

# ON PIERRE BOURDIEU

## PART 1: VOCABULARY

The text for this series is David Swartz' book, *Culture and Power: The Sociology of Pierre Bourdieu*. I'm starting with a vocabulary of some of the technical words and ideas in the book.

1. Practice. For Bourdieu, practices are the behaviors that people exhibit in coping with their social environment. A simple example is table manners. Manners are taught to us at an early age, and it's rare that we ever think about them, but they say a lot about us. Emily Post manners are essential for people trying to climb the greasy pole to the C-Suite, just as State Fair eating manners are crucial to political candidates. They're a necessary but not sufficient condition for entering certain social groups. They also matter in dating, as the charming series *Blind Date* in the Guardian shows. The paper sends a couple on a blind date to a restaurant and then interviews them about the date. They always ask about table manners. In this one,, the pair went to a Japanese restaurant and apparently tried to shell edamame with their chopsticks, a funny faux pas.

Practices can be complex. How do I interact with higher-ups in my workplace? I don't have to think about that, I just do it, and it is obvious that I'm not thinking when I do it. One way to describe this is to call it intensive behavior as contrasted with reflective behavior, two terms I learned years ago from an otherwise unreadable book.

2. Capitalist Mode of Production. When I found this term in the book, I knew exactly what it meant, but somehow it made me uncomfortable. After a moment, I realized it was because I associate the term with Marxist analysis, and as a good American boy, I know that all of Marx is evil. But of course, it isn't. There's a lengthy discussion of the capitalist mode of production (without the term) in Thorstein Veblen's book

*The Principles of Business Enterprise*, which I discuss here and here.

Fear and loathing of Marxism is a foundational aspect of neoliberalism; its founders wanted to insure that capitalism would never be threatened by such un-American ideas. But in the intellectual training in France in the 40s and 50s Marxism is a jumping off point.

3. Thinking. Perhaps we all know what this term means intuitively, but there's more than just self-examination as a way to understand it. I contrast thinking with behaviors that don't involve thinking, like the practices that Bourdieu studies. Practices are learned behaviors that we emit without being conscious of them. We deploy them as needed in response to the social signals we encounter.

The act of thinking calls on us to become aware of ourselves as thinking. In action, it feels like we are activating a specific part of our mind. Once we start thinking there are various ways to go. One is to ponder an idea, trying to get a grip on it, trying to flesh it out, and generally to meditate on it. Another is purposeful, thinking with a goal. A good example of the former can be found in Plato's Socratic Dialogs, as Hannah Arendt discusses in *The Life of the Mind*. Here's a .pdf; see the two sections starting on page 166.

The latter is what we do when we try to prove a mathematical theorem. We know where we begin, with axioms, theorems, lemmas and corollaries, and a mental image of the problem; and we know to use formal logic. But the choice of steps to take is an art, not a science.

I use the word "contrast" as opposed to define because there are many other contrasting mental states. For example, I could contrast thinking with the kind of mental babble that the Buddhists call the monkey mind. Or I could contrast it with the mental state of practicing a physical behavior.

We live in a complicated society; I think

building in complexity is something mammals just automatically do to amuse themselves if nothing else. We can't comprehend the complexity we jointly create, so we invent mediating concepts to enable us to proceed. The selection of those concepts is an art. The use of those mediating concepts is an art. The Frankfurt School, for example, designed its empirical research around its theoretical concepts as a test of those concepts and as a way of understanding their results. The choice of contrasts is a useful way to add structure to the messy social world.

4. Dialectical thinking. I spent hours reading *The Dialectical Imagination*, and more hours reading texts about the Dialectic, but I am not comfortable with my understanding. Most of what I read was some version of thesis, antithesis and synthesis, That makes sense in the context of dialectical materialism, because we can see that historically one movement is confronted by another. We don't have to explain why the second movement arose, except that it arose in opposition to the dominant thesis. In *The Dialectical Imagination*, it seemed to be a broader idea, based on negation, which I understood to mean that when working in the context of abstract ideas, the thinker would try to work up an opposing thesis and its implications.

In *The Life of the Mind*, Arendt talks about the dialog of the self with the self, which seems to be a form of dialectical thinking. Swartz adds another idea, from the French philosopher of science Gaston Bachelard. He says that science doesn't proceed from *a priori* constructs. It does not begin with atoms or cells, but only comes to them after empirical observation, and changes them as new observations are made.

Rather, the movement of thought proceeds from a limited conceptual framework, which is closed to some important aspect of experience, to the development of a broader framework that includes the previously excluded aspect. In this way,

for example, Euclidean geometry was not replaced but rather superseded and regionally situated within a broader non-Euclidean, space-time conceptual space. P. 32.

That seems much closer to what I understood from *The Dialectical Imagination*. Jay quotes Adorno as saying the true dialectic is "... the attempt to see the new in the old instead of simply the old in the new." P. 69. I'll leave this here, but I will be alert to this issue.

5. Relational thinking. According to Swartz, Bourdieu's approach is to define a term as I did above, in opposition to another term. Concepts have meaning in relation to other concepts. This view appeals to me, because it sets up poles in the space of inquiry, which otherwise would feel too unstructured. At the same time, it doesn't limit us to other contrasts that may open our minds to other possibilities.

That's my starting point for working on this new area. We'll see if it holds up.