

Resurrecting the subaltern: bodies of defiance

Bourdieu is interested in the subordinated body which the subaltern habitus predisposes to manual labour, as well as to deference, humility and a physical stance of submission. This immediately poses the question of the body in resistance. The body on strike is already a body of defiance, refusing the routines of subordination and of the supervisor's instruction, disrupting authority. Striking workers today chant songs with their roots in the freedom songs of the 1980s, dance the toyi-toyi war-dance that originated in the military camps of MK, and carry sticks that they understand to symbolise acts of fighting or war.

Where does this – the refusal, the defiance – fit into the idea of habitus, which predisposes the dominated to find domination invisible, and submit to it? Nor does the body of resistance only come into being at the moment of explicit collective mobilisation. In my study of workers struggles at Highveld Steel in the apartheid era, workers talk about a continual resistance to the pace of white managers and their machinery, about an 'apartheid go-slow' on the part of African workers. Workers at the Daimler-Benz plant in East London wore wooden AK-47s strapped to their bodies on the production line, symbolising the connection between their struggles and the military struggle of the ANC, while supervisors locked themselves into their offices (Von Holdt 1990). Can Bourdieu's theory account for the resistant body, the body that refuses the machinery and structures of domination?

According to Bourdieu, historical critique is a "a major weapon of reflexiveness" which "makes it possible to neutralise the effects of naturalisation" (2000:182). For Bourdieu, it is the scholar who has the time and occupies a location which makes it possible to pursue this task. The first strike I went to after arriving in Johannesburg in 1986 was an occupation strike in a big engineering works. Hundreds of workers were gathered in a solid and disciplined phalanx, toyi-toying slowly up the main roadway between the factory buildings. Many were bearing cardboard shields, and steel replicas of spears turned on factory lathes, and in front of them whirled and danced two of the strike leaders, their factory overalls supplemented with animal furs and beads, referencing precolonial culture and resistance to colonial conquest.

History is not something that is solely available to social scientists toiling away in the scholarly fields; it is available to be appropriated and reinvented and marshalled afresh by subalterns. In the colony history is embodied. The bodies of the colonised constitute a site of struggle in the form of conquest and resistance, and in the various endeavours of colonial authority to order and subdue the subject body. Racial classification systems – which reached their apogee under apartheid – provide the foundation for physical and symbolic assault. When the railway strikers in 1987 made use of traditional medicine to protect them they were drawing on all the resources of their history, before going out to confront the guns of the police. Rationalists may point out that the bullets drew blood anyway, but if the medicine gave the strikers strength to challenge the apartheid order, is that not how apartheid was brought to the negotiating table?

In the colonial experience, history has a bodily presence which has to be accommodated in any attempt to make use of Bourdieu's concept of habitus or of bodily dispositions; it may not be impossible for anthropologists or sociologists to make similar arguments about the subordinated body in the metropolis.

In Bourdieu, for the most part, habitus and symbolic violence fit the embodied individual, the social body, seamlessly into social structure, so that social reality appears most of the time as ordered and coherent, and domination becomes natural and invisible. This is how Bourdieu resolves the opposition between agency and structure, but he does so in a way that removes agency from the picture. "The body is in the social world but the social world is in the body", so that the body can only act in accordance with the social world, by which it is "*pre-occupied*" before it acts (Bourdieu 2000: 142, 152). This comes close to constituting a tautological circle which allows little room for agency or volition.

In contrast, the colony poses the question of the *limits* of order, and the limits of authority's power to occupy the body. The potentiality of the body of defiance is present within the body of submission, corresponding to the distinction James C Scott (1990) draws between 'the public transcript' of deference and submission and the 'hidden transcripts' of resistance. It is quite intriguing to read the early Bourdieu on the anticolonial struggle in Algeria: in his account of settler colonialism, racialised oppression is totally transparent and resistance is inevitable – to the extent that it requires no explanation. (Reference) This is of course too simple an account of colonial domination, as we shall see in the conversation between Frantz Fanon and Bourdieu, but its interest lies in the contrast with his later work on the invisibility of domination in the West.

Echoes of the Algerian experience do surface at critical moments in Bourdieu's text, particularly when he considers the possibilities of social change and the disruption of domination. Contradictory positions in social structure may generate "destabilised habitus, torn by contradiction and internal division, generating suffering", and the same effect may occur "when a field undergoes a major crisis and its regularities (even its rules) are profoundly changed"; this happens "in situations of crisis or sudden change, especially those seen at the time of abrupt encounters between civilisations linked to the colonial situation or too-rapid movements in social space".

But, strangely, this disjunction does not culminate in collective struggle; instead, Bourdieu emphasises the difficulty agents then have "in adjusting to the newly established order", and the durability of these now maladjusted dispositions creates the "Don Quixote effect"; the disoriented individual is reduced to tilting at windmills, and the possibility of subaltern mobilisation to restructure the field itself is elided (2000: 160-1).

But the question of subaltern agency reappears several times in Bourdieu's text, mostly as a possibility to be gestured towards, rather than something fully explored. Thus 20 pages from the passage discussed above, we find:

The specifically political action of legitimation is always carried out on the basis of the fundamental given of original acceptance of the world as it is, and the work of the guardians of the symbolic order, whose interests are bound up with common sense, consists in trying to restore the initial self-evidences of *doxa*. By contrast, the political action of subversion aims to liberate the potential capacity for refusal which is neutralised by misrecognition, by performing, aided by a crisis, a critical unveiling of the founding violence that is masked by the adjustment between the order of things and the order of bodies. (2000:181)

For Bourdieu it is only the intellectuals who can see through the "silent self evidence" of the given order of things. But if, in the colonial world, it is domination that is self evident? Then what becomes of subaltern agency and intellectual's monopoly of the power to understand?

Notwithstanding their ambiguities and briefness, it is these passages in Bourdieu that I read most avidly, gesturing as they do to our history of resistance and contestation, and at the fractured and endlessly subverted reality we inhabit in Johannesburg today – which demonstrates so forcefully the limits of authority in post-apartheid South Africa; and they seem to gain an added charge of theoretical explosiveness precisely because of their sparseness and elliptical brevity, surrounded as they are by the overwhelming accumulated weight of domination which is the main emphasis of his texts, as Michael points out.

When Bourdieusian theory, drawing on anthropological insights into indigenous society in the colonies, and elaborated in the advanced capitalism of France, is returned to Johannesburg and South Africa, it is confronted by disjunction, fragmentation, subversion, where passages such as those I have quoted above are the ones that really make sense. They need to be expanded and elaborated.

Colonial and postcolonial realities which are deeply structured by their 'founding violence', by domination and the uneven distribution of power, suggest that the social world may better be understood as contradictory, inconsistent, poly-vocal, paradoxical, full of tensions and uncertainties, than as a coherently structured order. In this case, the habitus too should be regarded as complex and contradictory, where different dispositions may be at odds with each other, and a particular disposition may even be dogged by a shadow counter-disposition, to which at times the individual may give way. Considered this way, the relationship between habitus and social world, while structured, is not seamless. The potentiality of the body of defiance is present within the body of submission.

The subaltern has to be brought back in, and theorised as an agent capable of mobilising to change the fields of domination¹. But what kind of subalterns would these be? Workers in their trade unions, which may bear at least a family resemblance to the labour organisations of classical sociology? Or the residents of informal settlements where the

¹ As Jennifer Chun does in her study of the ways casualised workers and their organisations seek to challenge their labour market status in Korea and the US (Chun 2009).

state has a minimal presence and is unable to impose its authority in the face of informal local elites who control land, law and punishment? Or the intellectuals, fighting back against the accumulated weight of the imperialism of reason? Does the agency and mobilisation of subalterns such as these bear any resemblance to Marx's conception of a working class whose historical agency is derived from its essential relationship with capitalism?

Works cited

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