

ON PIERRE BOURDIEU

PART 3: HABITUS

The text for this series is David Swartz' book *Culture and Power: The Sociology of Pierre Bourdieu*. Swartz says that Bourdieu extends concepts from economics to sociology. Bourdieu writes about various forms of capital the individual might have, and the interests that drive the individual in the pursuit of capital and its use. Capital comes in material forms, as economic resources, as well as symbolic forms, as social capital, cultural capital, religious capital. Bourdieu says that these are recognized as capital when they are "...objects of struggle as valued resources." P. 43.

Interests are "... defined practically as whatever motivates or drives action toward consequences that matter". P. 71. Swartz says that for Bourdieu seems the critical interests are obtaining power and wealth, which probably explains the use of economic models. Elsewhere Swartz says that Bourdieu's framework seems less useful for analyzing the working class or the underclass. P. 82. That makes sense, because the concerns of a large part of society don't involve gaining wealth and power; other concerns are dominant, such as maintaining their existence.

The use of economic modeling raises the specter of rational actor theory and other axioms of neoliberal theory. Bourdieu explicitly disavows rational actor theory. He insists that most human action is pre-reflective, dispositional and tacit, rather than consciously planned and strategized to assure optimal outcomes. The definition of interest is similarly vague. These definitions are more like descriptions. They leave open a space at the center of the theory that serves to remind us that as individuals we are largely inscrutable to others, and perhaps even to ourselves. It also leaves a space for surprise, for the generation of new behaviors by the self. The point of sociological inquiry is

to discern regularities in behavior that are invisible even to ourselves, using various forms of observations and different kinds of statistics.

Bourdieu says that just because a scientist can formulate a rule that describes the behavior of a group doesn't mean that individuals are following a rule. Rather, he says that we follow a practical and informal knowledge that helps us predict which behavior might produce the desired results. Again, that leaves room for individual agency.

Bourdieu says that people form ideas of the way society works and the way they fit into society beginning at a very early age from their families, their friends and their surroundings including people and events. These experiences are internalized, and become the basis through which people understand the world and their own potential. This practical sense of position and possibility is called habitus. Habitus is "the product of class situations, not their cause."

Habitus, then, represents a sort of deep-structuring cultural matrix that generates self-fulfilling prophecies according to different class opportunities. And Bourdieu's "cultural" explanation of unequal educational attainment differs from the blaming-the-victim version of culture-of-poverty arguments in emphasizing individuals' adaptation to limited opportunities rather than the cultural origins of deviant behavior. It shows how structural disadvantages can be internalized into relatively durable dispositions that can be transmitted intergenerationally through socialization and produce forms of self-defeating behavior. P. 104.

This unconscious socialization of the individual turns into an acceptance of the power structures confronted by the individual. It seems natural,

so that neither the dominated nor the dominant feel cheated or privileged. It affects the sense of possibilities and establishes the limits of aspiration, and thus limits the scope of actions that seem plausible to each individual. In other words, it cements class relations.

As I was reading, I got the impression that Bourdieu used habitus to make predictions about how people would behave. I don't think that's right. Instead, it appears that the point of the concept is to describe how people come to accept the status quo. They learn from experience what results are likely from particular actions, and they internalize the results of those experiences as the world they live in, the world that sets the parameters for the success or failure of their actions. Kids learn beginning at birth what actions produce favorable outcomes, and which produce bad outcomes. They aren't thinking, these are concrete experiences, not processed by a thinking mind. The learning is pre-reflective, that is, people aren't even aware that they are learning, because they aren't able to think about or to understand what is happening. They only see that it is happening, and they think that's the way things are and will be.

Changing one's habitus is difficult. Swartz says that change occurs only when the strategies are applied in new situations and they produce unexpected results. In such cases there can be a gradual adjustment to the new circumstances. Action requires some use of capital, mostly social, cultural or economic. People are reluctant to make use of their capital unless they think there is a reasonable chance of success, won't make such use if the outcome is uncertain. That assessment arises from habitus, which limits the exposure to new situations. As an example, Swartz cites the results of changes in the French education system after WWII. Middle class people were more likely to take advantage than members of the working class who were inclined to "know their place".

So far I haven't seen discussion of things done strictly for pleasure. For example, in the discussions of cultural and social capital, there is no mention of the fact that both can be enjoyed purely on their own, without regard to the possible gain of wealth or power. Similarly, there is no discussion of religious behavior as personally rewarding, and there is no discussion of altruism. This is an interesting gap, in part because personal pleasure is an important concern to the Frankfurt School. I wonder whether the omission will be cured later in the book, or whether maybe this is a result of the use of the economic model of competition for scarce resources that frames Bourdieu's thinking.