Pierre Bourdieu – Challenging Symbolic Violence and the Naturalisation of Power Relations

For Bourdieu, 'The only way to bring about organisational change that does not entail merely replacing one modality of domination with another is to address specifically and to undo the mechanisms of dehistoricisation and universalisation – "always and everywhere has it been this way" – whereby arbitrary workings of power are enabled to continue.' (Emirbayer and Johnson, forthcoming; 47-8)

Change is at the heart of Bourdieu's philosophy and he espouses radical views and strong criticisms of society. With this in mind, this paper will ask if, and how, Bourdieu's concept of *symbolic violence* can help us to change the world for the better?

The quote above summarises Bourdieu's approach to social change. He proposes that it is necessary reconceptualise society in order to make visible power relations and injustices which are hidden through processes of 'dehistoricisation and universalisation'. We must escape what Bourdieu terms the *symbolic violence* within our own minds which prevents us from thinking critically. I will argue that this is a necessary step towards creating a more just society.

In this idea, Bourdieu is in agreement with many other great modern philosophers who offer a variety of means to undo symbolic violence. Although there are philosophical differences between these theorists, a number of different approaches can helpfully be brought together to achieve the same ends of emancipation. I will then examine briefly the ways in which this approach is applied to neo-liberalism which, I will argue, is the most generalised form of symbolic violence functioning in Western societies today.

I will conclude that undoing symbolic violence is the key to creating a better world and that Bourdieu, in combination with other theorists, can lead us towards this goal.

Change

That Bourdieu is a passionate advocate for change is clear in his writings. Unlike some, he is not afraid to use strong language or offer damning criticism and his normative views are clearly on display (see for example, Bourdieu and Wacquant, 2000).

At the core of Bourdieu's politics is the emotive notion of *symbolic violence*. This is a similar concept to the Marxist idea of 'false consciousness', whereby people internalise the discourses of the dominant, meaning that "the most intolerable conditions of existence can so often be percieved as acceptable and even natural" (Bourdieu in Emirbayer and Johnson, forthcoming; 46).

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A brief overview of history gives us considerable reason to take this claim seriously. In Victorian Britain, even the Queen opposed extending voting rights to women because of their unsuitability for politics. Similarly 'social Darwinism' and the 'divine right' of monarchs have both in the past been widely accepted despite the huge inequalities and injustices we see in them today.

Past examples such as this should alert us to the probability that many norms and practices which are unquestioningly accepted now may be deemed barbaric in the future. Bourdieu's call for more critical intellectuals who '[question] the things that are self-evident' and challenge the 'acceptance of *commonplaces*' (Bourdieu, 1998: 8) reflects this need to question contemporary society and is part of his moral attack on the perpetuation of hidden injustices.

In Bourdieu's philosophy, symbolic violence is lodged in an individual's 'durable principles of judgement and practice' – the *habitus* (Emirbayer and Johnson, forthcoming; 5). In effect, individuals absorb the structures and hierarchies of the social settings in which they exist (*fields*) into their 'mental structures' (*habitus*) (Swingewood, 2000; 214). This acceptance of the social order, even by people disadvantaged by it, is what Bourdieu calls the 'paradox of doxa' – it is a conflict hidden under the surface of the common sense notions which rule our social reality (Emirbayer and Johnson, forthcoming: 46). In the current dominant framework of neo-liberalism, individualism, and self-responsibility, symbolic violence often leads people to (unjustly) blame themselves for their own suffering whilst the role of society remains hidden (Bourdieu et al, 2000).

The implication of all this is, 'that what is required is a radical transformation of the social – including organisational – conditions of production of the habitus that is actively complicit in its own domination' (Emirbayer and Johnson, forthcoming; 47). In other words, we must free our minds as a first step towards freeing ourselves from the injustices of the status quo.

Approaches to 'freeing the mind'

Symbolic violence is an idea (although not a term) which is common to a number of theoretical approaches and which has its roots in the classical Marxist idea of *false consciousness*. Indeed, it is a concept which is present, to a greater or lesser extent, in most post-positivist thinking. Bourdieu's approach is most similar to that of Critical Theory and elements of Postmodernism and Poststructuralism also resonate. Although the philosophical basis for these approaches differ they share a goal of undoing the naturalisation of social power relations, and as such can be viewed as mutually supportive.

Bourdieu sees the naturalisation of power relations, and the resulting symbolic violence, as made up of two processes – 'dehistoricisation and universalisation' (Emirbayer and Johnson, forthcoming; 48). Thus a social relation, such as the gender system, has come about as a result of specific historical and contextual factors. The denial, or forgetting, of this specificity places gender to a large extent beyond question, even by those who suffer as a result of it. It appears to be true that, as Cob and Elder argue, naturalised inequalities are not seen as problems to be solved, but as inevitable facts of life (in Koopmans and Duyvendak, 1995; 246).

Bourdieu's aim of undoing these processes by which we come to accept power relations as natural can best be achieved by a historical and contextual analysis of the roots of this power. This is directly comparable to Nietzsche's (postmodern) *genealogy* and search for 'origins' – 'a form of history which historicises those things which are thought

to be beyond history, including those things or thoughts which have been buried, covered, or excluded from view in the writing and making of history' (Devetak, 2001b; 183-4). Foucault describes genealogy as "a history of the present" (in Gutting, 2005; 50) in that it seeks to explain and evaluate the present 'particularly with a view to discrediting unjustified claims of authority' (ibid.; 50).

Critical (international) Theory also takes this type of approach; it 'asks how that configuration [of power relations] came about, what costs it brings with it, and what alternative possibilities are immanent in history' (Devetak, 2001a; 161). Critical Theorists search for internal contradictions in the present, *within* the framework of the power relation being challenged – a method known as 'immanent critique'. This aims to open up space for democratic challenges to the status quo by highlighting its logical inconsistencies and weaknesses (ibid.: 162).

In stressing the possibilities for change, Critical Theory shares with Bourdieu a focus on justice and emancipation which is lacking in much postmodern thought. Whilst postmodernism sees change only as 'the endlessly repeated play of dominations' (Foucault, 1987; 150), Bourdieu and Critical Theorists allow for the idea that some power relations are more problematic than others. They feel justified in advocating change on behalf of those dominated by a system (Emirbayer and Johnson, forthcoming: 49; Devetak, 2001a).

Poststructural thought offers a slightly different strategy for denaturalisation, which has a more linguistic basis. It derives from the idea that all concepts and logics/arguments rely on dominant (common sense) assumptions which allow them to appear stable (Agger, 1991: 113; Devetak, 2005b: 187). Through the processes of *deconstruction* and *double reading*, internal contradictions can be made obvious within these concepts and logics and their 'truth' can be challenged.

These various approaches, despite their differences, can all contribute towards Bourdieu's project of challenging the naturalisation of power relations. The Postmodern and Critical theories emphasise more the 'dehistoricisation' element of naturalisation, and Poststructuralism's approach can be seen perhaps as a challenge to 'universalisation'. Accepting Bourdieu's claim that denaturalisation is a prerequisite for meaningful change, all of these perspectives can contribute to a better future. This can be demonstrated with regards to the denaturalisation of neo-liberalism – a high priority for Bourdieu.

Challenging Neo-Liberalism

Bourdieu describes neo-liberalism as a 'mental colonisation' which operates globally (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 2000: 4). The sheer scale and pervasiveness of neo-liberalism and the many damaging effects it has, make it a pressing target for criticism – a project which Bourdieu has contributed much to.

For Bourdieu, neo-liberalism is deeply complicit in numerous types of symbolic violence. Not only does it 'betray' and abandon of all types of social workers (Bourdieu, 1998: 3), but the ideals of individualisation and self-help serve to hide the role of neo-liberalism in the creation of suffering and '[make] it possible to 'blame the victim' who is entirely responsible for his or her own misfortune' (ibid.: 7). Thus, both social workers and those receiving help are denied much of the support they need and exposed to a logic which claims that their worsening situation (meaning tougher working conditions for social professionals) is their own fault.

Drawing on Bourdieu's critique, Fairclough (2000) stresses the need to challenge neo-liberalism particularly over the

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idea that it is 'inevitable' (p147). 'Governments of different political complexions take it as a mere fact of life (a 'fact' produced by intergovernmental agreements) that all must bow to the logic of the global economy' (Ibid.: 147). This 'inevitability' of neo-liberalism, despite powerful grassroots opposition, is evidence of its naturalisation in the eyes of many.

Boudieu and Wacquant (2000) seek to challenge this naturalisation by emphasising neo-liberalism's historical emergence in the USA and the subsequent 'mental colonisation' of the rest of the world, made possible by the global domination of those with an interest in the neo-liberal ideology (p4). They challenge the universalising 'truths' of the economic system, calling it a 'double discourse which, although founded on belief, mimics science by superimposing the appearance of reason… on the social fantasies of the dominant' (ibid.: 4, emphasis in original). Elements of both Postmodern *genealogy* and Poststructuralist *double reading* can be seen in these arguments.

Many other sources add to this project of denaturalisation. For example, Kellner's (2002) Critical Theory approach to neo-liberal globalisation uses the method of 'immanent critique' to prise open contradictions within which resistance can form against injustices. Another, much more specific, example is Schram (2000) and Schmitz and Goodin (1998) whose arguments both analyse the powerful (neo-liberal) welfare discourse of 'personal/individual responsibility' from a poststructuralist (and partly genealogical) perspective, exposing internal contradictions and hidden discrimination. Schram (2000) shows that particularly for many black, single mothers in the US 'personal responsibility', as defined in the neo-liberal discourse, is unattainable (p55). Schmitz and Goodin (1998) suggest that in many cases it may also be a bad choice.

This last example, in particular, gives a clear indication of the practical manner in which a denaturalising approach to the status quo can challenge policy. It could also play a significant role in undoing the structural violence experienced by those who are told they must fulfil the requirments of 'individual responsibility' and yet find that they cannot. Were these arguments to become well-known, they could reduce self-doubt and suffering by legitimising the difficulties of welfare recipients and those who support them, as well as providing a platform for dissent.

Conclusion

I have argued that Bourdieu's approach to social change through denaturalising the status quo is both powerful and useful. Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence stored in the habitus is a helpful way in which to understand people's acceptance of their own domination. His method for challenging this – 'to undo the mechanisms of dehistoricisation and universalisation… whereby arbitrary workings of power are allowed to continue' (Emirbayer and Johnson, forthcoming: 49), is broadly accepted by many post-positivist theorists.

The theorietical resonance of Bourdieu's perspective on symbolic violence means that a variety of Critical, Postmodern, and Poststructuralist tools can be used to challenge the naturalisation of power relations. I have breifly demonstrated a few of the possibilities as applied to neo-liberalism – Bourdieu's pet hate. Bourdieu's challenge to the status quo, and to neo-liberalism in particular, should be taken very seriously if we are to move beyond our most pressing hidden injustices into a more equal future.

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