

# Pierre Bourdieu's sociological theory of culture

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Pierre Bourdieu is currently the Professor of Sociology at the Collège de France, Paris. He is someone who has experienced in his own life a double transition from a pre-capitalist world to a capitalist one: initially, in his move from Denguin, in the peasant Béarn area of the Pyrenees, to metropolitan Paris, and once again, after his return from the rural South of Algeria, where after being drafted with the Army he became a self-taught anthropologist.

Thus Bourdieu is well-placed to argue that the fundamental element of modernity is the historical shift towards the greater significance of the economy within the whole society. From being a "thing in itself" the economy becomes a "thing for itself". In particular, the gift exchange of goods and labour, which had once been totally organised around reciprocity, is largely replaced. What is substituted for it, of course, is the production and circulation of commodities, but also the enclosure of a sacred island of Art, where an inversion of commodity values emerge, in such a way that high sales no longer count as an acceptable measure of aesthetic value:

The denial of economic interest ...finds its favourite refuge in the domain of art and culture, the site of [a] pure [form of] consumption, of money, of course, but also of time convertible into money. The world of art, a sacred island systematically and ostentatiously opposed to the profane world of production, a sanctuary for gratuitous, disinterested activity in a universe given over to money and self-interest, offers, like theology in a past epoch, an imaginary anthropology obtained by the denial of all the negations really brought about by the economy (1977).

Bourdieu himself is particularly concerned with the fate of art in late capitalist society, arguing that the sociological study of culture is the sociology of religion of our time. Adorno and the theorists of the Frankfurt School saw painters such as Kandinsky as adopting a language of form which was out of reach of the commercial "culture industry", not least because of the epiphanies offered within their works and their two-dimensional grasp of social realities. But Bourdieu forcefully proposes a disturbing, new, demystifying stance. He asks whether the avant-garde might not have become set in an entirely different context once the structures of the modern art market had been established. Thus when the leading exponents of the various modernisms became highly-valued in the art market and their works came to be used to prove that their owners had "a spiritual soul", a fundamental "misrecognition" occurred.

Increasingly, a hagiographic approach to "the artist as saint" has emerged. With it, any attempt to introduce a scientific study of art and its social relations are denounced as *reductionist*. But such an approach, taken seriously, means looking once again at the evolution of artistic autonomy within capitalist modernity and especially at the split phenomena of "the appearance of cultural production specially designed for the market and, partly in reaction against that, a production of pure works destined for symbolic appropriation" (1996:140). The underlying principle of difference between the two has become the opposition of "pure art" to popular taste, where the popular has become negatively associated with the "commercial". In fact "pure art" is less other-worldly, that is, disinterested and non-market-oriented than it appears, and the routine organisation of art operates to ensure that there are actually two "modes

of ageing" and two economic logics functioning, one based on a long-run time perspective with risky undertakings, organised around objects that have a long life ("art"), and the other, with the aid of multiple reproduction, organised around low-risk undertakings with a short-run life (the "commercial" portrait or Boots landscape) (1996:142-6).

Bourdieu's relentlessly empirical investigations into the taste for modernist works as symbolic goods show that its public are not just drawn from other artists, but principally from those patrician families who have "old money", often bankers, liberal professionals and higher education teachers (1984). Thus, once aesthetically certified by a leading critic and authenticated by the artists' signature, the works of the contemporary avant-garde have moved into the arms of power. "Legitimate taste" ("good" taste) is far from randomly scattered: it is the possession of an "aristocracy of culture". Moreover, artistic reputations no longer have to wait for *posthumous* recognition (as with Manet) or middle age (as with Degas, Monet and other members of the impressionist Batignolles Group). Certainly, the reverse world of bohemia, established by the first "heroic modernists", was premised on the ascetic disavowal of the market and a self-denying pursuit of artistic values alone (1996). Thus Flaubert, for example, could be recognised as truly epoch-making in his refusal to make a "pyramid structure" —to present a cumulative narrative order —and in his insistence on a perspectivist treatment in his novels (e.g. *Madame Bovary*). Equally, Manet and Redon refused to use a painting to "say something" and aimed to "liberate themselves from the writer", that is, from any "gloss or exegesis" (1996:136-7).

Such ascetic withdrawal is now no longer an adequate description of contemporary artists. Instead, the longer-term investment of their experiential effort is increasingly a *guarantee* of the art-market's eventual recognition, a recognition which often now comes to the young and which ensures rewards considerably greater than those the commercial market hands out to the mass of illustrators and designers "selling their souls" in standardised activities! The self-presentation of the artist as devoid of monetary interests is meanwhile preserved by the convenient alchemy of the art-dealer. For the gallery owner (or dealer), by concerning him/herself uniquely with the vulgar world of money, frees the creative figure from its grips and thus arranges the transmutation of the artistic philosopher's stone into gold. In this respect, the artist is aided by the School, in the role of the critic. The critic provides *explanations* of the nature of his/her art to a whole professional field which thus consecrates and authorises her (1996:169).

There is also another reason for the changed role of the arts in contemporary society. This concerns their emergence within the field of education, both as the mechanisms for selecting the "best brains" and more indirectly as the means by which the dominant social classes arrange their social inheritance. Bourdieu (1968, with Passeron) saw the post-war bourgeoisie as distinguished from other classes by its acquisition of state credentials in the form of educational success ("meritocracy"). The notion of meritocracy was and is one of the most brilliant rationales of good fortune for the successful few, just as the karma doctrine served to create a perfect theological justification for the hierarchical pre-eminence of the Brahmin few. Moreover, the canon of great artists and writers could be incorporated into such a



state-certified education by means of the mechanisms of critical discrimination (via representation in the National Gallery, Oxford anthologies, etc.). Yet the secret of such disproportionate success in school for the sons and daughters of the dominant class was that they alone possessed, via family visits to museums and libraries, a domestic culture that trained them to penetrate the academic mysteries of the school curriculum. Thus Bourdieu's *The State Nobility* showed that only 32% of students of the great *grandes écoles* (the topmost rung of French higher education) came from the subordinate classes, while earlier research on the universities revealed that in 1964 only 6% of the children of workers (or peasants) were enrolled.

## Bourdieu's Theory of Practice

Bourdieu is becoming synonymous with a "holy trinity" of concepts: habitus, capital and field. There are dangers in stripping these from their conceptual moorings in his other, wider, theories, but I will risk these to show how these "trademark" ideas operate. I will then apply them especially to the art-world, and show how a Bourdieusian perspective refuses a charismatic theory of the isolated artist and resists the interpretation of pure disinterestedness on the part of both public and artists. I shall suggest that Bourdieu represents a powerful analysis of the high culture of modernism but that his social theory also contains certain problematic omissions.

Bourdieu aims to avoid the oppositions based on privilege and prejudice that resonate through the linked dualism of the "individual genius" and the "masses", noting how the deskilling of the subordinate classes has been accompanied by the "hyperskilling" of the genius, how the subordinate classes' incomprehension of high culture has been similar to that of colonised natives awed by colonial power, and how the dominant classes' racist fears of the masses has echoed the irrationality and childishness which was once attributed to "primitives" by the colonising Western powers.

In contrast, for Bourdieu, all action, including artistic work, is modelled on craft action. To put it another way: *practice* is strategic action. Within this strategic action or agency, everyone is capable of improvisation, just as the clarinetist's jazz solo both obeys certain rules but also —as the fruition



back to art its concern with ethical and political interests, which wishes to flee the museum and restructure the role of the art-world within everyday life.

We begin to see, too, why there is no such thing as popular art in Bourdieu's theory. First because the modern artist, bereft of the orthodoxy of the Academic artist, needs the defence of his/her critic, not to speak of a reputable dealer. Second, because the institution of permanent revolution requires the crucial ingredient of the right place (especially presence in the great metropolises of modernity) and also the time when young to experiment. The conditions for these are self-assurance and the financial support that historically has been available only to the sons and daughters of the dominant class (not least the minor aristocracy) by means of an allowance.

We also note that for Bourdieu some arts might be legitimisable (eg cinema or photography or jazz). However, compared with other more securely-consecrated forms they don't bring their potential haute bourgeois public enough returns (in terms of "cultural capital") to reward them for their investment of time and effort. Such art-forms are doomed to be taken seriously only by a tiny "deviant" minority like the junior executives or technicians who make up the members of camera clubs. Photography, therefore, is consigned forever to the outer circle of hell in the form of the mere middlebrow.

I think that Bourdieu overlooked the potential for "consecration" within photography—it might be said that the popular character of photography did delay its legitimisation but that it has now acquired its own canon of great photographers, its own critics and historians and its own educational base in art-schools. However, there is considerable backing to many of Bourdieu's theories, not least in the various British reports of the Arts Council. For example, Moulin's empirical work on the contemporary French art-market (1967), in the *Centre de Sociologie Européenne*, has shown very acutely, by means of interviews with painters, collectors and curators, the precise ways in which critics' aesthetic values are used to bolster exchange values and the paradoxes of the painters of having clients buy their works who are out of sympathy with their views. She indicates the widespread painters' concern for alternative ways of putting their work in the public domain. Gamboni (1989) has shown how being taken up by a wealthy and aristocratic group of clients, as Odilon Redon was, can coincide with a fundamental change of style. This included, in his case, a total change from monochrome symbolist or metaphysical etchings to oil-paintings, suffused with light, and from sombre greys to intense, bright colours. Sapiro's study (1996) of French writing in the period of the Nazi occupation has revealed that many of the organisations of the so-called autonomous literary field, such as the Académie Française, the Nouvelle Revue Française, the Prix Renaudot and the Prix Goncourt, pandered unheroically to the Vichy regime or its German masters, thus displaying in the event the weakness of their humanist rhetoric.

But Bourdieu's theory does have certain problematic elements, following on the poor predictive quality of his research on photography. Let me isolate these briefly. First the concepts of "doxa" or "illusio" tend to suggest that there are no possibilities of moving outside the "game" and beyond the forms of knowledge that prevail within it, knowledge which depends crucially on your location in relation to power. However, unlike Foucault, Bourdieu does suggest that there is a possibility of *lived experience* which may clash with ideology: moreover, in the case of (social) science, this takes the form of procedures for testing reality which are non-discourse-dependent. It is true that despite this there are still certain types of doxa or taken-for-granted assumptions which are ineradicable in a given period because they are opaque, even to social scientists. However, every historian would agree that this is the case to some degree.

Secondly, Bourdieu writes very disparagingly of the "fragile" nature of the alliance between artists and workers, and expects it to dissolve when the artists themselves gain recognition. But in some circumstances, this "fragile" alliance does hold, at least temporarily (eg the Russian and Cuban Revolutions). Artists do suffer exile or even die for their beliefs—I think of Neruda confronted by the Chilean junta, of Lorca in the Spanish Civil War, or Mandelstam, Solzhenitsyn, and others who could have sometimes taken easier ways out. The question here, it seems to me, is to deepen and make more precise our historical sociology of such testing-points. Under what conditions do groups of artists—like Quakers and some early trade-union groups—offer resistance or seriously undertake the risks of "martyrdom"? (Fowler, 1997)

Further, I should refer to Bourdieu's disturbing views about artists' "interest in disinterestedness", which has led one critic to accuse him of having a narrow and unacceptably determinist position, which lacks any room for altruism (Alexander, 1995). My inclination is to follow Bourdieu here: he points even to medieval monks having occasionally come to blows, such was the intensity of their belief in their religion (1998c: 78). Yet he is also aware that monastic communities could reveal considerable levels of disinterestedness. The brothers scourged themselves with consciences more subtle and vigilant than most. The same should be noted of artists, who, after all, deliberately avoid economic capital at the outset of their adult careers. They might quite reasonably want the degree of material comforts which are necessary for work, without being held to pursue economic interests single-mindedly. The problem here is not Bourdieu's theory but rather an "invention" of "the artist" which projects on them idealised human qualities, transforming them into figures devoid of practical needs (Bourdieu 1998 c: 85-8).

My view would also be that Bourdieu does incur some costs in broadening out the idea of "capital" to include social and cultural capital. Economic capital is necessarily zero sum—the more surplus value the employer has, the less the worker has. But it is not clear to me that "cultur-

al" (or "informational") "capital" are necessarily either zero-sum or hierarchical in all societies. These could, without internal contradiction, be more democratised. Equally, artists' symbolic "capital" in the form of reputations does not necessarily have to be exploitative of others, although it may be competitively-based.

It is often said that Bourdieu might be accurate in writing of the centrality of high culture or the aesthetic in France, but in France alone. However I disagree with this view: many of the same phenomena appear in Scotland. I cannot agree with Halle's criticism (taken to be implied by his American study) that Bourdieu has overstressed the significance of the drive for symbolic power in such areas as the possession of abstract art. Nor is it sufficient to show, against Bourdieu, that popular artistic works exist (Shusterman cites the case of rap, 1992), for there have to be sponsors to champion new genres/groups/independent cultural producers, and, as Raymond Williams has argued, such sponsors are often unprepared to defend works that the *general public likes* because they have themselves developed "mandarin" tastes. Yet the modern period has also had a small minority of critics who have sometimes canonised popularly-successful producers, as did Williams himself with Dickens, Mrs. Gaskell, Thomas Hardy and Tressell. In some contexts, works have been unshackled or recycled from a purely formalist optic and the artist has become the visionary of his/her time, expressing ethical/political issues in the form of images—as Blake managed to criticise slavery, and even in the era of modernism, Manet achieved in his lithographs of dead Communards or Grosz pulled off in his satirical cartoons of post World War I inequality.

*Distinction* and *The Rules of Art* sum up the deliberate disenchantment of art by Bourdieu. By this more scientific exploration of the art-world and its links with the school and the field of power, we can all become more aware of the ways in which educational outcomes are linked to class experience and of the complex nature of the interests which drive agents. But there is nothing biological, akin to genes, that leads to such interests invariably being preserved and passed on, despite the impressive dignity of the dominants which is imparted by their knowledge of poetry and art. A reflexive sociology shows also the possibility for resistance and transformation. Bourdieu in fact has high standards for artists, as emerges unambiguously in his work with the installation artist, Hans Haacke<sup>3</sup>.

At the end of *The Rules of Art* Bourdieu argues for an *Internationale of Artists and Intellectuals* (344-5), who will aim to advance the project of the Enlightenment and who will need to own their means of cultural production to do so. Recently, he has restated this:

I would like writers, artists, philosophers and scientists to be able to make their voices heard directly in all the areas of public life in which they are competent. I think that everyone would have a lot to gain if the logic of intellectual life, that of argument and refutation, were extended to public life.

And, in his acceptance speech for the Bloch Prize, he argues for a "reasoned utopia" and against the "bankers' fatalism" which is the ideology of our time. Rational utopianism is defined as being both against "pure wishful thinking (which) has always brought discredit on utopia" and against "philistine platitudes concerned essentially with facts ... intellectuals and all others who really care about the good of humanity, should re-establish a utopian thought with scientific backing ..." (Bourdieu, 1998b: 128).

## Notes

- 1 Bourdieu's theories neglect the crossovers between the fine and applied arts. Subsequent to the period of his research, these have certainly become more frequent with artists plundering the "expanded field" of comics, cartoons, graffiti etc. and vice versa. Some recuperation of the popular was always an element of the restricted field (see Varndoe and Gopnick, 1990).
- 2 *Acts of Resistance* notes in its critique of the Bundesbank's President, Mr. Tietmayer, that while he is anxious to bury the expensive welfare state and remove labour movement "rigidities", he, like M. Trichet, the Governor of the Banque de France, no doubt reads poetry and sponsors the arts (Bourdieu 1998b: 46).
- 3 *Free Exchange*, Polity, 1995. Haacke has also revealed the anomalies in the changed location of the most celebrated modernists' works, both through showing the changing ownership of their paintings as they come into possession of the more conservative professions and corporate heads and through revealing the discrepancies between the directors' view of how art museums should be run and those of the general public.

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