

## Bourdieu, symbolic order and the 'margin of freedom': four sketches for a theory of change

*Pascalian meditations* is, as Burawoy points out, Bourdieu's 'culminating theoretical work', in which he draws together and elaborates on the core concepts developed in a lifetime's research and reflection, referring back as he does so to his wide-ranging empirical studies. The main force of the book's arguments is to explain the stability and durability of social order: field, habitus and symbolic violence form an interlocking whole which ensures the reproduction of existing hierarchies and social orders.

Yet there is an undercurrent to the main argument, or a counter-current, which emerges briefly but vividly at certain points – a probing of the conditions under which the weight of social order may be destabilised or challenged. Some of these concern the potential of a destabilised field, or a contradictory habitus, to generate dynamics of change; Michael and I touch on these in some of the pieces in this book. However, in the final chapter of *Pascalian meditations*, Bourdieu returns to symbolic struggle, and in this iteration he introduces an entirely new dimension: the symbolic order constitutes *a space of relative autonomy with a margin of freedom for redefining the world* and opening up new possibilities:

But there is also the relative autonomy of the symbolic order, which, in all circumstances and especially in periods in which expectations and chances fall out of line, can leave a margin of freedom for political action aimed at reopening the space of possibles. Symbolic power, which can manipulate hopes and expectations, especially through a more or less inspired and uplifting performative evocation of the future -- prophecy, forecast or prediction -- can introduce a degree of play into the correspondence between expectations and chances and open up a space of freedom through the more or less voluntarist positioning of more or less improbable possibles -- utopia, project, programme or plan -- which the pure logic of probabilities would lead one to regard as practically excluded.

The symbolic order introduces a crucial new dimension into an analysis of social reality dominated by the concepts of field and habitus, namely, a flexibility or freedom through which the determinism of structure can be challenged by imagining alternatives. It is worth exploring Bourdieu's meaning as far as possible:

... symbolic power... intervenes in that uncertain site of social existence where practice is converted into signs, symbols, discourses, and it introduces a margin of freedom between their objective chances, or the implicit dispositions that are tacitly adjusted to them, and *explicit aspirations*, people's representations and manifestations.

That is, symbolic power implies 'a margin of freedom' between habitus and field, a space for interpretation and therefore contestation. This becomes a site of 'twofold uncertainty' because the meaning of the social structure remains open to several interpretations, at the same time as the agents are capable of multiple ways of

understanding their actions. In other words, both habitus and field become sites of uncertainty, in radical contrast to the full and forceful weight of Bourdieu's main line of argument:

This margin of freedom is the basis of the autonomy of struggles over the sense of the social world, its meaning and orientation, its present and its future, one of the major stakes in symbolic struggles. The belief that this or that future, either desired or feared, is possible, probable or inevitable can, in some historical conditions, mobilise a group around it and so help to favour or prevent the coming of that future.

This account differs from those summarised above in that it does not end with the alienated, maladjusted individual left disoriented by changing fields, nor does it rely on the intellectual who has the power to unmask domination to mobilise the masses, but rather suggests a significant indeterminacy in which a group can mobilise to shape the future. Here we have collective agency to imagine a different future and disrupt the social order. Finally

... the discourses or actions of subversion... have the functions and in any case the effect of showing in practice that it is possible to transgress the limits imposed, in particular the most inflexible ones, which are set in people's minds... The symbolic transgression of a social frontier has a liberatory effect in its own right because it enacts the unthinkable....

Bourdieu was evidently grappling with the different possibilities for disruption and change available in different locations within his interlocking system of concepts, and in the passages quoted here finds a possibility of critical consciousness on the part of the dominated, resting on the ability to *imagine* an alternative future, in the indeterminacy of symbolic order. Imagination calls forth a potential agency beyond the determinism of structure although, to be comprehensible rather than 'unreal and foolhardy' (236), it has to call on dispositions and structural possibilities that already exist in the world. These passages hold the clues we require in bringing Bourdieu to bear on South Africa -- or in bringing South Africa to bear on Bourdieu!

### *The resistance*

It would be difficult to understand the re-emergence of resistance to apartheid in the 1970s and 1980s in terms of the dynamic between field and habitus. Certainly changing social structures -- the rapid growth of a mass semiskilled working class based in the expansion of manufacturing, and the dramatic increase in the student population concentrated in township secondary schools and in 'bush universities' -- meant that sectors of the black population had increased structural power in the economy and in communities, while the capitalist expansion of the 1950s and 1960s was mired down in structural constraints.

These factors provided the material foundation for the formation of the two key forces in the new resistance -- the black working class and its new trade unions, and the students and their organisations. In both cases, though, the substance of their struggles was a challenge to the symbolic order of apartheid. For workers the trade union struggle was a struggle to be treated as a *human being*: 'Today I see myself as a human being because of the union,' said one illiterate steelworker, and, 'Now you can actually tell the white man what you want, you can speak for yourself; those things were impossible in the dark years of the past, especially for the people before us, our fathers,' said another (Von Holdt 2003:299).

For students there was the elaboration of Black Consciousness, as a symbolic counter-discourse to the racism of apartheid, and then the revolt against apartheid schooling triggered by the imposition of Afrikaans as a medium of instruction -- again, a highly charged moment of symbolic struggle. To the extent that these assertions of agency could be said to involve habitus, the crucial factor is the 'margin of freedom' that symbolic struggle over the definition of social reality afforded first activists, and then growing numbers of supporters, to re-imagine themselves -- to 'see myself as a human being' against a system which denigrated and commodified blacks.

And, as Bourdieu writes, the 'symbolic transgression of a social frontier has a liberatory effect in its own right because it enacts the unthinkable' -- and indeed, with every such transgression, the popular movement won wider support, and the granite-like solidity of the apartheid system was seen to be illusory. By the late 1970s and early 1980s the popular movement was increasingly drawing on the symbolic resources provided by earlier waves of mass resistance. I well remember the public meeting in the Western Cape where the symbols of the banned African National Congress were first displayed, in 1981. At the entrances into the hall young activists proffered baskets of ANC ribbons, and soon the audience of 3000 was wearing ANC colours. Halfway through the meeting three young activists, their identities concealed with balaclavas, marched the ANC flag down the aisle and onto the stage in a moment of extraordinarily potent political symbolism as the popular movement 'unbanned' an organisation which was at the time illegal, exiled, and prosecuting an underground political and military struggle against the regime. This was 'symbolic transgression' at its most charged.<sup>1</sup>

Symbolic transgression and mobilisation was profoundly *embodied*, from the ritual raising of clenched fists and call-and-response salute of 'Amandla!', answered with 'Ngawethu!', to the chanting of freedom songs and marching to their rhythms, a practice which reached its apogee with the *toyitoyi*, a militant, chanted battle-dance which originated in the MK camps outside the country and rapidly spread through the internal popular movement. Such rituals, songs and dances conveyed both exuberance and resolve, welding huge gatherings of people in halls, factories, mines, streets and funerals

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<sup>1</sup> This meeting was preceded by fierce struggles within the organising committee between activists who supported 'Congress' and those who favoured more 'workerist' political ideologies, and precipitated a split in the community movement and tensions with the trade unions; nonetheless, 'Congress' rapidly became the hegemonic force in the popular movement, partly because of the potency of its symbolic resources.

into mass phalanxes of resistance and insurgency. Indeed, public performance was a central dimension of the popular movement's power. Every death led to a funeral which became a mass theatre of community unity and refusal to submit. It could be said that a new habitus, a habitus composed of dispositions to resistance, bravery, defiance, was forged out of these bodily performances -- and that such a habitus was necessary if people were to face the hazards of bullets, detention and torture which the struggle entailed.

Public performance of the popular movement provided also the arena in which was forged a new symbolic universe ordered around ideas of freedom, democracy, non-racialism, people's power, women's rights, workers' rights, socialism, armed struggle, making apartheid 'ungovernable', and so on. In the face of this symbolic universe and the organisational power which underlay it, the symbolic order of apartheid lost its hold and its coherence and in the end the regime became less and less able to speak and therefore unable to act, beyond the spasmodic bouts of repression facilitated by national states of emergency.

Habitus does not seem able to explain the emergence of resistance to apartheid; rather, habitus provided one location -- uncertain and contested -- amongst others for symbolic struggle between the embodied submission demanded by apartheid and the embodied defiance evoked by resistance and democracy. In explaining large-scale durability or overthrow of regimes, habitus can only be a secondary concept; of central importance is symbolic order and resistance, and its relation to structural and material power in the economy and society.

### *Transition and after*

The symbolic struggle between the popular movement and the apartheid regime continued through the process of negotiated transition, and was stabilised in the form of the new democratic Constitution, which laid the basis for the emergence of a new symbolic order centred on the idea of democracy and the transformation of the social structures of racial domination in the economy and society.

While, at one level, the new constitutional order backed by broader national consensus did appear to stabilise the symbolic universe of a new South Africa, at other levels it opened up new arenas of contestation, particularly racial contestation over institutional and economic transformation. Contestation within the state has already been discussed in Reflection 3. But the destabilisation of symbolic order is not confined to racial contestation over the meaning of social reality in post-apartheid South Africa. Side by side with these transformations has gone a rapid process of black elite formation out of which a new black middle class, a new black business class, and a political elite are emerging. At the same time, the growth of unemployment and the expansion of insecure work has driven the fragmentation of the working class and formation of an underclass condemned to informal substance activities or idleness.

The formation of historically new classes is not simply a material process of accumulation on the one side and dispossession on the other, of struggles to enter one class or avoid being forced into another, and of attendant social dislocation; it also entails disturbance or disruption of the existing symbolic order, and formative projects to reconstitute symbolic order so as to make sense of new hierarchies and distinctions, new interests, and new social distances.

How will it be known who has power, who is a member of the elite, who has status? This is a particularly urgent question when elite formation is so rapid, and the trajectory from poverty and subaltern status to powerful elite is so steep. A long established ruling class, or a long drawn out intergenerational process of class formation, may evolve more discreet or subtle expressions of status and distinction, but a class, or classes, that tear themselves forth from the subalterns through such internecine struggles, and in which individuals remain subject to sudden reversals of fortune, necessarily has to rely on more robust, and even brash, assertions of status. This is doubly so in South Africa, given the nature of apartheid, which consistently denigrated and undermined the capabilities of black South Africans.

Hence what Jacob Dlamini calls ‘the politics of excess’: conspicuous consumption, the emphasis on marks of distinction that bear witness to high levels of disposable income -- designer clothes, powerful cars, large homes, expensive parties and largesse to friends and associates (Dlamini 2010). These are the signs through which the new elite attempts to stabilise its power and assuage its uncertainties.

The emerging symbolic order of the new elite is oppressive -- and contested -- in other ways, too. Young male protesters in one town related angrily how the mayor had publicly dismissed the protesters as ‘unemployed, unwashed boys who smoke dagga, *abongcolingcoli* [puppets] who are not members of the community’. They pointed out, as did many others, that the mayor herself did not live in the town, and that she had minimal schooling. (Langa, Dlamini & von Holdt 2010)

In a second town, the mayor refused to meet the community, and when she did she told them that residents were like Eno digestive salts: they might bubble up in protest but that would quickly die away. Councillors ‘disdained us, and said *asiphucukanga, sizohlala singaphucukanga* [We are not civilised, we shall remain uncivilised].’ But as in the first town, the mayor herself is disdained because she was for years a ‘tea-girl’ in the Post Office and had only reached grade 4 at school (Dlamini 2010). Evident in these stories is the destabilisation of the symbolic order and uncertainties over the meaning of different markers of status. While insecure members of the new elite seek to establish their status in the symbolic order by denigrating subalterns -- that is, by establishing the terms of symbolic violence against them -- subalterns counter with efforts to contest and undermine the oppressive terms of the symbolic order articulated by the elite.

While much of this subaltern contestation of the symbolic order takes place in language, it becomes most explicit through the insurgent citizenship (Holston 2008) claims that are articulated in direct protest action. So, for example, elite targets of protest claim that the

youth protesters have been bought by disgruntled faction leaders who have their own agendas. Young protesters respond angrily:

It is an insult to my intelligence for people to think we are marching because someone has bought us liquor. We are not mindless. People, especially you who are educated, think we are marching because we bored. We are dealing with real issues here. Like today we don't have electricity. We have not had water for the whole week. (Langa 2010a)

Insurgent citizenship in this context is defined by its claim for work and housing, for an improvement in municipal services, and to be heard and recognized. An end to corruption also features. The repertoires of protest resemble those that were used in the struggle for full citizenship rights against the racially closed citizenship defined by apartheid, and the protesters in post-apartheid South Africa explicitly claim the rights of democracy and citizenship, especially in relation to police violence against their protests:

The Freedom Charter says people shall govern, but now we are not governing, we are being governed. (Langa 2010)

The constitution says we have rights. Freedom of speech, freedom of religion... We have many freedoms... but we get shot at for walking around at night. (Langa, Dlamini & von Holdt 2010)

The police want us to be in bed by midnight. It's taking us to the old days of curfews against blacks. What if I have been paid and want to enjoy my money? (Langa, Dlamini and von Holdt 2010)

The elite engages in symbolic struggle in order to stabilise the material inequality between classes -- what Holston calls 'differential citizenship' in the form of the differential access to basic services, housing, jobs and incomes between the underclass and the elite -- and render it normal. However, the normality and justice of this state of things is contested by subalterns who qualify and reject the discourse of the elite, countering it with their own notions of a fair and just hierarchy and markers of status. The protest movements constitute an insurgent citizenship which demands the expansion of citizenship rights, in the form of services and jobs, as well as in the form of respect by authority for all citizens, and protest action is itself a disruption of the symbolic order of the elite that controls the state.

The breakdown of the symbolic order of apartheid, and contestation over its reconstruction, goes to the heart of many disputes in contemporary South Africa. Corruption, for example, is a lightning conductor for disputes over the meaning of the state and the legitimacy of elite formation. While the government and the ANC routinely denounce corruption, their actual practices suggest that they are unwilling or unable to consistently crack down on it. So, when the chairman of the Northern Province ANC and MEC for Finance was recently charged together with others for fraud amounting to over R 100 million, both the Northern Cape ANC and the ANC Youth League immediately

declared their support for him, and it was announced that he would not be suspended from either of his two offices – a position which was later reversed. On the other hand, COSATU, formally in political alliance with the ANC, repeatedly lambasts the ‘political hyenas’ and ‘predatory elite’ in the ruling party, and challenges its leadership to undergo ‘lifestyle audits’.

Likewise the conflict between the ANC and COSATU over the latter's strategy of developing alliances with independent organisations in civil society: the ANC secretary-general attacked COSATU for ‘betraying’ the ANC and planning to establish a new anti-ANC political party. This outburst suggests that the ANC's conception of democracy -- namely, that it has a monopoly on political legitimacy for representing the black majority, and that independent organisations in civil society are a threat to that legitimacy -- is fundamentally at odds with that enshrined in the constitution. Meanwhile, young protesters at the end of their tether about the corruption and unresponsiveness of local politicians, celebrate when their protests result in their (ANC) protest leaders winning local by-elections, but warn that they will resort to violence if the new councillors in turn betray them, as ‘violence is the only language the government understands’. (Langa, Dlamini and von Holdt 2010)

These disputes are not simply spats between different political organisations or factions, they constitute heated disagreement over the nature of democracy and the new political order. They are, in other words, symbolic struggles over the meaning of social reality. The ANC itself is unstable and paralysed, not only by the rivalry between competing political factions for high office and access to patronage networks, but also because of its inability to speak for, or evoke, a consistent notion of symbolic order.

The current situation may be better described as a symbolic crisis or classification crisis, rather than a straightforward symbolic or classification struggle. There is, indeed, a widespread anxiety in South Africa about the breakdown authority, within the ANC, within government, within schools and within the family. Crime is a lightning rod for this anxiety: while citizens bemoan their insecurity and berate government for not doing enough to protect them, each new police Minister promises to use force to restore order. And indeed, while an average of about 100 police officers per annum have been killed on duty over the past two years, an average of 590 people died as a result of police action over the same period, an average of 1600 were assaulted by police, and over a one-year period 294 died in police custody, seven of them after torture and 90 due to ‘injuries sustained in custody’ (Mail & Guardian 27 May-2 June 2011). The policing of protests and strikes has also been increasingly confrontational and violent over the same period, with the unprovoked killing of Andries Tatela in Ficksburg only the most recent.

It is not clear how this impasse will be resolved. Will one or other coalition of social forces gradually prevail in assembling sufficient symbolic power to dominate the process of forging a new hegemonic symbolic order? Will the current stalemate between contending social forces persist indefinitely, producing a kind of institutionalised and chronic disorder across society and the state? Will the state resort to a strategy of force to reinstall order and establish its monopoly over symbolic violence and symbolic power --

demonstrating in the process the necessary relationship between physical violence and symbolic violence?

*Habitus: an intermediate concept?*

As Michael argues, though, what is clear is the inability of the concept habitus to explain the durability or fragility of social order, notwithstanding Bourdieu's claim that it is 'no doubt one of the most powerful factors of conservation of the established order' (231). The concepts of symbolic power, symbolic order and symbolic struggle, I have tried to show, provide considerably more insight into exploration of order, disruption, resistance and disorder. It is these that restore indeterminacy to social structure and habitus, creating a 'margin of freedom', as Bourdieu describes it. In the light of this, it seems to me that Michael's analysis of the transparency of social structure and its role in the collapse of the state socialist order could be expanded. After all, the collapse took place not only in the workplace, but at the borders of countries and in their public squares -- sites of tremendous symbolic force in the life of any nation.

Finally, I'm not sure that the inability of habitus to explain social change is sufficient reason to abandon the concept altogether, as Michael concludes. What do we do, then, with the insights into various forms of domination by some of the key Marxist thinkers whose engagement with Bourdieu through the medium of Michael makes these conversations so productive? How do we understand the symbolic violence of racial oppression explored by Fanon (as indeed by Steve Biko), or the symbolic violence of male domination explored by Beauvoir, without some kind of concept of an interiority, which is what Bourdieu attempts to map out with habitus? Is it sufficient to say that these forms of symbolic violence reside only in exterior social structures and that we do not need to understand how they inhabit our psyches in any way?

Without habitus, how do we think about Bourdieu's insight into the embodied nature of domination, the way in which submission, deference and resistance are inscribed in the body and its stance and postures, as much as in the mind? Think here of the intersection between Bourdieu and Gramsci, as they analyse the physical discipline that correlates to mental discipline as it is taught in the schools of the sanctified culture. Is the idea of social structure sufficient to grasp the physicality or corporeality of social relations and social repertoires?

Perhaps habitus is a useful concept at a more intermediate level of analysis. I'm thinking here of how the dispositions of defiance, bravery and rebellion were embodied in the chants and dances of the *toyi-toyi*. This involved a kind of physical and emotional 'countertraining' in resistance (Bourdieu 2000:172; see discussion in Chapter 2). The *toyi-toyi* persists in the repertoires of strikes and protests in post-apartheid South Africa. Past dispositions and bodily repertoires have an ambiguous durability even in a substantially changed political context. Strikers and protesters explain that the *toyi-toyi* does not have the same meaning as in the past, when it marshalled insurrectionary struggles to overthrow the state; but nonetheless, its current meaning partakes of the



symbolism of violence and warfare, disrupting the authority of the state in order to call attention to the grievances of the people.

In the time of negotiated transition, a shop steward was referring to the depth of this habitus when he told me that ‘a culture of resistance is inherent in the hearts and minds of the workers; I am sure to change that culture there has to be a process of learning’. (Von Holdt 2003: 194) And in 2008, discussing strike violence in the recent public service strike, a former shop steward said,

Since I was born, I have seen all strikes are violent. There are no such strikes as peaceful strikes. Some workers do not join a strike because of fear. By force they must join the strike. Otherwise anybody would do their own thing. (Von Holdt 2010b)

This worker draws attention to a process of historical habituation through which a strike gathers certain meanings and bodily repertoires which are reproduced in new historical situations. Even more significant is the way youthful protesters in community protests, who are too young to have any direct experience of the toyi-toyi of the 1980s, have adopted exactly the same repertoires, chanting the same songs to the same bodily movements as they gather, throw stones at the police, barricade streets and burn down municipal buildings. They describe the excitement, bravery and fighting spirit that is involved in these confrontations.

In the light of these durable and embodied practices and the emotions they involve, habitus may be a useful concept for exploring the interplay of symbolic power and symbolic order with the individual psyche. It also suggests ways in which historically established repertoires of symbolic challenge may establish a durable presence in the life of a society; such repertoires may become more or less stylised or ritualised over time, but in conditions of symbolic contestation, of the clash between contending symbolic orders, such as exist today in South Africa, they remain a resonant and widely understood element in the struggle over the structures of domination.