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Practical Reason: On the Theory of Action by Pierre Bourdieu

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remembered in the postwar context, where the FMLN guerrillas did not win a clear-cut victory? Army killers currently enjoy amnesty, the right wing controls the national government and is actively undermining FMLN officials who govern locally, and the country faces an economic crisis that is worse than before the war. As in Rwanda, there are those who insist that the past should be forgotten. They argue that excesses were committed by both sides, and it is now time to move forward with the difficult task of national reconstruction. Binford, like Gourevitch, demonstrates that such a view is short-sighted. There can be no peace without justice, but in order to insure a just peace, the authors believe that Salvadorans and Rwandans need to know that their suffering was not in vain and that there is no impunity for murderers. The struggle to rebuild these societies involves a continuing battle over the meaning of the past in the context of current political and economic uncertainty. Although Binford and Gourevitch cannot predict the future, they have written extremely astute accounts that illuminate the difficulties of establishing legitimate, accountable states.

Every anthropologist should read these books. As the discourse on human rights is increasingly appropriated, and frequently distorted, by groups and organizations with a variety of agendas and political interests, these books ask important questions that cannot be ignored. They are not only testimonies to the victims of political violence in El Salvador and Rwanda, but stand as exemplary models of what an ethical, politically committed anthropology should be. ♦

Practical Reason: On the Theory of Action. *Pierre Bourdieu*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998. 153 pp.

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This work consists of six essays (plus some short “appendices”) on familiar Bourdieu themes (interest, difference, economy), but augmented, reconceived. Readers familiar with Bourdieu’s work will find the essays well worth reading; those searching for an introduction to Bourdieu would be advised to turn elsewhere, for example, to the collection of essays and interviews edited by Bourdieu and Loic J. D. Wacquant as *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology* (University of Chicago Press, 1992).

Here, as elsewhere, Bourdieu takes pains to emphasize what he sees as mistaken readings of his work, readings that often stem from philosophical contrasts between French and Anglo-American strains of social science thinking. One such divide is ontological and separates a view of social life in terms of relations, a view that one may trace to Spinoza, and more proximally to Gaston Bachelard and Lévi-Strauss, from a contrasting view that starts from the individual actor and that ultimately is inspired by Hobbes and Locke. A second divide regards theories of action and sets Bourdieu’s efforts to study action in terms of “dispositions” against the two major strains of Anglo-American thinking, the one beginning from rational actors consciously maximizing material interests, the other from actors following norms. Here Bourdieu may be seen as the heir of Mauss and Merleau-Ponty in France, but also of a U.S. cultural anthropol-

ogy that, beginning with Boas’s studies of human movement, has analyzed the subconscious character of culture.

In two lectures delivered in Japan, Bourdieu underscores the relational quality of the analysis set out in his major study of culture and class in France, *Distinction* (Harvard University Press, 1984). Cultural practices have social-class significance, but these shift over time and differ across countries, such that specific sports may change their class meaning over time (consider soccer in the U.K., soccer in the U.S. today, and soccer as a Catholic pastime in the U.S. of a generation ago). These essays by their very nature question the transportability of Bourdieu’s analysis outside France. They suggest that one ought to distinguish in this respect, as Bourdieu does not, between the more general emphasis of his approach and the specific models of “capital” he employs for France. His general argument is that in industrialized societies, differences in tastes and habits are drawn on by members of particular status groups to distinguish themselves from others. Bourdieu, echoing Weber’s critique of Marx, notes that these acts of differentiation do not in themselves produce a self-conscious social class. This type of analysis, which can be carried out in Japan, the United States, and elsewhere, illustrates the usefulness of the relational approach.

But Bourdieu also claims that in these societies people carry out their social differentiation in a space defined by the differential possession of two types of capital, cultural and economic, each one internally homogeneous. This model of social differentiation was developed out of the France studies and depends on a France-wide cultural and social hierarchy. French schools transmit in uniform fashion awareness of a high culture, the differential control of which can then signify, to all potential audiences, one’s position in a national hierarchy. Schools themselves also lie in a hierarchy, such that access to certain types of high-level occupations depends on graduation from certain specific postsecondary schools. A model that developed out of studying such a nation could be based on assumptions of homogeneous cultural capital and a generally acknowledged hierarchy, both of culture and of educational institutions.

Bourdieu claims that this two-capital model works well to analyze status differentiation in all industrialized societies, but his comparativist remarks are just that, not empirical studies. One would expect that the model would be useful for comparative study when particular features of social history are shared across two or more countries. For example, Bourdieu effortlessly extends his analysis of the “state nobility” in France (high-level bureaucrats) to Japan, because the two countries share a history of creating centralized institutions of higher education functioning to anoint a small set of graduates as elite bureaucrats. But when features are not shared, the model must be refined accordingly, as, for example, Michèle Lamont has done in her study of French and U.S. upper-middle-class social differentiation, *Money, Morals, and Manners* (University of Chicago Press, 1992). Lamont shows that morality is as important as culture and economics, and that region (center-periphery) has strong effects on which of these axes of differentiation are emphasized.

In other essays Bourdieu extends his previous work in several directions; I would emphasize the attention to family and the state. Examining, in a comparative fashion, the strategies of social reproduction pursued by households (Bourdieu rightly emphasizes the constructed nature of “family”) should allow more

attention to the mechanisms that perpetuate status distinctions, giving the analysis a stronger microcomponent. Bourdieu rightly points to the strategies of social reproduction pursued by Japanese families, who seek to place their children as highly as possible in the status hierarchy. (Unfortunately, as is generally the case, Bourdieu fails to note the many ethnographic studies of these strategies in Japan.)

"Family" appears in an important essay on "The Economy of Symbolic Goods" as a powerful source of "euphemizations," images for experiencing what are economic transactions as something else instead—as religion or kin solidarity. This essay provides a very useful adumbration of Bourdieu's theory of action, and in particular the interested nature of apparently disinterested actions. Bourdieu's use of *economy* as a general term has confused many readers. His dominant images of action are not economic but those of the game and the gift: the game for which players have a "feel" without being able to consciously formulate how they act (*parole* could have played this same role in his writings); the gift that is given according to a conscious logic of advantage gained, but with an air of the pure gift. One might read this part of the overall project as providing a theory of action for substantive economic anthropology, whose strongest suit was always in delineating the structures organizing production and distribution, and not in analyzing individual actions (a point made by the formalists). But Bourdieu also moves the analysis up to the institutional level in this essay, by providing an intriguing definition of such institutions as the Catholic church or the modern family as institutions that are indeed economic but can function as they do only by denying that they are so—that in the denial lies the specific difference of church or family vis-à-vis the firm.

These remarks on the family are encompassed in an analysis of the emergence of the modern state (an augmentation of his earlier studies of French rural family strategies of reproduction, which paid little attention to their legal contexts). The essay on the rise of the state introduces a kind of metacapital, "statist capital," produced by the state as it succeeds in grasping monopoly control over other forms of capital. This essay clarifies the concept of "field of power" as both a metafield, producing particular channels of access to other fields (such as the artistic or the economic), and as a field in its own right, within which actors compete for its own particular type of capital. State formation concentrates specific forms of capital (e.g., legal, educational) in its own hands, and at the same time differentiates that capital-type's field from others. State formation also creates uniform codes of classification (e.g., of civil law, of knowledge, of language), which give a specific symbolic value to these forms of capital. (The reader must keep in mind that "symbolic capital" is used not to designate a separate type of capital, but rather to emphasize that the valuation of all capital takes place through the prisms of specific systems of classification: thus, economic, cultural, and political capital are all "symbolic.")

The language employed here remains a functionalist one: cultural change is explained by its contribution to state power. We are far from the microanalysis of the habitus of an individual actor, and yet to understand how, say, a legal code is created and accepted would require such analysis. The leap illustrates the problem with Bourdieu's totalizing vision: the fine-grained action-theoretical studies (in which ethnomethodology and Weber are invoked) at levels of village or family are linked to "the

state" by a neo-Durkheimian vision of social order through totalizing social codes. The strength of the turn to Durkheim at the macrolevel is in its focus on the state's capacity to create meaning through performativity: to state effectively the conditions for there being "marriage," or "nobility," or "money." The weakness of that turn, especially as it is married to a Weberian assumption concerning legitimacy as an actually existing state of acceptance, is that it grants a great deal of symbolic power to the state, assuming that by definition states create cognitive structures of acceptance, without empirically investigating the degree of this uniform acceptance.

Bourdieu extends his Durkheimian analysis in an essay on the ethical value of claims made by groups to universal norms. As did Durkheim, Bourdieu tries to render Kant (and implicitly Rawls) sociological, in this case by finding the social counterpart of Kant's postulate of universalizability in the ideal of universally accepted social norms. The advantage of adherence to such an ideal is that it makes compelling the demand that political institutions are constantly tested for their universalizability—would you still support this set of norms if your position in the institution was less favored than it is?

Breathtaking in their scope, concise in their formulations, these essays, a series of *aperçus* rather than a single extended argument, offer a valuable way to revisit the insights, the oversights, and the continually searching character of Bourdieu's project. ♦

The Domestication of Desire: Women, Wealth, and Modernity in Java. *Suzanne April Brenner*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998. 302 pp.

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Located in a northwest corner of the Central Javanese town of Solo, Laweyan was once an important center of batik production. In the late colonial period, the area was well-known for its wealthy family firms and impressive walled houses. By the 1960s Laweyan was in decline. Today, Suzanne Brenner tells us, many Solonese regard Laweyan's inhabitants as backwards and out of step, as "old-fashioned Javanese" rather than "modern Indonesian." In *The Domestication of Desire: Women, Wealth, and Modernity in Java*, Brenner explores the reasons why Laweyan was not swept up by the tide of development unleashed by President Soeharto's New Order regime and has instead remained distinctly "unmodern." Seeking to understand Laweyan's apparent resistance to modernity, Brenner traces social change in the neighborhood from late colonial times to the present.

Brenner's exploration has two major foci. The first examines critically models of modernity, especially those drawn from conventional modernization theory. She rightly criticizes models of modern life that assume a sharp division between "domestic" and "public" spheres or between "family" and "economy." Her second focus is on gender and its relationship to tradition and modernization. Here she argues convincingly that an understanding of gender is central to an understanding of the