

**SYMBOLIC
VIOLENCE**
CONVERSATIONS
WITH
BOURDIEU

Michael Burawoy

DUKE UNIVERSITY PRESS
DURHAM AND LONDON
2019

For Eriki

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Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper ∞

Designed by Drew Sisk

Typeset in Garamond Premier Pro by Westchester Publishing Services

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Burawoy, Michael, author.

Title: Symbolic violence : conversations with Bourdieu / Michael Burawoy.

Description: Durham : Duke University Press, 2019. | Includes
bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2019006364 (print)

LCCN 2019009132 (ebook)

ISBN 9781478007173 (ebook)

ISBN 9781478005803 (hardcover : alk. paper)

ISBN 9781478006473 (pbk. : alk. paper)

Subjects: LCSH: Bourdieu, Pierre, 1930–2002—Criticism and
interpretation. | Sociology—France—History—20th century. |
Sociology—Philosophy.

Classification: LCC HM479.B68 (ebook) | LCC HM479.B68 B873 2019
(print) | DDC 301.01—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2019006364>

Cover art: Design and illustration by Drew Sisk

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Every power to exert symbolic violence, i.e. every power which manages to impose meanings and to impose them as legitimate by concealing the power relations which are the basis of its force, adds its own specifically symbolic force to those power relations.

— PIERRE BOURDIEU AND JEAN-CLAUDE PASSERON,
REPRODUCTION IN EDUCATION, SOCIETY AND CULTURE

For symbolic power is that invisible power which can be exercised only with the complicity of those who do not want to know that they are subject to it or even that they themselves exercise it.

— PIERRE BOURDIEU, "ON SYMBOLIC POWER"

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

For many years I was a Bourdieu skeptic. Under pressure from Berkeley graduate students to take Bourdieu seriously, I enrolled in Loïc Wacquant's Bourdieu Boot Camp course in the spring of 2005. It opened my eyes to the ever-expanding panorama of Bourdieu's oeuvre. It was in the memos for that course that I first began imaginary conversations between Bourdieu and Marxism. It took me another four years to develop my own seminar on Bourdieu. Teaching is the greatest teacher of all. I owe an incalculable debt to the students who have passed through those seminars but also to the many audiences who have listened to and commented on the enactment of one or more of the conversations.

Let me mention just a few who have enhanced these conversations with conversations of their own—in Berkeley with Gabe Hetland, Zach Levenson, Mike Levien, Mara Loveman, Fareen Parvez, Gretchen Purser, Raka Ray, Adam Reich, Ofer Sharone, Mary Shi, Shelly Steward, Cihan Tuğal, and Loïc Wacquant; in Madison with Gay Seidman and Matt Nichter; in South Africa with Kate Alexander, Shireen Ally, Andries Bezuidenhout, Jackie Cock, Bridget Kenny, Oupa Lehoulere, Prishani Naidoo, Sonja Narunsky-Laden, Irma du Plessis, Vish Satgar, Jeremy Seekings, Ari Sitas, Tina Uys, Ahmed Veriava, Michelle Williams, Eric Worby, and, of course, Luli Callinicos and Eddie Webster; in France with Quentin Ravelli, Ugo Palheta, Anton Perdoncin, Aurore Koechlin, and Sebastian Carbonell. In addition, I was very fortunate to have two encouraging but anonymous reviewers for Duke University Press.

One friend and colleague, in particular—Jeff Sallaz—has been a source of continual support. When he was a graduate student at Berkeley he put up with my skepticism toward Bourdieu, and then he was generous enough to help me through my conversion. When I first went public with my conversations at the University of Wisconsin–Madison in 2008, he listened to the recordings in Arizona and sent me invaluable comments. When Ruy Braga heard of my Madison conversations he thought they would be important in Brazil for bridging the divide between Marxists and Bourdieusians. So

he organized their translation and publication in Portuguese under the title *O marxismo encontra Bourdieu* (Marxism meets Bourdieu).

At the same time, Karl von Holdt, then head of the long-standing Society, Work and Politics Institute (SWOP) at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, invited me to give lectures in 2010. He bravely accepted my proposal to extend the six Madison conversations to eight. I faced a stimulating and engaged audience, as there always is at Wits, but I had a problem convincing them of Bourdieu's importance. Karl saved the day, stepping in at the end of every lecture to show the relevance of Bourdieu's ideas for South Africa. His conversations about my conversations were duly published by Wits University Press in 2012 as *Conversations with Bourdieu: The Johannesburg Moment*. Since then there has been a French version in preparation by a group of young French sociologists.

The biggest challenge of all was to produce a US version—one suited to the US world of sociology. When Gisela Fosado of Duke University Press invited me to do just that, I set about revising the lectures once again and included two further conversations: one of Bourdieu with himself based on the book *La misère du monde* (*The Weight of the World*), and a prologue tracing my successive encounters with Bourdieu—from skepticism to conversion to engagement. Finally, I wrote a new conclusion that arose from an ongoing dialogue with my colleague Dylan Riley, in which I redeemed Bourdieu against Dylan's Marxist critique.

This all took much longer than expected, but now it is finished. Each conversation can be read by itself, but there is a cumulative theme that interrogates the underappreciated concept that lies at the heart of Bourdieu's writings—symbolic violence.

My lifelong friend and fellow Marxist Erik Wright had difficulty fathoming my Bourdieusian odyssey. While recognizing the enormous influence of Bourdieu's work, he had little patience for its arbitrary claims, its inconsistencies, and its obscurantist style. His skepticism notwithstanding, it was Erik who invited me to give those experimental Madison lectures in 2008. He helped me through them, commenting on them and orchestrating a lively conversation with the audience. He had a unique capacity to draw out what was salvageable, to separate the wheat from the chaff. For more than forty years I was blessed by his generosity—emotional, intellectual, social, and culinary—as we each took intersecting paths between sociology and Marxism. He left us while I was putting the finishing touches to this book. I miss him badly, as will so many others. He was an extraordinary human being. I dedicate this book to him and to the many adventures we had together.

ENCOUNTERING BOURDIEU

My path to Bourdieu has been long and arduous, strewn with skepticism and irritation. His sentences are long, his paragraphs riddles, his essays perplexing, his knowledge intimidating, his books exhausting, and his oeuvre sprawling. When I thought I understood, I wondered what was novel. Struggling with his texts, I experienced the full force of symbolic violence. Pierre Bourdieu is not only the great analyst of symbolic violence, but he is also the great perpetrator of symbolic violence, cowing us into believing that some great truth is hidden in his work. For many years I was anti-Bourdieu.

Taken individually his works are incomplete, but as the pieces came together I began to see the vision that arose from his theory of symbolic violence—a breathtaking panorama stretched before me. Only by putting symbolic violence and its ramifications into conversation with Marxists, those enemies from whom he borrowed so much, could I begin to grasp and then grapple with the ambition of his theoretical mosaic. The conversations began as a mischievous game, but little by little the pace quickened, turning into a trot and then into a headlong gallop as I became absorbed in my own game, obsessed with Bourdieusian theory. The Bourdieusian lens rose ever more powerful, ever more paradoxical, posing a new challenge to Marxism and giving a new meaning to sociology.

In the United States, as in other countries, sociologists grew increasingly receptive to Bourdieu over time, to the point that he is now one of the discipline's most-cited figures (Sallaz and Zavisca 2007). Critical sociologists of education such as Annette Lareau (1989) were among the first adopters, extending Bourdieu's early research on "schools as reproduction machines." As more of Bourdieu's books became available in English, scholars began