

Praxis and Social Theory (Review of *Outline of a Theory of Praxis*)

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Pierre Bourdieu has produced a fascinating and uncompromising attack on a number of currently popular established theoretical positions including Structuralism, Althusserian Marxism, Phenomenology and Ethnomethodology. At the same time, he has argued for a fresh approach to theory which is at once comprehensive and unique, informed by the philosophical, anthropological and sociological traditions. The argument of the book is complex, detailed, often elusive and, in its own distinctive manner, obscure. For the serious reader, it offers a new field of inquiry, and an attempt to construct a new theory of praxis in juxtaposition to prior objectivist and subjectivist theoretical positions, as well as those positions whose claim is to be praxiological. In the contemporary world, which is in contradistinction to the classical world, it was Marx who originally offered a theory of praxis. No doubt the outlines of that theory have been obscured, if not by Marx himself then by his interpreters, in such a manner that Marx's own theory should reach the current French scene under the heavy hand of the objectivist structuralist Althusser who, as Bourdieu would have it, managed to place the best of Marx in the shadow of a mechanistic, scientific pseudo-interpretation of social experience. Hence, Bourdieu, armed with ethnographic data from his fieldwork in Kabylia, does not simply attempt to reconstruct the original theory of Marx, but also constructs a theory in the tradition of the Early Marx. This theory not only provides a critique of other theories of social science but also attempts to outline a new theory of social science. If, indeed, this attempt fails, it is nonetheless both interesting and significant.

I

The argument begins in the repudiation of both the objective and subjective polarities of anthropological science. On the subjective side, phenomenological knowledge "sets out to make explicit the truth of primary experience of the social world."¹ However, it "does not reflect on itself and excludes the question of the conditions of its own possibility."² In contrast, objectivist knowledge presup-

¹Bourdieu, Pierre, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, Cambridge University Press, NY 1977 p. 3

²Ibid p. 3

poses a break with the “*doxic*” experience of the social world and, in so doing, excludes “the question of the (particular) conditions making that experience possible”³—an exclusion which allows the objectivist position to establish “both the structures of the social world and the objective truth of primary experience”⁴ but—and this is the catch—“as experience denied *explicit* knowledge of those structures.”⁵ Against this backdrop—the limitations of both subjectivist and objectivist knowledge—Bourdieu argues for a second break which is defined as the grasping of the “limits of objectivist knowledge” in order to illuminate “the theory of theory” and the “theory of practice inscribed (in its practical state) in this mode of knowledge.”⁶ The achievement will be “an adequate science of practices.”⁷ With this in mind Bourdieu can give a tentative statement of his thesis:

The critical break with objectivist abstraction ensuing from inquiry into the conditions of possibility, and thereby, into the limits of the objective and objectifying standpoint which grasps practices from outside, as a *fait accompli*, instead of constructing their generative principle by situating itself within the very movement of their accomplishment, has no other aim than to make possible a science of the *dialectical* relations between the objective structures to which the objectivist mode of knowledge gives access and the structured dispositions within which those structures are actualized and which tend to reproduce them.⁸

Bourdieu is careful to note that this attack on objectivist knowledge is not made in the name of a reconstruction of a subjectivist point of view—a return to “lived experience” as it were. Rather, his purpose is to set the objectivist position “on its feet” by posing the question of the conditions of a possible primary experience in such a way that the objectivist position is made manifest. The problem in this view is that objective knowledge does not make the origin of the structures of primary experience manifest but simply superimposes a scheme on that experience. The objectivist position may be said to produce a science of the social world without knowledge of the practical generation of the social world. Hence, Bourdieu’s theoretical analysis incorporates a mode of apprehension which allows one to overcome the ensuing dilemma of choices between objectivism and subjectivism by inquiring into the “mode of production and function of the practical mastery which makes possible both an objectively intelligible practice and also an objectively enchanted experience of that practice.”⁹ This can be done “if we subordinate all operations of scientific practice to a theory of practice and of practical knowledge (which has nothing to do with phenomenological reconstitution of lived experience).”¹⁰

³Ibid p. 3

⁴Ibid p. 3

⁵Ibid p. 3

⁶Ibid p. 3

⁷Ibid p. 3

⁸Ibid p. 3

⁹Ibid p. 4

¹⁰Ibid p. 4

All this does not give us Pierre Bourdieu's theory of practice. Rather, it provides a critical perspective on various representations of the objectivist and the subjectivist approaches to social science. If one approaches the objectivist model as used in structuralism with its various representatives, it is appropriate to exclude both the phenomenon of time, and to concentrate upon the phenomenon of rule, as in Claude Levi-Strauss. However, in contrast to Levi-Strauss in particular, and structuralism in general, Bourdieu has chosen to "substitute *strategy* for *rule* as "reintroduction of time."¹¹ Critically, "the detemporalizing effect . . . that science produces when it imposes on practices inscribed in the current of time, i.e. detotalized, simply by totalizing them, is never more pernicious than when exerted on practices defined by the fact that their temporal structure, direction, and rhythm are constitutive of their meaning."¹² But again that does not simply mean that one can revert to subjectivism. Bourdieu "radically" opposes his approach to that of Schutz and Garfinkel which is characterized as an "interactionism" that reduces the constructions based on the first order constructions of the social actors. "One is entitled to undertake to give an 'account of accounts,' so long as one does not put forward one's contribution to the science of pre-scientific representation of the social world as if it were a science of the social world."¹³ In Bourdieu's view, "only by constructing the objective structures . . . is one able to pose the question of the mechanisms through which the relationship is established between the structures and the practices of the representations which accompany them, instead of treating these 'thought objects' as 'reasons' or 'motives,' and making them the determining cause of practices."¹⁴

II

But what is praxis? The question has not yet been answered. Objectivism in its various forms fails because of a superimposition of a quasi-mechanistic set of rules upon a social situation which does not account for the origin or genesis of those rules, or for their immediate production. Equally, subjectivism fails because it takes for granted that which is subjectively produced without accounting for the objective system of production which is the condition for the production of any quasi-spontaneous action in a given social situation. Bourdieu, in order to provide the foundation necessary for his theory of praxis, creates the concept of "habitus."

In short, the habitus, the product of history, produces individual and collective practices, and hence, history, in accordance with the scheme engendered by history. The system of dispositions—a past which survives in the present and tends to perpetuate itself into the future by making itself present in the practices structured according to its principles, an internal law relating the continuous exercise of the law of external necessities (irreducible to immediate

¹¹Ibid p. 9

¹²Ibid p. 9

¹³Ibid p. 21

¹⁴Ibid p. 21

conjectural restraints)—is the principle of the continuity and regularity which objectivism discerns in the social world without being able to give them a rational basis. And it is at the same time the principle of the transformations and regulated revolutions which neither the extrinsic and instantaneous determinisms of a mechanistic sociallogism nor the purely internal but equally punctual determination of voluntarist or spontaneist subjectivism are capable of accounting for.¹⁵

The habitus may then be defined as that phenomenon which gives rise not only to objectivist structure but also to subjective action. In short, it is history. Bourdieu's attempt is to overcome the limitation of both objectivism and subjectivism by juxtaposing history to nature assuming that the point of departure for both positions being attacked is the assumption of certain nature (restructures which partake neither of time, nor history, nor change). The habitus is the strategy generating principle which presents the subject with a series of calculable chances associated with a system of objective possibilities. It is a universalizing mediation dialectically conceived which not only generates a realm of objective possibilities but also the subjects who act within it. The historical point of departure for this theory of the habitus should come as no surprise for those familiar with discussions of praxis, for it is as we stated a moment ago, Marx was the original author of this theory. "With the Marx of the *Theses on Feuerbach*, the theory of practice as practice insists against positivist materialism, that the objects of knowledge are *constructed*, and against idealist intellectualism, that the principle of this construction is practical activity oriented towards practical functions."¹⁶ For Bourdieu, this in turn means that the appropriate logic for analysis of human activity is not formal and mathematical, but is instead a practical logic on which symbolic systems not only depend for their intelligibility and coherence but also on their ability to be immediately transformed into practical functions which have, in fact, generated them. To perceive anthropological activity from a logical point of view is in fact to miss the point from Bourdieu's point of view. "Logical criticism inevitably misses its target: because it can only challenge the relationships consciously established between words, it cannot bring out the incoherent coherence of a discourse which, springing from underlying mythic or ideological schemes, has the capacity to survive every *reductio ad absurdum*."¹⁷ The habitus can equally explain, from Bourdieu's point of view, the phenomenon of power, particularly, and this is unusual, power in an archaic—predated capitalism. Hence, symbolic capital is used to apply to an economic system that which is said to be cultural as well as purely economic. Equally, there are modes of domination with an attendant division of labor, which is the primacy of work once shown to exist and become characteristic of the praxiological behavior of the pre-capitalist societies. Symbolic capital becomes the basis for accumulation, and perhaps its

¹⁵Ibid p. 82

¹⁶Ibid p. 96

¹⁷Ibid p. 188

most valuable form in societies which are not yet capitalized. Equally, as domination is said to emerge from direct usage of capital in modern society, so in pre-modern society was domination said to result from the symbolic and cultural forms of capital.

III

As I stated at the outset, Bourdieu's *Outline of a Theory of Practice* is an innovative and unique book which attempts to overcome the fundamental distinction that exists in social science between theory and praxis. It is unique because it attempts, in an original manner, to carry out the insight of Marx, first expressed fully in 1845, that both materialism and idealism are falsifications of the reality of human experience which can only be overcome by a praxiological theory. Bourdieu attempts to carry on that insight to deepen it, as it were, by updating the criticism to forms that are both idealistic and objectivistic, and which dominate theory in contemporary social science. Hence, his profound insight that a critique of objectivism is not *ipso-facto* a reestablishment of subjectivism. Simultaneously, it is clear that an endorsement of Marxism is not an endorsement of all its more current manifestations. That is to say that, as a theory, structural Marxism is as non-praxiological as other orthodox "scientific" approaches to the social sciences. Finally, his theory of the "habitus" is a distinct addition to the theory of praxis in its original form, and in this writer's judgement, adds an originary element to the theory of praxis.

However, the book is not without limitations. The very attempt to outline a theory of praxis, given the history of that enterprise in modern social thought, requires more clarification and foundational work than Bourdieu's book presents. Bourdieu's own strategy is to go beyond objectivism and to put it on its feet, as it were, by rescuing it from its materialist foundations and placing in it the context of a praxiological orientation. In so doing, his attempts to avoid the pitfalls of subjectivism are admirable. However, and this is a problem, in order for a praxiological theory to work it is necessary to construct an appropriate anthropological theory of human interaction to account for the interaction of subjects and their intersubjective relations. I do not suggest that this is an easy task. How are phenomena generated praxiologically? In order to answer that question, it is necessary to reconstruct the 1844-1845 discussions of praxiological theory more fully than Bourdieu has done. It was precisely on the basis of a reconstructed anthropology that Marx was able to develop his theory of praxis in the first place. However, this is not the occasion to review that discussion. Suffice it to state that Marx was able to write the famous first thesis of the text on Hegel which appeared in the Manuscripts of 1844. There, Marx constructs his own anthropology, the concept of a human being who is composed of need and instinct, which requires another for its actualization. No doubt Marx is here freeing himself from the limitations of an idealist position with its attendant notion of an "abstract individual." However, the emphasis of the text is on the actualization of the human subject, the very problem

for which he will attack Feuerbach in the first thesis. At that point, Marx's fundamental problem, as in later writings, revolves around the question of how phenomena are intersubjectively generated. Out of this question, Marx is able to establish a theory of praxis. It should also be noted that Marx takes the contribution of idealism, or, in Bourdieu's terms, subjectivism seriously. Sadly, Bourdieu does not. Hence, it is quite easy for Bourdieu to dismiss questions of intention, constitution, etc. as merely subjective categories. Marx's statement remains "the chief defect of all hitherto existing materialism—that of Feuerbach included—is that the thing, reality, sensuousness, is conceived only in the form of the object or of *contemplation*, but not as *human sensuous activity*, practice, not subjectively." To be sure, there is nothing particularly *doxic* about this statement in the sense that Marx's own theory of praxis requires further interpretation. However, as he well knew, the construction of a theory of praxis could not overlook the problem of how phenomena are generated on the subjective side.

Yet this is precisely what Bourdieu overlooks. Hence, we are back to our original question, namely, how are phenomena generated praxiologically? Bourdieu gives us no answer, for indeed, and this robs the book of much of its force, there is no *theory* of praxis. Indeed, there is the strategy to overcome the limits of both objectivism and subjectivism with the resultant hope of setting objectivism on its feet. Further, the book presents us with the very interesting concept of the habitus. Yet, and this is the rub, the easy dismissal of subjectivism makes Bourdieu closer to those he criticizes than one might originally be led to believe. But for all that, this is an important book which should be read by anyone seriously concerned with theory in the social sciences and philosophy.

REFERENCE

Bourdieu, P. *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1977.