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Outline of a Theory of Practice by Pierre Bourdieu; Richard Nice

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Pierre Bourdieu. *Outline of a Theory of Practice*.  
 Trans. by Richard Nice. Cambridge, London, New York,  
 Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1977.  
 viii + 248 pp. Figures, notes, index. \$18.95.

In an essay on "Philosophy and Politics," the late Bertrand Russell quotes a particularly abstruse passage of Hegel's, concerning the definition of the "Absolute Idea," and wryly comments: "I hate to spoil the luminous clarity of this sentence by any commentary, but. . . ." Anyone who wishes to read Bourdieu might do well to refresh himself/herself with Russell's witticism, a necessary tonic for all those who recklessly waddle through oceans of intellectual mud.

The following sentence is perpetrated at the beginning of M. Bourdieu's chapter, "Structures and the Habitus":

In order to escape the *realism of the structure*, which hypostatizes systems of objective relations by converting them into totalities already constituted outside of individual history and group history, it is necessary to pass from *the opus operatum* to the *modus operandi*, from statistical regularity or algebraic structure to the principle of the production of this observed order, and to construct the theory of practice or, more precisely, the theory of the mode of generation of practices, which is the precondition for establishing an experimental science of the *dialectic of the internalization of externality and the externalization of internality*, or more simply, of incorporation and objectification. (p. 72)

Although M. Bourdieu's book is an effort to read, I do not mean to suggest that it is without merit. It is possible to extract some gems out of the mud, clean them, and expose them to clear light.

Mr. Nice, Bourdieu's translator, tells us that the author became impatient with prevailing schools in anthropology and philosophy during the course of his ethnographic fieldwork among the Kabyle Berber. That fieldwork took place at the time of the Algerian War. In the course of it, Bourdieu was led to reconsider the role of the fieldworker as an outside observer, and to reject the intellectualism of structuralism and phenomenology, which respectively deny the possibility of and the socioeconomic basis for meaningful social action. M. Bourdieu's work

is about fundamental problems in social science, namely, how we understand what social actors do, and particularly why problems arise when westerners endeavor to understand everyday thoughts, actions, and relationships in peasant societies. Accordingly, it is addressed not merely to students of North Africa, but rather to a much wider audience. Nonetheless, the ethnographic specialist will be intrigued by Bourdieu's discussion of gift exchange, parallel cousin marriage, the honor code, the structure of the Kabyle house, and the agricultural calendar. In the course of Bourdieu's discussion, the following theoretical points emerge.

First, Bourdieu objects to the use of Saussurean principles by social scientists who regard culture as a code or body of rules which social actors merely realize. Structuralists and Marxist-structuralists have eliminated strategy (whether voluntary or involuntary), intentionality, and the realities of power from their accounts of social behavior. Accounts of gift exchange, such as that of Lévi-Strauss, portray actors as fulfilling norms of, or following rules of reciprocity. In actuality, gift exchange involves much strategic play: the timing of a gift or counter-gift, the assessment of whom one should challenge, and in what way the challenge should be effected are all key elements in the game. Parallel cousin marriage (father's brother's daughter's marriage) presents a challenge to structuralists insofar as it defies the fundamental principle that one should exchange with outsiders. In Berber society, it is one of three modes of marriage (the others being prestigious marriage with outsiders and "ordinary" marriages) which may be chosen. The choice depends on a variety of factors. An important lineage may choose to enhance its "symbolic capital"--its men, its honor, its land--by endogamic marriage, rather than risk a diminution in solidarity and a threat to patrimony by bringing in outsiders. Alternatively, the leading figures in the groups may view an alliance marriage with nonkin at a distance as a means of gaining prestige and needed political connections. Sometimes one son may marry an outsider, whereas another son marries endogamously. In theory, parallel cousin marriage is always prestigious, but in actuality it may be an arrangement which covers social cracks. Thus, a poor male may be forced to marry his unwed, unloved, and ugly cousin. A man who has much land, but works rarely and has little prestige, may be compelled to wed his daughter to a husband whose family is endowed with many male hands, but precious little land for those hands to work on. Strategies which result in the promotion of sectional interests may not be viewed as selfish moves by those who make them. They can be rationalized in terms of conformity to social norms. Actors misrecognize their motives.

Methodological objectivists who regard social rules as grammatical codes thus fail to realize the subtleties of social behavior which may appear to the outsider as mere performance,

as automatic realization of *langue* in *parole*. Bourdieu's perspective here seems barely distinguishable from that of the transactionalists, anthropologists who view social reality as a game and social actors as the players and who adopt an extremely individualistic perspective in their work. However, Bourdieu substitutes for the codes and grammars of the structuralists his own notion of the habitus. The habitus is produced by the material conditions of existence in a society. It is a body of dispositions. It is often inarticulate. In other words, we can say of a people that they do what they do when they have to do it, and in the same circumstances they may tend to do it in similar ways. They will perhaps only say why they are doing it and give an account of the rules they follow when problems occur. Social actions are, therefore, regular without being based in rules. Their actions in one realm of activity, for example, copulation, will influence the way they conceptualize other realms of activity, such as ploughing, and vice versa. Social actions are adapted to their goals, albeit the adaptation may not be conscious. Bourdieu compares a group following its habitus to an orchestra without a conductor.

Second, Bourdieu's attack on objectivism does not lead him to radical subjectivism. He condemns the phenomenologists for ignoring the material and social conditions which give rise to beliefs.

Third, in an account of the structure of the Kabyle house, the details of which are inappropriately omitted from this translation, and in his consideration of the ritual calendar and of Kabyle ritual, Bourdieu presents an outline of the symbolic organization of both space and time, whose structures appear to accord with the binary schemata so beloved of the structuralist school. The Kabyle house has male and female parts, but as a whole is female in relation to the outside. The oppositions, wet/dry, left/right, female/male, are all evident in the ritual calendar. However, Bourdieu is contemptuous of the "structuralist vulgate" which views such binary oppositions as the inevitable consequence of the structure of mind itself: "In fact, this plannerless plan is no less mysterious than the plan of a supreme planner" (p. 120). Bourdieu regards binary oppositions as mnemonic devices, at least in their origins, and their origins are no mystery. They arise out of the orientations of the body in practical actions, out of the facts of fertility, life, and death which Frazer placed at the root of ritual. A very practical intelligence views ploughing, copulation, and the art of the smithy as the union of contraries. Bourdieu simultaneously affirms both the practical origin of the categories and actions of ritual and the enchanted nature of the present practice of ritual. This reviewer regards his assertion that ritual merely mimics practical actions as far too simplistic, an overreaction to the intellectualism of his opponents.

Fourth, Bourdieu observes that Kabyle would not of their own

accord construct a synoptic chart of their ritual calendar, integrating a variety of practices, such as ploughing, harvesting, resting, practicing rituals, weaving and events, short nights, long nights, and dry and wet seasons. Different calendrical schemata are utilized for different practical purposes at different times. The ritual calendar consists of several overlapping schemata which are not mutually consistent in all ways, because they do not need to be.

Fifth, Bourdieu, as the above account has implied, is a Marxist, but he is not a vulgar materialist. The complexities of Berber gift exchange and marriage and their conceptualization of the people's relationship to their land and their work cannot be understood unless one appreciates that the Berber is not *homo economicus*. Certainly, the Berber, inhabitants of an enchanted universe, misrecognize the economic base of much of their activity. However, in their world, there is no purely economic action. The purpose of marriage, exchange, and vengeance is to build up symbolic capital, a notion which is encapsulated in the notion of honor. Honor implies, to be sure, economic prowess and credibility, but it refers explicitly to the ability of the village men to defend the integrity of their women (*hurma*), so that they will not be violated by strangers. The defense of the honor of women is the defense of the means whereby social relationships are reproduced. Bourdieu's point is that although honor has its value in the marketplace, insofar as an honorable man is a good witness and a worthy credit risk, and although land and women are clearly subjects of economic value, it is a notion which is not compatible with our ideas of economic behavior. Accordingly, those who study peasant societies must realize that power, honor, and wealth are interchangeable coins and are part of a universal realm of activity. To most anthropologists, Bourdieu's assertions are hardly news. In some circles they may be greeted as bourgeois revisionism.

There is much more in this work than any brief review can possibly indicate. Even when he is infuriatingly obscure, incorrigibly dogmatic or even silly, Bourdieu rarely fails to stimulate the reader.

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Robin Cohen, Peter C. W. Gutkind, and Phyllis Brazier, eds. *Peasants and Proletarians: The Struggles of Third World Workers*. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1979. 505 pp. Notes, tables, bibliography. \$16.00.

For those concerned with workers and social change in Africa, there have been several recurring problems in the literature.