

# CONVERSATIONS WITH BOURDIEU

THE  
JOHANNESBURG  
MOMENT

MICHAEL BURAWOY AND KARL VON HOLDT



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## ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

ANC	African National Congress
COSATU	Congress of South African Trade Unions
CPF	Community Policing Forum
CWP	Community Work Programme
DA	Democratic Alliance
FLN	Front de Libération Nationale/ National Liberation Front
FOSATU	Federation of South African Trade Unions
MEC	Member of the Executive Council
SACP	South African Communist Party
SWOP	Society, Work and Development Institute
UDF	United Democratic Front

## PREFACE

MICHAEL BURAWOY

---

My four-year stint with the Ford PhDs, which had brought me to the University of the Witwatersrand for three weeks every year, had come to an end. Karl von Holdt, then acting director of SWOP (the Society, Work and Development Institute) invited me to come to Wits for a semester on a Mellon Visiting Professorship. I would work with students and faculty and also give public lectures. There was interest in my giving lectures on the work of Pierre Bourdieu, which I had previously done at the University of Wisconsin. I revised and expanded these lectures from six to eight. As at Wisconsin, the idea was to bring together faculty and students from different departments and develop another side to SWOP's activities.

But Wits would be a different experience altogether, as Bourdieu was not the popular theorist in South Africa that he was in Wisconsin. After all, Bourdieu was not only a theorist of the North and from the North, but more specifically of France and from France, which made him more unfamiliar than Anglo-American theorists. His convoluted style of writing, his elliptical sentences, his erudition and his philosophical grounding – in sum, his deployment of cultural capital – make his work challenging to access.

As I had done in Wisconsin, I sought to interpret Bourdieu by presenting his ideas in relation to Marxism through a series of imaginary conversations between Bourdieu and Marx, Gramsci, Fanon, Freire, Beauvoir, Mills and myself, respectively. Bourdieu makes reference to Marx – indeed, his work is a deep engagement with Marx (as well as Durkheim and Weber) – but Marx never receives a sustained examination. As for

Gramsci, Fanon and Beauvoir, his scattered references and footnotes are contemptuous, while Freire and Mills hardly get a mention. Nonetheless, there are some interesting parallels and convergences with these theorists that more often than not evaporate under closer examination. My endeavour was to rescue these figures buried in Bourdieu with a view to problematising both Bourdieu and Marxism. The Marxists I chose – and I realise Mills had an ambiguous relationship with Marxism – were all concerned with developing a theory of superstructures or ideological domination, and therefore most convergent with what lies at the centre of Bourdieu's opus: the theory of symbolic domination. These theorists also had important things to say about intellectuals and the public face of social science, and here too there was much to debate, as Bourdieu was – and still is – the pre-eminent public sociologist of our era. Like Marxist theory, Bourdieu was always concerned with the relation of theory and practice.

Still, this was South Africa, and even if Marxism had more currency here than in other parts of the world, it was nonetheless flagging; and, moreover, Bourdieu's concerns with symbolic domination seemed removed from the South African situation, where physical violence seemed far more salient – something about which Bourdieu has little to say beyond some of his early writings on Algeria. My original intention was to try and show the significance of Bourdieu to the New South Africa; this was, after all, a time of the struggles between African National Congress Youth leader Julius Malema and Congress of South African Trade Unions president Zwelinzima Vavi, struggles that might be seen as precisely open warfare of a symbolic kind, with Vavi even calling for a 'lifestyle audit' for Malema – effectively questioning the basis of ruling-class 'distinction', a questioning that would be difficult to imagine in France, with its settled symbolic order. It was also the time of preparation for the FIFA Soccer World Cup, a spectacle if ever there were one that absorbed the attention of the entire population, masking the real interests at play. Again, the symbolic world of post-apartheid South Africa could not be disregarded. Still, it could be argued that Bourdieu's significance might be the non-applicability of his ideas to South Africa, i.e. that his ideas are irrevocably Northern or French.

The eight conversations held over a period of six weeks in February and March 2010 brought in crowds from different quarters of the university, and each presentation was followed by heated exchanges. They were made all the more interesting by Karl von Holdt, who consistently defended Bourdieu against Marxist detractors, showing how his ideas do

have validity in South Africa. My own attempt to incorporate South Africa into these conversations proved to be paltry and wooden, and so when it came to writing up the lectures, I invited Karl to respond with his own reflections. He has done this in an exceptional manner, in a sense returning Bourdieu to where he began his sociological life – Africa. After all, many of Bourdieu's abiding ideas are taken from his interpretation of the Kabyle kinship society in Algeria. It was from his studies of the Kabyle that he developed the notions of symbolic capital, misrecognition, habitus, male domination and so forth. Bourdieu applied these ideas to French society, and Karl has now taken them back to Africa, pointing to the symbolic dimensions of township violence, the power of the concept of habitus, the disciplinary mode of education and the place of intellectuals in contemporary South Africa.

If I presented a rather arid conversation between Bourdieu and Marxism, Karl has extended the conversational mode to one between Northern and Southern theory, but based on more than three decades of engaged research and contestation in education, labour and community. Karl brings to the forefront a subordinate register in Bourdieu's writings, the dimensions of struggle, crisis and social transformation. He does not, however, engage Bourdieu's writings as a combat sport and he does not dismiss or ignore either myself or Bourdieu, but uses Bourdieu to construct a dialogue about the South Africa of yesterday, today and tomorrow. So we now offer a set of conversations on conversations in the hope of sparking further debate and discussion about the trajectory of South Africa, about the continuing vitality of Marxism and about the relevance of Bourdieu's thought to different contexts.

These conversations have benefitted from many other conversations with colleagues and students: in Berkeley with Xiuying Cheng, Fareen Parvez, Gretchen Purser, Dylan Riley, Ofer Sharone, Cihan Tugal, and Loïc Wacquant, whose boot camp course opened my eyes to the enormity of Bourdieu's achievements; in Madison with Erik Wright, Gay Seidman, Mara Loveman and Matt Nichter; and in Johannesburg with Bridget Kenny, Oupa Lehoulere, Peter Alexander, Irma du Plessis, Prishani Naidoo, Michelle Williams, Vish Satgar, Eric Worby, Shireen Ally, Tina Uys, Andries Bezuidenhout, Sonja Narunsky-Laden, Ahmed Veriava and Jackie Cock. Especial thanks to Jeff Sallaz, who gave me detailed commentary on both the Madison and the Johannesburg Conversations with Bourdieu, and to an anonymous second reviewer who also gave us excellent comments on the draft manuscript. I have tried to address their criticisms and suggestions in the book. Last, but not least, for the past 45

years I have had the good fortune of listening to, learning from and living with two great interpreters of South Africa – Luli Callinicos and Eddie Webster – and it is to them that I dedicate these conversations.

## PROLOGUE

### The Johannesburg Moment

KARL VON HOLDT

---

Forty years ago, in the early 1970s, Durban experienced a ferment of new ideas that were to profoundly shape resistance to apartheid. The central figures in this ferment were two charismatic intellectuals, Steve Biko and Rick Turner. Biko and his comrades founded the Black Consciousness movement and its organisational forms, the South African Students' Organisation and the Black People's Convention, from which emerged a new generation of political activists who went on to organise trade unions, community organisations and the United Democratic Front. Rick Turner's ideas about participatory democracy and the projects he initiated to support a nascent black trade union movement, partly in response to the challenge of Black Consciousness, influenced many of those who contributed to the building of the trade union movement.

The Durban ferment was not only about the ideas of intellectuals; it was also about a shift in popular consciousness. In 1973 some 100,000 workers participated in a wave of strikes in Durban, breaking with the quiescence of the 1960s. By the end of the decade both Biko and Turner had been killed by the Security Police. Their ideas, however, continued to shape the resistance movement in different ways throughout the 1980s.

This was what Tony Morphet – drawing on Raymond Williams's idea of a structure of feeling – called the 'Durban moment', constituted by profound shifts in ideas and consciousness among intellectuals and workers, and setting off far-reaching reverberations across South Africa, way beyond the immediate locale of Durban (Morphet, 1990: 92–93; Webster, 1993).

That was the Durban moment. This book is subtitled 'the Johannesburg moment'. What do we mean by this?

At the simplest level, the title is a reference to the fact that the book grew out of a series of lectures on Pierre Bourdieu, the great French sociologist, given at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg in 2010. The significance of the reference to place is not simply that the lectures took place here, but that they presented an occasion for interrogating the relevance of Bourdieu's work to South Africa – and, more importantly, confronting the meaning of South Africa for Bourdieu's theory. It is through exploring the significance of this interrogation and confrontation that we can arrive at some sense of the possible meaning of a 'Johannesburg moment'.

In contrast to the Durban moment, the Johannesburg moment is a post-apartheid moment; that is to say, it is a moment of political rupture with apartheid – a moment of the new Constitution, democracy, reconstruction and transformation.

Yet in our book – which presents a multilayered conversation, not only between Bourdieu and an array of interlocutors presented by Michael, not only between 'Johannesburg' and Bourdieu, but also between Michael and myself – I argue that this place (Johannesburg and its hinterland) is distinguished by a fractious and turbulent set of social contestations, both small and large, over the shape of an emerging social order in post-apartheid South Africa. So sharp is this contestation, so multi-centred and diverse, that we may speak of multiple local moral orders, a social fragmentation and a profound disordering of society, which are evident in many different ways, among them an argument deep in the heart of our society over the meaning of 'law' and 'order'.

Thus, from the start, the Johannesburg moment is one that disrupts the stark binary of oppression and freedom and the comforting trajectory of transformation and reconstruction. Nor should we imagine that such arguments and contestations take place only on the far peripheries of our city, in places like Trouble (discussed in the main body of the book), from which its towering buildings and twinkling lights cannot even be seen. They take place as well in its heart, in those buildings and their streets, as well as its leafy suburbs.

One of the icons of Johannesburg is the Constitutional Court and the wider Constitution Hill precinct. It symbolises the new post-apartheid order in South Africa – the order of democracy and human rights. The Constitution and its Court are supposed to rise above society, just as they rise above the cacophony of Johannesburg on their hill, and preside over

all institutions, deliberating, adjudicating and providing guidance in the construction of a new order.

But in reality, what is the reach of the Constitution and its Court? Trouble itself is only 30 or 40 km away from the Constitutional Court as the highway goes, but the Constitution appears to have little force there, just as the law seems to have little presence. If the Republic is defined by the constitutional order, then Trouble belongs in a different Republic; or, perhaps, Trouble is a place of struggle between contending Republics.

Constitution Hill is home to a moving exhibition on the conditions of the apartheid jails and the role of these jails in securing the apartheid order. Visitors can be forgiven for imagining that there are no longer jails in our constitutional democracy, and that if there are, conditions for prisoners are decent and humane. The truth is very different – our jails are more overcrowded than ever before, and violence and corruption continue to pervade many of them. What role do they play in securing the post-apartheid order? The Constitution no doubt seems remote both to the incarcerated and their jailers.

Nor can the Constitution remain above the fray. The Constitutional Court itself is increasingly at the centre of controversy, ranging from the dispute between Judge Hlope and some Constitutional Court judges to the process of appointing a new chief justice. There can be little doubt that the same contestations, the same battles over the nature of order, the same cacophony of Johannesburg will necessarily penetrate its inner workings. The progressive liberal consensus that characterised its early years may well give way to sharp differences that reflect wider divergences, each with substantial constituencies in society, over such questions as social conservatism or the relative power of the executive branch of government.

Johannesburg is also the city of head offices, and the streets outside the headquarters of the African National Congress (ANC) in 2011 were witness to violent clashes between the police and the supporters of the president of the ANC Youth League, Julius Malema, protesting against the disciplinary hearings brought against him and his executive by the ANC. This provides a dramatic image for 'a profoundly unstable ANC which at the same time exists in a state of profound paralysis' due to the fierce struggles between different factions of the elite, as well as different constituencies of the Tripartite Alliance, over the control and direction of the organisation (Von Holdt, 2011a). Authority and discipline have become extremely unstable and highly contested within the organisation, much as they have in the broader society. Indeed, the ANC general

secretary warns that the ANC is 'imploding' because 'chaos and anarchy are good forests for mischief' (*The Star*, 21 September 2011).

Thus, Johannesburg confronts us with all the contradictions and tensions of post-apartheid reality at their most intense. By virtue of its dynamism and scale, the city serves to refract them so that the dynamic interaction between order and disorder, between multiple orders and the jagged edges of ruin, become most visible and most intense in this place. Johannesburg was always at the centre of the making and remaking of the South African order. However, this moment is different, characterised, as noted above, by an historic rupture.

New forces, new problems and new questions come to the fore as we emerge from the ruins of the old. Many of our assumptions are questioned and much of what we took to be true breaks to pieces. We find we have to think again. Clashing narratives provide us with alternative ways of naming ourselves, evident in the multiple meanings assigned to our city. Are we a 'world-class African city' in the making, as the city authorities would have us believe? Is Johannesburg the second-greatest city after Paris, as Johannesburg artist William Kentridge's title so ironically proclaims? Are we a Third World slum? Are we a site of the African Renaissance, or are we another anecdote in the tale of Afro-pessimism? Is London a suburb of Johannesburg, in another of Kentridge's musings (Cameron, Christov-Bakargiev & Coetzee, 1999: 109)? Is Johannesburg a suburb of Lagos, or Harare? Whose story is it in which we play out our roles?

Again, we are reminded of the sharp contrast with the Durban moment. The latter was founded on two binaries – the class binary of worker versus capitalist and the racial binary of the black oppressed versus white domination. Both of these binaries designated the agents of history and located them in master narratives of progress. Both narratives provided for a triumphal ending after long periods of suffering and struggle. The Johannesburg moment is that ending, however, it disrupts those neat binaries. The master narratives and their moral certainties are no longer clear. In its place we have multiple symbolic orders in contention over such matters, paralysis in our present and uncertainty in our future.

It is perhaps inevitable that the situation should give rise to an attempt to assert a new binary – that between order and disorder. Thus, we have the strengthening of social conservatism and the assertion that the erosion of morality and authority must be countered with a new authority, embedded in institutions such as the executive organs of the state or the social structures of patriarchy. We have the increasingly violent responses

of the police to both crime and social protest. We have new attempts to control information, to limit the space of the press.

It is easy for progressives to fall back on moralistic responses to this kind of assertion of conservative order and counterpose the progressive values of the Constitution. But we might do better to interrogate more carefully the sources of this response, and to think more deeply about why there is a pervasive sense that morality and authority are in crisis. Many people in places like Trouble long for an orderliness within which to conduct their daily lives. And where the state fails to guarantee that order, we have the forceful authoritarianism of vigilante mobs and xenophobic crowds imposing a very different kind of order on communities.

We explicitly present the Johannesburg moment – like the Durban moment before it – as a moment of theoretical endeavour: indeed, the disruption of master narratives and their attendant certainties makes a fresh engagement with theory imperative. So we turn to Pierre Bourdieu. Bourdieu is primarily a theorist of order and its reproduction. We confront this Bourdieu with the argumentative, unruly and violence-laden social realities of South Africa – with, precisely, the Johannesburg moment. And in this theatre, we conduct a series of conversations between Bourdieu and (mostly) Marxist intellectuals and theorists, exploring the intersections and divergences between their theories and his. This is a doubly appropriate endeavour, because, in contrast to Bourdieu, Marxism is a theory of struggle and change, and because, as a theory of change, it has been hugely influential both in the struggle against apartheid and in the scholarly field in South Africa.

In these engagements, we see theoretical work as a dynamic endeavour, with intellectuals building onto and borrowing from what went before, or demolishing it and making use of the rubble afresh, as they confront the theoretical constructions of their forebears and opponents while attempting to wrestle into coherence the social world around them. The accumulated weight of social order in the West and in the Western sociology of Bourdieu – and of Mills, and in the Marxism of Gramsci and Beauvoir and Burawoy – is contrasted with the making and remaking of social order in the post-colony, where the old order is ruptured and the new order seems unable to come into being, weighed down as it is with the legacies and conflicts of the old, as well as with new and contradictory claims and battles and confusions – a world for which two of our interlocutors, Freire and Fanon, in turn attempt the remaking of Marxism.

Our Johannesburg conversations are not simply a critique of Bourdieu from a Marxist perspective. We explore Marxism as a living encounter



between individuals and generations. Fanon wrote that decolonisation, 'which sets out to change the order of the world, is clearly an agenda for total disorder'. The disorder of the Johannesburg moment presents a challenge not only for Bourdieu, but also for Marxists.

Marxism and Bourdieusian theory share their point of origin and their reference points in the development of Western society – they can be seen, in other words, as elements in what Bourdieu called 'the imperialism of reason'. The challenge of the Johannesburg moment is to disorder and reorder Western theory so that it is better able to name our own world. Not only that, though: the point is to so rework theory that it enables a rethinking of the West, a renaming of what appears so solid and dominant. In short, the goal, in the words of Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000), is to provincialise Europe.

This is not a project that limits itself, or can limit itself, to Johannesburg or South Africa. The Johannesburg moment is linked to Mumbai, São Paulo, Istanbul, perhaps Cairo, perhaps Lagos, perhaps Beijing (Yongle, 2010), perhaps Moscow, other cities of the global South, or outside of the West, with the accumulated cultural and intellectual resources to undertake such projects. Indeed, Johannesburg is a latecomer to this scene – we have only recently won our political freedom – but we can draw on resources from our past. Explicit in the work of both Biko and Turner, for example, was a questioning of European 'civilisation'.

Nor is the project limited to a set of questions about theory. These questions have urgent practical implications, and if we develop the wrong answers, the consequences could be disastrous. As an illustration, in the first decade of democracy, the ANC government adopted orthodox Western policy prescriptions regarding economic policy, and at the same time took a radically heterodox position on the nature of HIV and AIDS. The result was the deepening of both inequality and the ravages of disease in our society. If the opposite positions had been taken – medical orthodoxy and economic heterodoxy – South Africa might have found itself in a very different position today.

In this book, we begin a process of putting Western theory through the grinder of Johannesburg, probing and reconstructing it in a way that helps us understand our world and name it afresh. At least, that is our ambition. Readers will have to judge for themselves whether it is successful.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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