

Bourdieu in South Africa: order meets disorder

What I find so striking, reading Bourdieu in South Africa, is how alert his texts are to the textures of social order, how acutely conscious of the accumulated weight of centuries of social structure that define ‘the way things are’, and of how light that weight seems, embedded 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 it is inscribed in bodies, language, 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, 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. One of our problems is how to think about resistance, 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 precolonial 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 in place 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 society's 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. 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 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 a salient features of our history and our present as colonialism, racism and ethnicity.

Many South Africans 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 about us.

To take one example, Marxist analysis of post-apartheid society tends towards a ritualistic denunciation of neoliberalism and the neoliberal state, concepts which 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 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 2010). Neither of these two 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 field for its place in social reality and therefore in the scholarly analysis of social reality? To take this point further, may white scholars not 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 SA 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 the 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 fledgling trade union movement. 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, though that is important. 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, is not only a deracialisation of knowledge production, but its decolonisation (2009).

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.¹ Race may play a surprising part in this, as will 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 be anticipated and welcomed.

References

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Pillay, Suren (2009)

¹ For recent interventions, see Naidoo 2010 and Pillay 2009.