other sociologists, such as Alain Touraine, were doing, Bourdieu examined the way language and political science conspired to dispossess the dominated, effectively making them voiceless in the political arena. Opinion polls, with their artificial construction of public opinion, served as an archetypal instrument of disempowerment. For Bourdieu, democracy hid the struggle within the field of power among elites whose appeal for popular support was driven not so much by a concern for the dominated, but by manoeuvres within this field of the dominant.

As he ascended the academic staircase, converting his academic capital into political capital, he became more radical. He used his position as professor at the Collège de France, which he assumed in 1981, to draw attention to the limits of educational policy, and began to direct his attacks at

the academy. Still, at the same time, he placed his hope in the potential universality of the state and the creation of an International of intellectuals. In the 1990s he deliberately gave voice to the down-trodden in the best-seller *The Weight of the World* (Bourdieu et al. 1999 [1993]), a collaborative work of interviewing immigrants, blue-collar workers and low-level civil servants – in short, the dominated. He joined social struggles, most famously the general strike of 1995 that opposed the dismemberment of the welfare state. He spoke out against the socialist government that was socialist in name, but neoliberal in content. As he aged, so his assaults on neoliberalism and the distortions of the media, especially television, took a popular turn in the book series *Liber-Raisons d'Agir*. Gone were the long and tortured sentences, and in their place he delivered uncompromising attacks written in an apocalyptic tone. Neoliberalism, he warned, meant the subjugation of education, art, politics and culture to the remorseless logic of the market, not to mention the 'flexploitation' of workers and their ever-more precarious existence.

His combative spirit in the public sphere, however, collided with his theoretical claims. For a long time Bourdieu had been contemptuous of sociological interventions in politics – social movement sociology or 'charitable sociology', as he once called it (Bourdieu, Passeron & Chamboredon, 1991 [1968]: 251). He insisted that sociology had to be a science with its own autonomy, its own language and its own methods inaccessible to all but the initiated. He had dismissed the idea of the organic intellectual as a projection of the habitus and conditions of existence of intellectuals onto the benighted, yet here he was on the picket lines, leading the condemnation of the socialist government. Having insisted on the depth of symbolic violence, how could he work together with the subaltern? Was he just manipulating them for his own ends, as he accused others of doing? If the social struggles of the subaltern are misguided, rooted in a misrecognition of their own position, was Bourdieu being led astray by joining workers in their protests? We don't know – his practice was at odds with his theory, and he never cared to interrogate the contradiction. This is what he writes in *Acts of Resistance*:

I do not have much inclination for prophetic interventions and I have always been wary of occasions in which the situation or sense of solidarity could lead me to overstep the limits of my competence. So I would not have engaged in public position-taking if I had not, each time, had the – perhaps illusory – sense of being forced into it by a kind of legitimate rage, sometimes close to something like a sense of duty. ...

And if, to be effective, I have sometimes had to commit myself in my own person and my own name, I have always done it in the hope – if not of triggering mobilization, or even one of those debates without object or subject which arise periodically in the world of the media – at least of breaking the appearance of unanimity which is the greater part of the symbolic force of the dominant discourse (Bourdieu, 1998: vii–viii).

Here, Bourdieu is attributing a certain rationality – you might say good sense – to the publics he is addressing that they don't have in his earlier writings.

This is the first paradox, the *paradox of public engagement* – the simultaneous claim of its impossibility and its necessity. It leads to the second paradox, the *paradox of relative autonomy*. In fighting neoliberalism, Bourdieu finds himself defending the very autonomy of educational, cultural and scientific fields that earlier he had claimed were responsible for the reproduction of domination. In the end, he finds himself defending the great institutions of French culture, notwithstanding their role in reproducing domination. A child of the French Enlightenment, Bourdieu claims that these institutions he condemns – the state, the university, literature and art – do have a universal validity and do represent a rich cultural heritage that should be accessible to all.

You might say Bourdieu is defending not the status quo ante, i.e. the relative autonomy of these institutions, but their full autonomy, so that they become the privilege of all. Yet if this is the case, then it is an entirely utopian project, so that the paradox remains: defending the relative autonomy of cultural fields against market invasion is the defence of the very thing he denounces – symbolic domination. But in calling for the defence of the cultural, bureaucratic and educational fields, he can rally the interests of intellectuals, artists and academics – fractions of both the dominant classes and the new middle classes – against market tyranny.

## COMBAT IN THE ACADEMIC FIELD

It is easier for intellectuals and academics to attack the excesses of the market than to see themselves exercising symbolic domination over society by virtue of the autonomy they so stoutly defend. While intellectuals denounce physical violence throughout the world, they are reluctant to recognise that they too are the perpetrators of violence, i.e. a symbolic violence that assures a taken-for-granted – what Bourdieu calls 'doxic' – submission to domination incorporated in bodies and language. Thus,

although they may see themselves as autonomous, intellectuals are implicated in the state through its monopoly of the legitimate use of symbolic violence, through consecrated classifications and categories.

But intellectuals, academics and social scientists are not all of a piece. While most do not recognise their contribution to symbolic domination, some, like Bourdieu's followers, do spell out the truth of symbolic domination. This division of intellectuals into those who have a good sense and those who have bad sense calls for an analysis of academic fields that reveals what we are up to behind our screens of objectivity and science, pointing to the ways we deceive both ourselves and others. In short, the sociology that we apply to others must equally be applied to ourselves. The purpose of such reflexivity, however, is not to denounce our fellow scientists, but to liberate them from the illusions – scholastic fallacies – that spring from the conditions under which they produce knowledge, namely their freedom from material necessity. Bourdieu criticises his fellow academics for not recognising how their material conditions shape their knowledge production, and so they mistakenly foist their theories onto the subjects whose actions they theorise. For Bourdieu, to better understand the conditions of the production of knowledge is a condition for producing better knowledge.

This sounds very fine in principle, but in practice the scientific field, no less than any other field, is a combat zone in which actors struggle to enforce their view of the world – their theories, methodologies and philosophies. Indeed, Bourdieu (2000 [1997]: 116) refers to the scientific field as one of 'armed competition' in which some actors manage to accumulate capital at the expense of others. He assumes, however, that the rules of such combat ensure the production of truth – or, more accurately, the reduction of falsehood – even though, as he says in his article on the scientific field, there is an ever-increasing concentration of capital with its own conservative tendencies. What happens to that open competition for truth when the scientific field is monopolised by a few powerful actors? What assures the ascendancy of good sense over bad sense, Bourdieusian sociologists over neoliberal economists? Are there rules of combat or does anything go?

In his own practice of science Bourdieu can be quite ruthless in establishing his domination. As already mentioned, he devotes little time to recognising the contributions of others, tending to constitute himself as the soul originator of his ideas. He may be standing on the shoulders of giants, but they are invisible, repressed below the surface. He seems to deploy the recognition of others in footnotes and acknowledgements to

maximise the recognition that he receives. His very writing is a form of symbolic violence, trying to impress upon the readers his own distinction through esoteric references, appeals to Greek and Latin, and long-winded sentences, all of which have an intimidating effect. Those who dare to openly disagree with him – if they are sufficiently important – are deemed to suffer from irrationality, weak-mindedness or even psychological disorders manifested in repression and defence mechanisms. Or, more simply, they express the interests that they have by virtue of their place in the academic field. He exercises symbolic violence within the field of science against these infidels, all in the name of the Realpolitik of reason and to unmask symbolic violence in the wider society. Throughout, he is so sure that he is right that any stratagem to vanquish the opposition seems justified. Here, combat often appears not as self-defence, but as ‘unfair attacks’ on enemy combatants.

While happy to locate others in the academic field and explain their perspectives in terms of that position, he fails to apply the same principle to himself. The nearest we get to such a self-analysis are his claims to outsider status, coming as he did from a peasant background with a ‘cleft habitus’, that allows him greater insight into the workings of the academy and, indeed, of the world. His *Sketch for a Self-analysis* (Bourdieu, 2007 [2004]) is just that – a sketch that describes his sufferings in boarding school and as an outsider in the École Normale Supérieure, but tells us next to nothing of Bourdieu as a combatant in the scientific field. Indeed, Bourdieu never undertook a sociological investigation of the field of sociology, in which he was indeed a, if not the, central player – the French field. The nearest he gets is *Homo Academicus* (Bourdieu, 1988 [1984]) which is an incomplete examination of the French academic field as a whole – an examination of the relations among disciplines, but not the disciplinary field itself.

Here, then, we come to the third paradox, *the paradox of reflexivity*. On the one hand, he argues that an analysis of the academic field in which one operates is a precondition of scientific knowledge. On the other hand, he himself undertakes neither an analysis of his own place in the field of sociology nor even an analysis of the field of French sociology itself, as if none of his competitors is worthy of serious examination. Bourdieu’s interest in reflexivity – i.e. in scientifically assessing the field of sociology and his position in it – clashes with his interests as an actor, namely to accumulate academic capital, which means to elevate the status of sociology and his position within it. To accomplish these ends, Bourdieu mobilises the cultural capital that derives from a philosophy

degree at the École Normale Supérieure and builds a school of sociology with its own vocabulary, methodology, theory, journal, etc. It involves disrecognising others and exercising symbolic domination over them, which, if successful, is at odds with the project of reflexivity and endangers the very project of science.

In these three paradoxes – the public engagement of sociologists, the relative autonomy of fields, the reflexivity of scientific analysis – we see the contradiction between theory and practice. But according to Bourdieu’s own theory, this is to be expected – there is always a gap between theory and practice. We find this argument in all his meta-theoretical writings from *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (1977 [1972]) to *The Logic of Practice* (1990 [1980]) to *Pascalian Meditations* (2000 [1997]). He shows the necessity of the rupture between sociological understanding and common sense, between theory and practice, and how practice reproduces this separation. If people truly understood what they do, if they understood how their practices reproduce their subordination, then the social order would crumble. But for all his interest in reflexivity, Bourdieu does not turn this analysis back onto *himself* and examine the ways in which *his* theory and practice are at odds with each other. There is no internal conversation between Bourdieu and Bourdieu, between his theory and practice.

The following engagements with Bourdieu, therefore, will study the paradoxical relations among and within the three nodes of Bourdieu’s meta-framework: how he condemns symbolic domination, but defends the very institutions that reproduce that domination; how he advocates reflexivity by locating intellectuals within their fields of production, but fails to do the same for himself; and, finally, how he is critical of public engagement and yet this becomes so central to his own identity.

## CONVERSATIONS WITH BOURDIEU

Bourdieu’s model of sociology as a combat sport certainly casts doubt on the conventional collective self-understanding of scientists as building science through consensus. In his celebrated model, Robert Merton (1973 [1942]) defines the ethos of science as made up of four elements: universalism, communism, disinterestedness and organised scepticism. Competition there is, but this does not take the form of a combat sport in which the goal is to defeat the opposition! Yet of course, inasmuch as science is a field in the Bourdieusian sense, it must have relations of domination and subjugation that play themselves out as combat. To deny those

relations of domination, as is the wont of the dominant, is itself a strategy of domination. It is not surprising, therefore, that Parsons and Merton should have a consensus view of science. On the other hand, to endorse the idea of sociology as a combat sport without any further elaboration of the rules of that combat also excuses opportunistic strategies of disrecognition, expropriation and distortion that are inimical to science.

Here I want to consider a third model of science, one based on dialogue. The idea is not to suppress difference in the name of consensus, but to recognise difference as a challenge to existing assumptions and frameworks. Here one challenges not in order to vanquish, but rather to converse in order to better understand others and, through others, learn the limits and possibilities of one's own assumptions and frameworks. A model of dialogue is not exclusive of the other two models. In order to converse, there must be some common ground to make conversation intelligible. An inner circle of agreement is necessary for an outer circle of disagreement. Equally, in order to converse, it is necessary to give voice to subordinate perspectives, which usually requires combat. In a field of domination, conversation cannot be taken for granted, but has to be advanced and defended.

In the conversations that follow, we will bring to life some of the combatants Bourdieu has slain. I will follow Bourdieu's prescription that to read an author it is necessary to first place him or her in the context of the field of production – competitors, allies and antagonists who are taken for granted by the author and invisibly shape his or her practice. I cannot recreate all the academic fields within which Bourdieu was embedded. That would be a task far beyond my capabilities, covering as it would philosophy, linguistics, literature, painting and photography, as well as sociologists and anthropologists – indeed, the entire French intellectual field. So I have chosen a distinctive group of social theorists who wander like ghosts through Bourdieu's opus, because, unlike Bourdieu, they believe the dominated, or some fraction thereof, can indeed under certain conditions perceive and appreciate the nature of their own subordination. I am, of course, thinking of the Marxist tradition that Bourdieu engages, usually without so much as recognising it, and even to the point of denying it a place in his intellectual field. This is ironic indeed, but perhaps not surprising, since these social theorists were all experienced combatants, very much Bourdieu's equals.

In staging these conversations with Bourdieu, I have chosen Marxists with distinctive perspectives on the place awarded to intellectuals in social theory and public life, namely Gramsci, Fanon, Freire and Beauvoir.

I begin with Marx, perhaps the greatest gladiator of them all, whose Achilles heel is undoubtedly the absence of a theory of intellectuals, and I end with C. Wright Mills, no mean combatant himself, who erected a theoretical architecture similar to Bourdieu's.

While Marx did not pay serious attention to the question of intellectuals – their place in society or their labour process – his theory of capitalism as a self-reproducing and self-destroying system of production is nonetheless deeply embedded in Bourdieu's treatment of fields of cultural and intellectual production. The underlying structure of Bourdieu's thought is similar to Marx and Engels's engagement with Hegelian thought laid out in *The German Ideology* (1978 [1845–46]), but Bourdieu carries it forward in a very different direction, toward the study of cultural fields rather than the economic field. From Marx we turn to Gramsci and his theory of intellectuals that turns on the understanding of hegemony – a notion at first glance similar to, but in the final analysis profoundly different from, Bourdieu's symbolic domination. When asked to explain the difference between his own work and that of Gramsci, Bourdieu dismisses the very question. Yet I shall show that this conversation is pivotal to all the others.

Frantz Fanon, whose account of the colonial revolution is in many ways parallel to that of Bourdieu (their stays in Algeria overlapped), suffers the same fate as Gramsci. There is no serious engagement, but only an occasional contemptuous dismissal of Fanon's writings on the colonial revolution as dangerous, speculative and irresponsible. There is no reference to *Black Skin, White Masks* (1967 [1952]), which is an exemplary treatment of the symbolic violence of racism. From Fanon we turn to Freire, whose point of departure is quite similar to Bourdieu's – a deep-seated cultural domination or internalised oppression. But the solution is to develop a distinct pedagogy of the oppressed that liberates them from oppression. Although Freire is not mentioned by name, we can presume that Bourdieu would dismiss him along with other forms of critical pedagogy calling for the transformation of education. Having no confidence in the common sense of the oppressed, Bourdieu would reject a pedagogy that relies on dialogue and focus instead of making the dominant culture accessible to all.

We turn next to Simone de Beauvoir, whose account of masculine domination as symbolic violence predates and surpasses the account Bourdieu offers in his book, *Masculine Domination* (2001 [1998]), which makes only one reference to Beauvoir. The reference is not to *The Second Sex* (1989 [1949]), but to Beauvoir as the unknowing victim of Sartre's



## Bourdieu in South Africa

symbolic violence. This is a travesty. Beauvoir's account of masculine domination as symbolic domination is not only superior to Bourdieu's, but always seeks emancipatory challenges to that domination, although liberation only comes with socialism. I then turn from Beauvoir to C. Wright Mills, whose accounts of methodology and stratification, and their public engagements are astonishingly parallel, especially when one takes into account the differences in historical and national contexts. We can see that Mills is the American Bourdieu or Bourdieu is the French Mills, both borrowing from, but also careful to separate themselves from, Marxism. I end with a conversation between Bourdieu and myself. Instead of speaking through the voices of other Marxists, I speak in my own voice, bringing my interpretations of domination, based on my ethnographic work in capitalism and state socialism, into dialogue with Bourdieu, reconstructing my own understanding of capitalism and state socialism, while questioning the depth of Bourdieu's symbolic domination.

If Parsons presented the growth of theory as based on consensus, papering over conflicts and emphasising synthesis, and if Bourdieu presented the growth of theory as based on combat, repressing the other, I present the growth of social science as based on dialogue. Here, each side learns about its assumptions and its limits through discussion with others, leading not to some grand synthesis, not to mutual annihilation, but to reconstruction. The growth of Marxism has always relied on an engagement with sociology as its alter ego, and in our era the pre-eminent representative of sociology is Pierre Bourdieu, and so he provides the impetus for the reconstruction of Marxism for the 21st century.

What I find so striking when reading Bourdieu in South Africa is how alert his texts are to the textures of social order, how acutely conscious they are of the accumulated weight of centuries of social structure that define 'the way things are', and how light that weight seems, embedded as it is in language and embodied in practices that have evolved gradually over time. His analysis is fine-tuned to the intimacies of domination and subordination – to the way they are inscribed in bodies, language and psyches.

Our own social reality appears to be the polar opposite – fractured, contested, disputative, disorderly, violent. In contrast to Bourdieu's account of profoundly stable domination, reproduced as it is through the social structure of field, habitus and symbolic violence, we have challenge, reversal and constant shifts in meaning. The order of apartheid was ruptured and overthrown by countless initiatives that entailed not only resistance, but the formation of counter-orders. Symbolic violence is 'a gentle violence, imperceptible and invisible even to its victims' (Bourdieu, 2001 [1998]: 2); South African violence has been throughout its colonial history, and still is, rough, physical, all too visible in battered, punctured and dying bodies, whether it is police violence against strikers, subaltern violence against foreigners or domestic violence against women.

So why read Bourdieu in South Africa?

It may be that Bourdieu's very attentiveness to the question of order helps us to think about the limits of order and the contestation over these limits. One of our problems is how to think about resistance, about social fragmentation, about disorder, about pervasive violence – which should necessarily mean paying attention to different kinds of order as well. Local orders that emerge 'from below', formed by subaltern communities and activities and not infrequently shaped by elements of pre-colonial culture and practice, as well as by new networks and organisational forms, may support or subvert state orders. All too often, it seems that the master categories of sociology – state and society, bureaucracy and industrialisation, class, development, modernity – struggle to encompass our realities, and instead of illuminating them, impose a grid of concepts that leave us dissatisfied and with the sense that something crucial has been left out; not

to speak of the sense such sociology gives us that our society is something less than it ought to be, or that we have not yet arrived at our destination, at a place we can feel is somehow whole and explicable.

Bourdieu clearly finds the master categories of sociology inadequate, and so he reworks sociology, inventing and refashioning concepts so as to explore domination, order and social reproduction. To do this, he draws from his ethnographic studies among the Kabyle in Algeria, conducted using a different disciplinary framework – anthropology. This is interesting: whereas sociology and its master categories evolved in a systematic attempt by social scientists in the West to understand their societies' transition to modernity, anthropology was designed as its sister discipline, with the purpose of understanding non-Western 'traditional societies', and to do this it had to adopt a conceptually more flexible, open-ended approach. It had its master categories to be sure, but decolonisation and the post-colonial world challenged its implicit assumptions profoundly.

When the anthropological gaze is turned back on the West, it sometimes sees things freshly and proves itself able to adopt a conceptual inventiveness in ways that sociology may find difficult to do. The discipline that arose to codify the West's view of the 'other' may provide social scientists with a way to look at the West differently, through different categories, precisely as an other – and may even provide social scientists from the South with the tools for 'provincialising' the West and its social science. To some degree, this is what happens with Bourdieu, with his rethinking of the state, for example (1994).

It should also be said that what anthropology lacks – in contrast to sociology – is precisely the firm structure provided by a deep conceptual grid such as the state–society–economy triad. This too is evident as a lack in much of Bourdieu's work – the focus on discrete fields without a theory of civil society; the silence about the dynamics of economic transformations and their impact on social processes, for example.

Leaving these questions aside, though, Bourdieu's focus on the mechanisms of order and the concepts he finds it necessary to elaborate in order to explore this – field, habitus, classification, cultural capital, symbolic domination and symbolic violence – may point us towards exactly the sites that must be examined if we are to think about the limits of order. Symbolic violence may help us to think about physical violence; habitus may help us to think about resistance.

It is also possible that the subtlety of Bourdieu's thinking about domination and order may alert us to the processes of ordering beneath a surface that appears unruly and fragmented, pointing towards deep

continuities of domination and racial ordering derived from our colonial and apartheid past, as well as subaltern formations of resistance and counter-order. Many aspects of South African society – from the brutal facts of economic control and the distribution of poverty to the subtle ordering produced in language and symbols – are deeply shaped by this history, but in ways that remain opaque in public discourse precisely as a consequence of symbolic violence.

On the other hand, it may be that Bourdieu's concepts are rendered useless in our social reality, that they flutter about like moths caught in strong sunlight, out of their element, pointing to the need for other concepts. And indeed, one hopes that continuing interrogation of Bourdieu's work by the light of our social reality has the potential not only to generate new insights in our own research, but also to unsettle metropolitan sociology and shake up its master categories, contributing to a robust engagement – whether in the form of combat sport or dialogue – between centre and periphery, North and South, the West and 'most of the world', as Partha Chatterjee puts it.

These conversations with Bourdieu are set up essentially as a series of dialogues between Marxists and Bourdieu, choreographed by a Marxist, Michael Burawoy. This too resonates with South African sociology, which in its most creative and prolific wing – that is to say, its progressive wing – is Marxist or Marx-inspired. This sociology has concentrated on social transformations, colonisation and its impact on traditional society, industrialisation, state formation, agrarian transformation, urbanisation, class formation, patriarchy, changing labour regimes, trade unionism, urban resistance and so on. This is a rich sociology of transition, transformation and struggle. Why, then, contemplate a conversation with Bourdieu? Surely we have within the Marxist sociological tradition in South Africa and within the broader international resources of Marxism sufficient conceptual apparatus to wrestle with our reality?

Our Marxism tends to suffer from a similar problem to our sociology. It too works with master categories through which capitalism is analysed – schemas of change and assumptions about transitions between modes of production, revolution and reform, classes and state, class struggle and ideology, capitalism and socialism, social movements and resistance – which too often are mapped quite crudely onto our social reality. Marxism tends towards reductionism in its analysis of such salient features of our history and our present as colonialism, racism and ethnicity.

Many South African Marxists are currently so intent on finding the signs of a class movement and the prospects for an alternative future

that they grapple insufficiently with the contradictions, ambiguities and complexity of the present. The workings of democracy, state efforts at redistribution and development, far-reaching policy innovations, and, on the other hand, working-class xenophobia, popular prejudice, racial and ethnic identities, the intractability of patriarchy, repertoires of violence, social fragmentation, lawlessness, the fragility of authority – these remain little explored, and so the sociology of change seems disconnected from the actual social changes taking place all around us.

To take one example: Marxist analysis of post-apartheid society tends towards a ritualistic denunciation of neoliberalism and the neoliberal state – concepts that are assigned tremendous and far-reaching explanatory power, but which quite ignore other, equally important, dimensions of state functioning. Post-apartheid South Africa has seen an explosion of redistributive social spending by the state, with the building of 2.3 million houses and the dramatic expansion of social grants from 2.5 million recipients in 1996 to 14.5 million in 2010 constituting two of the most obvious achievements. On the other hand, sections of the state are increasingly dominated by processes of elite formation, including patronage and corruption, and by its status as the symbolic site for the assertion of African sovereignty (Von Holdt, 2010a). Neither of these dimensions can be reduced to ‘neoliberalism’.

Given these weaknesses within current sociological Marxism in South Africa, dialogue between Marxism and Bourdieu, with his concentration on symbolic domination and the reproduction of social order, may contribute to the regeneration of South African Marxism, inviting it to rethink its assumptions and its ways of seeing.

There is something else as well. Bourdieu, with his emphasis on the construction of scholarly fields and on the necessity for reflexivity regarding scholarly practices, invites us to consider a matter to which we are too often blind: the racial structure of South African sociology and what this may mean for the nature of the analytical narratives it establishes.

The canonical authorities of South African sociology are virtually all white. It may be responded that the white authors of mainstream sociology are mostly progressive and Marxist, aligning themselves broadly with the interests of the oppressed and on the side of democracy. These points may be true as far as they go, but what is the significance of the racial structure of this field for the production of knowledge and the search for truth? Is it not necessarily the case that most white scholars, lacking the experience of racial oppression – and not only that, but experiencing the structures of racial oppression as *dominants*, and

therefore as beneficiaries and protagonists of its symbolic violence – are likely to have a limited feel for its place in social reality and therefore in the scholarly analysis of social reality? To take this point further, white scholars have a direct stake, emotional as much as material, in continuing to underplay the significance of racial power.

And indeed, Marxist sociology (in contrast to the communism of the South African Communist Party) has tended to treat national oppression, racism and racial discrimination as epiphenomena in relation to the narrative of capitalist accumulation, class domination and class struggle – something that Marxism allows all too well. Thus, Black Consciousness and the national liberation movement were regarded with a profound scepticism: their focus on epiphenomena was an index of their petty bourgeois class base. In the 1970s many in the white student Left, rejected as ‘liberal’ by black students who were developing the theories and practices of Black Consciousness at the time, turned to Marxism and involvement in the fledging trade union movement (Ally, 2005). Progressive white scholars took an analogous turn in the scholarly field, writing against white liberal historiography, on the one hand, and the national liberation movement and its associated communist movement, on the other.

It is not only the question of race that is important, however; it is also a question of the extent to which the scholarly field reproduces the hegemony of the Western canon, and with it the symbolic violence of hegemonic rationality against the rest of the world – what Bourdieu calls the imperialism of reason. In this logic, South Africa becomes simply the local site of a global logic of development or, in its Marxist manifestation, of capitalist accumulation and reproduction. This question is not entirely separate from the racial one, since there are a multitude of reasons why white scholars with a settler background might feel more at ease reproducing the Western canon – in which Bourdieu, of course, is a towering figure – than seeking a position of critique founded in the ‘periphery’. What is required, in the words of Suren Pillay (2009), is not only a deracialisation of knowledge production, but its decolonisation.

The power of white scholars to define the stakes and rules of the scholarly field, and to shape its analytical narratives, its curricula and its themes may appear to be invisible, but is all too visible to many black students and staff. The symbolic violence of white seniority and authority is alive and replicated in the academy. The scholarly establishment may comfort itself that the new generation of black scholars and researchers will confine themselves to amplifying the sanctified narratives through their better ability to conduct research in townships and workplaces,

but already they are subverting, contesting and reconstructing the dominant narratives.<sup>3</sup> Race plays a critical part in this, as do new narratives about our colonial history and post-colonial reality, and a reconsideration of the canon itself, including Bourdieu. New forms of combat in the scholarly fields of sociology and its sister disciplines should therefore be anticipated and welcomed.

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#### NOTES

- 1 See the responses of Anderson (2002), Duneier (2002) and Newman (2002) to Wacquant's (2002) attack on their work.
- 2 There is, of course, an element of combat in Parsons too, for example, in the way he deals with Marx at a time when Marxism was enjoying a certain renaissance in US sociology: '[J]udged by the standards of the best contemporary social-science theory, Marxian theory is obsolete' (1967: 132). Marx was a 'social theorist whose work fell entirely within the nineteenth century ... he belongs to a phase of development which has been superseded' (1967: 135).
- 3 For recent interventions, see Ally (2005), Buhlungu (2006), Naidoo (2010) and Pillay (2009).

## CONVERSATION 2

### THEORY AND PRACTICE

MICHAEL BURAWOY

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#### Marx Meets Bourdieu

*The historical success of Marxist theory, the first social theory to claim scientific status that has so completely realized its potential in the social world, thus contributes to ensuring that the theory of the social world which is the least capable of integrating the theory effect – that it, more than any other, has created – is doubtless, today, the most powerful obstacle to the progress of the adequate theory of the social world to which it has, in times gone by, more than any other contributed.*

Bourdieu (1991 [1984]: 251)

What is Bourdieu saying here? The historical success of Marxism is to have constituted the idea of class out of a bundle of attributes shared by an arbitrary assemblage of people, what he calls 'class on paper'. Aided by parties, trade unions, the media and propaganda – an 'immense historical labor of theoretical and practical invention, starting with Marx himself' (Bourdieu, 1991 [1984]: 251) – Marxism effectively called forth the working class as a real actor in history, an actor that otherwise would have had only potential existence. However, Marxism did not see itself as constituting the working class, but as discovering and then reflecting the prior existence of an objective class that was destined to make history in its own image. Marxism did not have the tools to understand its