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Perspectives on Bourdieu

The theoretical framework of Pierre Bourdieu has become very influential in social sciences in later decades. It has been hailed as one of the most successful attempts of bridging the old sociological gap between subjective and objective, between structure and agency, by showing how these interact and create the conditions for each other.(Calhoun, 2006; Lau, 2004) Furthermore, it would seem that his theoretical concepts have been able to transcend disciplinary boundaries, being gainfully applied in for example sociology, anthropology, organization studies or cultural studies. In this paper, I would like to relate Bourdieu's main concepts of field, capital and habitus, as they apply to fields of artistic production, exemplifying with Bourdieu's own studies and focusing on qualitative rather than quantitative applications. In my own research, I study the fields of management consulting and theatre, and for this reason, I will focus this paper less on Bourdieu's sociology of education and science, and more on his cultural sociology. Since his theories are not uncontested, I would also like to bring up some of the criticisms I have encountered, and bring them to discussion. By regarding the critique that Bourdieu's concepts have encountered, we may arguably also deepen our understanding of them. Finally, I would also like to regard some of the further developments on the framework, more specifically field analyses outside the artistic fields, in the economic realm, and combinations with network theory. (Florian, 2006; Gunneriusson, 2002c)

Field, capital and habitus

Bourdieu argues that the theatre and other creative or scientific industries may be understood as fields of artistic, or scientific production, a *field* in this sense being defined as "a system of relations between positions held by specialised agents and institutions, who battle about something which they have in common." (Broady, 1998:14). What is specific about the fields of artistic production is that their logic is inverted in comparison to other parts of society. To openly strive towards monetary rewards, positions and status is looked down upon – rather, those who forsake all this for the good of their art, are the ones who in the end are likely to attain fame and fortune. (Bourdieu, 2000:63) The longer the agents are able to hold an extreme position, renouncing money and success, the more likely they are to finally be rewarded with symbolic capital and thereby status and possibly remuneration. However, this stamina requires conviction and resources – hence, revolutionaries in the field are likely to be born and bred within the field, not be humble outsiders.(Bourdieu, 2000:376) Thus, successful participation in the game of the field requires a conviction of the importance of the game, i.e. that for example the theatre is the most important thing in society, and the earnest intention to play the game for real. This shared belief Bourdieu terms *illusio* (Bourdieu, 2000:79), and firmly sharing this belief is for all intents and purposes a barrier to entry to even enter the field. For those who share the illusion, these values will seem self-evident and

taken for granted (Bourdieu, 1994/1995:129). The fact that everyone who attains a position in the field shares the *illusio* also has a further implication, as it provides an explanation to why opportunistic behaviour is rarely seen and at any rate not feared in for example contract situations. Therefore, the contracts between theatre directors and managers, for example, need not be exhaustive, for no director would ever consider disappearing with the money or doing less than they can to make the production successful. However, while necessary, the *illusio* is not sufficient to advance in the field. Advancing in the field also requires a thorough knowledge of the evaluation norms and tastes of the field. As an objective structure, *doxa*, this defines what can be done in the field, as incorporated *habitus*, what the individual perceives as possible. (Bourdieu, 2000:388) This quality of autonomy, of having a logic of its own different to economic logic, separates art and science from other fields, in that they are to a lesser degree contaminated, so to speak, by conflicting logics, primarily commercial or economic. Within the arts, there a sense of art for art's sake, it is self-sufficient, so to speak, and does not have to rely on outer confirmation in the shape of money to evaluate what is being produced. External influences from outside the field can only be understood in terms of the field's own logic – so, for example, economic prosperity in society may lead to a larger paying audience. (Bourdieu, 2000:336) These fields are therefore of a different nature than say politics or, for that matter, consulting. However, in Bourdieu's aftermath, this viewpoint has been contested. It has been argued that economic logic is just as socially constructed as artistic logic, and that non-artistic fields therefore represent a difference in application, rather than a difference in kind. The effects in concordance to economic theory that can be observed in society are therefore ideological rather than intrinsic in their nature. (Diaz-Bone, 2006:49) The usefulness of Bourdieu's framework for analyses of the economic realm has also been shown in recent studies of finance markets and management consultants in France. (see Godechot 2001 referenced in Diaz-Bone, 2006; Henry, 2002) Although not orthodox Bourdieu, this is also the view that will be taken in this study. In the case of the theatre, for example, the thing they have in common would be the question of what good theatre is and should be, and who is able to make it. In the case of science, it would be what good science is, and which strand of science should be deemed most valuable and prestigious. As a result of the field's autonomy, only one kind of resource is acknowledged: namely the field specific capital.

Capital in Bourdieu's understanding, then, is a subjective construct, and lies in the eyes of the beholder. A resource holds no innate value, only the value that other agents see in it. In the example given here, this would be experience and knowledge about theatre. While the actors in the field will agree on the importance of theatre itself, they are most certainly likely to be in disagreement about exactly what kind of experience and resources should be valued most. Furthermore, the power to consecrate, to denote what should be called art and an artist and what not, is most likely also a matter of debate. (Bourdieu, 2000:334) How much is an avant-garde production in the fringe worth in comparison to a traditional production at the Royal Dramatic Theatre, what is the value of an arts degree in comparison to access to funding, and so on. This acknowledged capital is what Bourdieu terms *symbolic capital*. That is, assets will only be deemed valuable and consequently acknowledged in terms of the theatrical (or literal, or scientific, depending on the field) merits they provide. Your position in the field will thus be determined by the capital you possess – foremost the field-specific capital, but there are also other assets that might be

valuable, such as social capital, which we will return to shortly. The cultural capital forms a special case of the symbolic capital: it is symbolic capital which has been objectified, or in other ways been made constant – a family name, a diploma, titles, institutions, etc. The distinction is important, for it means that in a field where the dominant, recognised capital has not been reified, social networks become all the more important. If your resources are fleeting, and exist only in the social world, they must constantly be held in people’s living memory, or else they will vaporise. Therefore, the control over the institutions which have the means to transfix symbolic capital into cultural (for example an academy, distributing prizes) is a means of power, and something which the dominant agents will seek to attain. Being rich in cultural capital also means being well-informed, knowing about all the right things. An agent who is well-endowed with cultural capital is thus well aware of the different possibilities that reside in the field, what career options are possible and which are not (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1979:12-17) – they have an appropriate habitus given the field they are in (ibid, p 22).

The *habitus* denotes an incorporated system of dispositions that allows people to act, think and orient themselves in the social space they are in, the incorporated values of the field you are familiar with (Broady, 1990:225) - that gut feeling that tells you what to do or not to do, what to say or not so say in a given situation, and what should be considered good or bad taste. What emotions are acceptable and appropriate to display, and which would seem reasonable courses of action. In short, what actions, emotions and thoughts that seem reasonable to you in a given situation. The habitus is the result of all the experiences the individual has been through, their schooling and upbringing, which becomes ingrained in us and is thus not easily changed. This does not mean that it is absolutely stable, but rather that it is slow to change, and that it requires a lot of social energy to do so. Bourdieu gives several contrasting examples of one hand the agent who, thanks to his position and capital, is able to fare well within the field, and on the other the comparative clutz, who, whilst possibly sharing the *illusio*, lacks intimate knowledge of the *doxa*, and from his lowlier place is condemned to relative failure in the field. One such example is that of Henri Murger, the simple tailor’s son, who ventured into Paris at the end of the 19th century with the ambition of becoming a poet and joining the literary ranks. While certainly not impossible, it is nevertheless an arduous journey, for our hapless tailor’s son is likely to get everything slightly wrong. His avant-garde poetry does not break the rules of tradition in the right way but are perceived as bourgeoisie and traditional, he admires the wrong people and has not read the right books, and he does not have the quite right friends and connections. After ten years of hard work in poverty, which break his health, he has not accomplished more than a meagre living for himself in the countryside. Compare this with his contemporary Baudelaire, who plays the part of avant-garde perfectly, choosing everything from his provocations to his publisher so that they are just right. Is this simply caused by Baudelaire’s superior talent and intelligence? No, Bourdieu argues, if we confine ourselves to the explanation of “gift” or “brilliance”, then we have in reality stopped halfway in our analysis. (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1979:22) Both Baudelaire and Murger act in accordance to their habitus, their incorporated habits and values. Although it may superficially seem as though they both have the same possibilities and choices of action, for all practical purposes this is not the case. They do not perceive the same things as possible, and so the farmer’s son would have been highly unlikely to write *Le Fleurs du Mal* – it would have appeared as a possibility for him, just as little as Baudelaire would have

considered writing *Scènes de la Vie de Bohème* (Bourdieu, 2000). Now, it might seem like a long way from Baudelaire in 19th century France to present time management consultants and theatre directors, but I would argue that this step is smaller than it may seem. The habitus is the social order that we carry with us at all times, it provides us with a room of possibilities, i.e. determines what we see as reasonable courses of action and reaction in a given situation. And so, every time we react to others, we recreate that incorporated structure, thus causing this structure to reproduce itself. However, it is important to note that the habitus is not deterministic – firstly, it provides a room of possibilities, not a set course of action, and secondly, as it is formed by our experiences, it is cumulative and will change depending on what experiences and environments we go through. Therefore, everyone has their own habitus, formed by the experiences and assets that individual has had – though of course persons with similar backgrounds are likely to have a similar habitus (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1979). Furthermore, all habitus are not valued the same – the evaluation on what is deemed valuable in the field. Everyone has a sense of taste, but in order to make the right choices, you have to have the right sense. The habitus thus functions as the intermediary between the set structure of the field and the bounded autonomy of the individual, in that it provides you with a room of possibilities. As Torbjörn Säfve succinctly puts it: “True, you may do what you want, but to *want* anything that is possible is not within our powers” (Säfve, quoted in Broady, 2000:9). For all practical purposes, your freedom of action is limited to those courses of action given by your room of possibilities. Thus, although the son of a plumber in theory has the same chance of gaining access to a prestigious art college as the daughter of an actress, in practice, he is far less likely to perceive this as a real possibility.

Determinism and agency

Now, although widely used and admired, Bourdieu’s theory has also inevitably encountered criticism. In this paper, it is primarily the accusation of overt determinism that I have found to be voiced with some frequency, that I would like to discuss. In the classic division in sociology between on the one hand structuralism, where the individual agent’s influence is negligible, and on the other more agency-based theories, such as rational choice, where the agent is able to make independent choices to maximize their personal benefit, Bourdieu arguably seeks to strike a middle way, regarding the field as both structuring and structured structures. (Postone, LiPuma, & Calhoun, 1993:3-4) The nexus between objective, external structure, and subjective, internal agency is formed by the habitus, succinctly described as the “capacity for structured improvisation” (Postone et al., 1993:4). How large the room for improvisation is in comparison to the limitations given by the structure does however seem to be a matter of improvisation. What seems evident is that there is an element of both: there is always an element of uncertainty in the structure, due to “the fact that the agents, no matter how strictly necessity is inscribed in their position, always dispose over an objective margin of freedom” (Bourdieu, 2000:345). It is important that we do not dispose the agent as a practical constructor of reality. (Bourdieu, 2000:266) On the other hand, Bourdieu cannot stress enough how completely erroneous it is to presume, like Sartre, that man is completely free to choose, unhindered of earlier experiences and assets. (Bourdieu, 2000:277-78) How much more interesting and fruitful would not Karin Knorr-Cetina’s sociology of science have become, Bourdieu laments, had she focused more on gathering sociological information about the scientists she studied, and determining their position in the

field, “rather than going in for long theoretico-philosophical debates with Habermas, Luhmann, etc.”(Bourdieu, 2001/2004:22). While clearly not belonging to either camp, where exactly Bourdieu should be placed on the scale seems to be largely a matter of the reader’s interpretation. The main crux, however, seems to be whether the element of determinism in Bourdieu is reasonable or insufferable. Joining the latter group, Brenda Farnell (2000:407) considers Bourdieu, although in the good company of much of social theory from Marx and Durkheim onwards, to commit the fallacy of bifurcation. Farnell recognizes habitus as “an attempt to keep social determinism at bay without renouncing the influence of social and cultural forces”(2000:408), but argues that this attempt is not altogether successful, in that Bourdieu through the introduction of the habitus locates human agency outside human consciousness. Thoughtful action is then no longer possible, and the body is reduced to a mindless automaton, a “mechanistic operator of practical techniques”. (Farnell, 2000:409) However, one might argue that Farnell’s reading of Bourdieu makes the agent more mindless than necessary. She gives the example of a Nakota woman using hand gestures to give directions, but far from mindlessly doing this, she adapts her gestures according to the direction she herself is facing. Farnell interprets this as evidence that the concept of habitus is too deterministic – an alternative interpretation might be that it is the manner of giving directions that is determined by habitus (i.e. using hand gestures), while the exact content is chosen within the room of possibilities. Gorringer and Rafanell (2007) voice a not dissimilar critique in their study of reproduction of the social structures of caste in India, in that Bourdieu is too fatalistic. In their study, they show that although the social patterns are deeply rooted, they can be consciously changed, in this case by activists who seek to improve the status of low caste people. They conclude that in this respect, Foucault is more accurate than Bourdieu, as he to a greater extent allows for the empowerment of the individual. Were habitus really fully internalized and unconscious, then how could they possibly be consciously changed? (Gorringer & Rafanell, 2007:111) While not seeking to advocate that Bourdieu’s are necessarily always the best theoretical tools with which to interpret social life, it might in this instance too be argued that the author’s make too strict an application of the unconsciousness of the habitus. It is, one might argue, after all possible to reflect upon the habitus, and become aware of this incorporated structure. Since the structures are not stable in themselves, but stable because they are continually reproduced, it would of course be possible to change them, reproduce them somewhat differently tomorrow. In this light, it might be possible to see the attempt to improve the status of low caste members as an example of the perennial struggle for power within the field described earlier.

The room for interpretation when it comes to positioning Bourdieu is also evident when, both using ample textual evidence from Bourdieu’s writings, Jenkins (1992:81-82) is able to make a convincing case for Bourdieu the problematic determinist, while Fuchs (2003:394 ff) with equal effect argues for how Bourdieu gives ample room for creativity and conscious change. What remains is; I would say, to settle your own mind firstly on how deterministic Bourdieu’s conception of social life is, and secondly whether you are able to reconcile yourself with this level of determinism. However, when it comes to his sociology of artistic fields, it might be hard to convincingly argue the case of determinism. What Bourdieu rather interestingly points to is that there might be an *illusion* of determinism when you look back on a particular course of action.(Bourdieu, 2000:345) Given the objective structure and the specific capital an agent in a particular position possesses, it might in hindsight seem as though there

was really only one course of action that both seemed like a reasonable thing to do, and put maximal use to the resources at hand. In other words, structure and agency in collaboration creating The One Reasonable Thing To Do – and voilà: apparent determinism! It seems reasonable to assume that this is the mechanism we see at work when, in one of the interviews conducted for this study, the dramaturgist at a theatre explains that when an idea for a production is finally chosen, it is sometimes because out of all the plays and actors of the world, this one specific production seemed like the one reasonable thing to do: “Or it may feel like this is the right moment to do Hamlet, now is the right moment to do Miss Julie, when we have actor X and actress Y. And actress Z. And they want nothing better than to do that particular play. Then it’s really the right decision to do it.” However, it is important to note “apparent” before determinism, in such a case.

Network theory

Before concluding this paper, let us just turn to another topic concerning Bourdieu’s theoretical framework that has in recent years been discussed, namely that of Bourdieu’s compatibility, so to speak, with other contemporary theoretical traditions. Bourdieu himself, one gets the impression, was not overtly fond of the idea, not seldom having little but rather fierce criticism for them (see for example the discussion on STS in Bourdieu, 2001/2004:24 ff). Other researchers, however, have proven less orthodox, and have found such amalgamations fruitful. In the following, we will regard one such attempt, namely that of introducing network theory (Florian & Hillebrandt, 2006; Granovetter, 1985). Too much influenced by rational choice and paying too little attention to the structural influence for Bourdieu’s own liking (Bourdieu, 2005:198), there might nevertheless be some merit in considering network theory in this context. In the light of network theory, the implications of a field where symbolic capital has not consolidated, but instead is more fleeting, such as information, taste or values, is that social capital is likely to increase in importance. Social capital is of course a term widely used, but in this context denotes the resources you can summon through your connections, what the people you can call are able to fix for you and tell you - your social clout, to put it somewhat crudely. If you are well-connected, you will be able to access all the information you need, and furthermore summon the resources that are needed in a given situation. While Granovetter’s (1985) studies of networks have been immensely influential in management studies, and certainly have pointed to aspects of networking hitherto largely unheeded, it is arguably not a conclusive framework. It has been criticised for neither providing sufficient explanation for the interaction between agent and structure, nor giving a satisfying account for how the perceived alternatives of action are constructed for the agents. (Florian, 2006: 80-81) Bourdieu’s framework, on the other hand, provides both, and might thus prove a fruitful way of illuminating these aspects of networks and social structures.

An interesting application of Bourdieu in the context of networks is given by Gunneriusson (ed) (2002c). A social network, Gunneriusson (2002b) argues, presupposes trust, in order to be maintained, for the members have to trust that the information they share with each other will not be spread to the wrong people, or used against them. Therefore, a network requires a high level of trust in order to function. (Creed & Miles, 1996) Such trust, Luhmann (1979) argues, is created by acts of reciprocity, through which the trust is deepened. These networks tend to be closed to newcomers, who first have to prove themselves trustworthy and useful,

before they can gain entrance. Furthermore, one agent can only have so many connections, and thus the more dominant the agent (and thus the more valuable the capital that he possesses), the more likely is he to want to make sure that his network holds the same standard status-wise as himself. Or in other words, you would want to know as influential people as you can. Also, in order to attain an understanding, and thereby trust to freely share information, members in a network tend to be similar in values and experiences, which also means that you have to acquire the right values, and make the right experiences before you can connect yourself to the information highway, so to speak (Gunneriusson, 2002a).

To conclude, I have in this paper tried to give both an overview of the main traits of Bourdieu's sociology of the fields of cultural production, as well as presenting two examples of how this legacy is carried on – in the discussion of determinism, and in the combination of Bourdieu with other theoretical traditions.

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