Pierre Bourdieu’s sociological theory of culture

Brigit Fowler

Pierre Bourdieu is currently the Professor of Sociology at the Collège de France, Paris. He is someone who has experienced in his own life a double transition from a pre-capitalist world to a capitalist one: initially, in his move from Denguin, in the peasant Béarn area of the Pyrenees, to metropolitan Paris, and once again, after his return from the rural South of Algeria, where after being drafted into the Army he became a self-taught anthropologist.

Thus Bourdieu is well-placed to argue that the fundamen
tal element of modernity is the historical shift towards the greater significance of the economy within the whole society. From being a “thing in itself” the economy becomes a “thing for itself”. In particular, the gift exchange of goods and labour, which had once been totally organised around reciprocity, is largely replaced. What is substituted for it, of course, is the production and circulation of commodities, but also the enclosure of a sacred island of Art, where an inversion of commodity values emerge, in such a way that high sales prices can now be counted as an acceptable measure of aesthetic value:

The denial of economic interest... and its favourite refuge in the domain of art and culture, the site of a [pure] form of consumption, of money, of course, but also a whole society. The world of art, a sacred island systematically and ostentatiously opposed to the profane world of production, a sanctuary for gratuitous, disinterested activity in a universe given over to money and self-interest, offers, like theology in a past epoch, an imaginary anthropology obtained by the denial of all the realities directly brought about by the dietary chain.

Bourdieu himself is particularly concerned with the fate of art in late capitalist society, arguing that the sociological study of culture is the sociology of religion of our time. Adorno and the School of Frankfurt, which was characterised by a dialectical approach, taken seriously, means focusing once again on the structures of the modern art market that had been established. Thus when the leading texts once the structures of the modern art market had been established. Thus when the leading art-dealer. For the gallery-owner (or dealer), by selling a painting to “say something” and aimed to “liberate themselves from the writer”, that is, from any “gloss or exegeis” (1996:136-7).

Such ascetic withdrawal is now no longer an adequate description of contemporary artists. Instead, the longer-term investment of their experimental effort is increasingly a guarantee of the art-market’s eventual recognition, a recognition which often now comes to the young and which ensures rewards considerably greater than those of ageing” and two economic logics functioning, one based on a long-run time perspective with risky undertakings, organised around objects that have a long life (“art”), and the other, with the aid of multiple reproduction, organised around low-risk undertakings with a short-run life (the “commercial” portrait or Boots landscape) (1996:134-2).

Bourdieu’s relentlessly empirical investigations into the taste for modernist works as symbolic goods show that its public are not just drawn from other artists, but principally from those patrician families who have “old money”, often bankers, liberal professionals and higher education teachers (1984). Thus, once aesthetically justified by a leading critic and authenticated by the artists’ signatures, the works of the contemporary avant-garde have moved into the arms of power. “Legitimate taste” (“good” taste) is far from randomly scattered: it is the possession of an “aristocracy of culture”.

Moreover, artistic reputations no longer have to wait for posthumous recognition (as with Manet) or middle age (as with Degas, Monet and other members of the impressionist Batignolles Group). Certainly, the reverse world of bohemia, established by the first “heroic modernists”, was premised on the ascetic disavowal of the market and a self-denying pursuit of artistic values alone (1996). Thus Flaubert, for example, could be recognised as truly epoch-making in his refusal to make a “pyramid structure” to present a cumu
donal narrative order and in his insistence on a perspectivist treatment in his novels (e.g. Madame Bovary). Equally, Manet and Redon refused to use a painting to “say something” and aimed to “liberate themselves from the writer”, that is, from any “gloss or exegeis” (1996:136-7).

There are dangers in stripping these from their conceptual moorings in his other, wider, theories, but I will risk these to show how these “trade-mark” of practice. I will then apply them especially to the art-world, and show how a Bouddouesian perspectivist revolves a charismatics of the isolated artist and resists the inter
distribution of pure disinterestedness on the part of both public and artists. I shall suggest that Bourdieu represents a powerful analysis of the high culture of modernism but that his sociological theory also contains certain problematic omissions.

Bourdieu is currently becoming synonymous with a “holy trinity” of concepts: habitus, capital and field. There are dangers in stripping these from their conceptual moorings in his other, wider, theories, but I will risk these to show how these “trade-mark” ideas operate. I will then apply them especially to the art-world, and show how a Bouddouesian perspectivist revolves a charismatics of the isolated artist and resists the interpretation of pure disinterestedness in the part of both public and artists. I shall suggest that Bourdieu represents a powerful analysis of the high culture of modernism but that his sociological theory also contains certain problematic omissions.

Bourdieu aims to avoid the oppositions based on privilege and prejudice that resonate through the linked dualism of the “individual genius” and the “masses”, noting how the deskilling of the subordinate classes has been accompanied by the “hyperskilling” of the genius, how the subordinate classes’ incorporation of high culture has been similar to that of colonised natives awed by colonial power, and how the dominant classes’ racist fears of the masses has echoed the irrationality and childishness which was once attributed to “ primitives” by the colonising Western powers.

In contrast, for Bourdieu, all action, including artistic work, is modelled on craft action. To put it another way: practice is strategic action. Within this strategic action or agency, everyone is capable of improvisation, just as the clarinetist’s jazz solo both obeys certain rules but also —as the fruition
Capital and doxa

For Bourdieu, artists and other agents possess certain capitals, of which there are four basic types: first, economic capital — stocks and shares but also the surplus present in very high salaries — second, social capital — the network or influential patrons that you can use to support your actions; third, cultural capital — including the knowledge of the artistic field and its history, which in turn serves to distinguish the naive painter from the professional, and including also scholarly capital of a formal type (a postgraduate degree, the award of a Rome visiting scholarship etc.); finally, symbolic capital: your reputation or honour, as an artist who is loyal to fellow-artists and so on. These capitals can be (and often are) distributed around a kin-group, their specific structure and volume distinguishing the "great family" of the dominants from the others. One of the properties of the dominants is to have families particularly extended (the great have great families) and strongly integrated. They are united not just through the effects of the habitus, but also by the solidarity of their interests. They are united at once by capital and for capital: economic capital certainly, symbolic capital (the name) and above all, perhaps, social capital (which one knows is both the condition for and the consequence of the successful direction of capital on the part of the members of this dominant unit).

Bourdieu calls "doxa" the taken-for-granted assumptions or orthodoxies of an epoch which are deeper in the level of consciousness than ideologies, but are also productive of conscious struggles and new forms. "Heresiarchs", as Bourdieu calls them, include painters like Courbet and Manet, as well as political figures and philosophers like Pascal and Spinoza. They rupture the doxa (or break with conventions), Bourdieu writes particularly powerfully of Robert and of his decision to write well and flout mediocrity while choosing, as his subject for tragic love, characters coming from the middle class provincial obscurity of Yvetot. Heterodox distills in its most conscripted forms the lived experiences of groups who are not of the subordinate classes, but are of the dominant fraction of the dominant class. Instead they derive from part of the ruling class which has cultural capital but not much economic capital.

Bourdieu has himself let loose some debunking arguments which have deeply upset art historians and philosophers of aesthetics. First, he claims that art critics have a model of a "fresh eye" which is opposed to an academic "eye", and is still itself thought of as a naturalised essence (that is, they presume that those competencies in colour, line etc which are actually the result of early upbringing or training are instead an innate gift of nature (1996: 294-312). Critics suffer from what we might call a poverty of historicism: in particular, they are unable to understand the artist in terms of his/her positions and position-taking within the art field. What is more, when the rhetoric of art-criticism is analysed closely, the terms chosen are those closely linked to the aristocratic discourse — the paintings are noble, distinctive, refined, subtle, etc. Such terms are convenient. They are at once sufficiently autonomous to continue to have some currency in creating an ethos of rarity but sufficiently loose to be compatible with any aesthetics (see 1984, conclusion). Secondly, Bourdieu argues — like Foucault on the invention of the homosexual — that the West saw the invention of the artist in the mid-nineteenth century. This was a characteristic, particularly bohemian, emphasizing with a Christ-like devotion the sacrifices necessary for art. The artist pro- voked a sense of devotion for the artist, and of a kind of aesthetic interest, interest in the artist's work, initially within the progressive intelligentsia of the Left bank, and then more generally among the bourgeoisie. Bourdieu's work undercuts this, although his latest work does concede that certain artists — like Manet — can be regarded as "heroic" in their inauguration of a new world of art based on "symbolic revolution". He insists, on the other hand, that, unlike the academic world where the artist is a civil servant of the state, made up by a strange mixture of pessimism and the rhetoric of art-criticism is analysed closely, the terms chosen are those closely linked to the aristocratic discourse — the paintings are noble, distinctive, refined, subtle, etc. Such terms are convenient. They are at once sufficiently autonomous to continue to have some currency in creating an ethos of rarity but sufficiently loose to be compatible with any aesthetics (see 1984, conclusion).

Yet the dangers inherent in historical revolutions also apply to such symbolic revolutions. The achievement of mass recognition by an artist is a double-edged victory for it sets in motion a process of routine co-optation — means of cheap reproductions, profitable "bio-pics", personality cults and hyperbolic "criticism". The most transgressive figures can thus be tailored ultimately to the needs of the museum, gallery market system and the curriculum. Here the lowest common denominator that draw them together is the artists' mutual concern for aesthetic form, whatever differences exist in terms of meaning or the political ends their works serve. Through a form of reception that forces them to submit to the aesthetic authority — the supremacy of style — they inadvertently come to undermine the dominant class's hold on power. Bourdieu's writings in fact disclose a skeletal theory of art which does not always need to serve the purposes of such figures. The anti-artist, he notes that the symbolic revolutions established by Baudelaire or Manet are in some respects as fundamental as a political revolution. They change permanently the way that we see and classify the world.

Geographically, it has been virtually impossible for provincial artists or even those who have come from the country to the city to make their mark. Provincial artists have been doomed instead to abandon their projects, and to become merely regional painters or writers. Moreover, only those painters or writers who had families ready to give them allowances in the difficult periods before getting established were likely to be successful. Here Bourdieu is at his most challenging. He is arguing in effect that the whole history of modernism has been one in which only those advantaged artists who were centrally located who had the time to spend on their experiments were the ones who won out. The Rules of Art (1996) bring out the tragic contradictions of art in our period. For Bourdieu shows us that the only effective field of struggle is within the "restricted" field of art, cut off from the "expanded" field where specialized knowledge is not required to decode the relevant imagery. Within the restricted field, collective movements help to consacrators of the reputation of individual artists, whose positions, in turn, are that much more defensible the better-secured are their own artistic habitus. Bourdieu suggests that Manet, for example, had had the time to spend on his experiments were it not for the time he had the time to spend on his experiments were the ones who won out.
back to art its concern with ethical and political interests, which wishes to free the museum and restructure the role of the art-world within everyday life.

We begin to see, too, why there is no such thing as popular art in Bourdieu’s theory. First, because the modern artist, bereft of the orthodoxy of the Academic artist, needs the defence of higher critics, not to speak of a reputable dealer. Second, because the institution of permanent revolution requires the crucial ingredient of the right place (especially presence in the great metropolitan centres of modernity) and also the time when young to experiment. The conditions for these are self-assurance and the financial support that historically has been available only to the sons and daughters of the dominant class (not least the minor aristocracy) by means of an allowance. Furthermore, there is no chance for новаторы or artists who might be legitimisable (eg cinema or photography or jazz). However, compared with other more securely-consecrated forms they don’t bring their potential haute bourgeois public enough returns (in terms of “cultural capital”) to reward them for their investment of time and effort. Such art-forms are doomed to be taken seriously only by a tiny “deviant” minority like the junior executives or technicians who make up the members of camera clubs. Photography, therefore, is consigned for ever to the outer circle of hell in the form of the midebbiebro.

I think that Bourdieu overlooked the potential for “consecration” within photography — it might be said that the popular character of photography only did delay its legitimation but that it has now acquired its own canon of great photographers, its own critics and historians and its own educational base in art-schools. However, there is considerable backing back to many of Bourdieu’s theories, not least in the various British reports of the Arts Council. For example, Maulin’s empirical work on the contemporary French art-market (1967), in the Centre de Sociologie Européenne, has shown very acutely, by means of interviews with painters, collectors and curators, the precise ways in which critics aesthetic values are used to bolster exchange values and the paradoxes for the painters of having clients buy their works who are out of sympathy with their views. She indicates the widespread economic pressure to do so. Recently, he bigly developed “mandarin” artists —like Quakers and some early trade-union groups —offer resistance or seriously undertake the risks of “martyrdom”? (Fowler, 1997)

Further, I should refer to Bourdieu’s disturbing views about artists’ “interest in disinterestedness”, which has led one critic to accuse him of having a narrow and unacceptably determinist position, which lacks any room for altruism (Alexander, 1999). My inclination is to follow Bourdieu here: he points out the need to preserve the solidarity of artists themselves without economic considerations so that artists can have sometimes taken easier ways out. The question here, it seems to me, is to deepen and make more precise our historical sociology of such testing-points. Under what conditions do groups of artists —like Quakers and some early trade-union groups —offer resistance or seriously undertake the risks of “martyrdom”? (Fowler, 1997)

Bourdieu here: he points even to medieval monks, of Lorca in the Spanish Civil War, or Mandelaists, Solheiritsyn, and others who could have sometimes taken easier ways out. The question here, it seems to me, is to deepen and make more precise our historical sociology of such testing-points. Under what conditions do groups of artists —like Quakers and some early trade-union groups —offer resistance or seriously undertake the risks of “martyrdom”? (Fowler, 1997)

But Bourdieu’s theory does have certain problematic elements, following on the poor predictive quality of his research on photography. Let me isolate these briefly. First the concepts of “doxa” or “illusio” tend to suggest that there are no possibilities of moving outside the “game” and beyond the forms of knowledge that prevail within it, that these are crucially on your location in relation to power. However, unlike Foucault, Bourdieu does suggest that there is a possibility of lived experience which may clash with ideology: moreover, in the case of (social) science, this takes the form of procedures for testing reality which are not discourse-dependent. It is true that despite this there are still certain types of doxa or taken-for granted assumptions which are ineradicable in a given period because they are opaque, even to social scientists. However, every degree would agree that this is the case to some degree.

Secondly, Bourdieu writes very disparagingly of the “fragile” nature of the alliance between artists and workers, and expects it to dissolve when the artists themselves gain recognition. But in some circumstances, this “fragile” alliance does hold, at least temporally (eg the Russian and Cuban Revolutions). Artists do suffer exile or even die for their beliefs —I think of Neruda confronted by the Chilean junta, of Lorca in the Spanish Civil War, or Mandelaists, Solheiritsyn, and others who could have sometimes taken easier ways out. The question here, it seems to me, is to deepen and make more precise our historical sociology of such testing-points. Under what conditions do groups of artists —like Quakers and some early trade-union groups —offer resistance or seriously undertake the risks of “martyrdom”? (Fowler, 1997)

I think that Bourdieu overlooked the potential for “consecration” within photography — it might be said that the popular character of photography only did delay its legitimation but that it has now acquired its own canon of great photographers, its own critics and historians and its own educational base in art-schools. However, there is considerable backing back to many of Bourdieu’s theories, not least in the various British reports of the Arts Council. For example, Maulin’s empirical work on the contemporary French art-market (1967), in the Centre de Sociologie Européenne, has shown very acutely, by means of interviews with painters, collectors and curators, the precise ways in which critics aesthetic values are used to bolster exchange values and the paradoxes for the painters of having clients buy their works who are out of sympathy with their views. She indicates the widespread economic pressure to do so. Recently, he bigly developed “mandarin” artists —like Quakers and some early trade-union groups —offer resistance or seriously undertake the risks of “martyrdom”? (Fowler, 1997)

Further, I should refer to Bourdieu’s disturbing views about artists’ “interest in disinterestedness”, which has led one critic to accuse him of having a narrow and unacceptably determinist position, which lacks any room for altruism (Alexander, 1999). My inclination is to follow Bourdieu here: he points out the need to preserve the solidarity of artists themselves without economic considerations so that artists can have sometimes taken easier ways out. The question here, it seems to me, is to deepen and make more precise our historical sociology of such testing-points. Under what conditions do groups of artists —like Quakers and some early trade-union groups —offer resistance or seriously undertake the risks of “martyrdom”? (Fowler, 1997)

Bourdieu here: he points even to medieval monks, of Lorca in the Spanish Civil War, or Mandelaists, Solheiritsyn, and others who could have sometimes taken easier ways out. The question here, it seems to me, is to deepen and make more precise our historical sociology of such testing-points. Under what conditions do groups of artists —like Quakers and some early trade-union groups —offer resistance or seriously undertake the risks of “martyrdom”? (Fowler, 1997)

But Bourdieu’s theory does have certain problematic elements, following on the poor predictive quality of his research on photography. Let me isolate these briefly. First the concepts of “doxa” or “illusio” tend to suggest that there are no possibilities of moving outside the “game” and beyond the forms of knowledge that prevail within it, that these are crucially on your location in relation to power. However, unlike Foucault, Bourdieu does suggest that there is a possibility of lived experience which may clash with ideology: moreover, in the case of (social) science, this takes the form of procedures for testing reality which are non discourse-dependent. It is true that despite this there are still certain types of doxa or taken-for granted assumptions which are ineradicable in a given period because they are opaque, even to social scientists. However, every degree would agree that this is the case to some degree.

Secondly, Bourdieu writes very disparagingly of the “fragile” nature of the alliance between artists and workers, and expects it to dissolve when the artists themselves gain recognition. But in some circumstances, this “fragile” alliance does hold, at least temporally (eg the Russian and Cuban Revolutions). Artists do suffer exile or even die for their beliefs —I think of Neruda confronted by the Chilean junta, of Lorca in the Spanish Civil War, or Mandelaists, Solheiritsyn, and others who could have sometimes taken easier ways out. The question here, it seems to me, is to deepen and make more precise our historical sociology of such testing-points. Under what conditions do groups of artists —like Quakers and some early trade-union groups —offer resistance or seriously undertake the risks of “martyrdom”? (Fowler, 1997)

Further, I should refer to Bourdieu’s disturbing views about artists’ “interest in disinterestedness”, which has led one critic to accuse him of having a narrow and unacceptably determinist position, which lacks any room for altruism (Alexander, 1999). My inclination is to follow Bourdieu here: he points out the need to preserve the solidarity of artists themselves without economic considerations so that artists can have sometimes taken easier ways out. The question here, it seems to me, is to deepen and make more precise our historical sociology of such testing-points. Under what conditions do groups of artists —like Quakers and some early trade-union groups —offer resistance or seriously undertake the risks of “martyrdom”? (Fowler, 1997)
And, in his acceptance speech for the Bloch Prize, he argues for a “reasoned utopia” and against the “bankers’ fatalism” which is the ideology of our time. Rational utopianism is defined as being both against “pure wishful thinking (which) has always brought discredit on utopia” and against “philistine platitudes concerned essentially with facts…intellectuals and all others who really care about the good of humanity, should re-establish a utopian thought with scientific backing…” (Bourdieu, 1998b: 128).

**Notes**

1. Bourdieu’s theories neglect the crossovers between the fine and applied arts. Subsequent to the period of his research, these have certainly become more frequent with artists plundering the “expanded field” of comics, cartoons, graffiti etc. and vice versa. Some recuperation of the popular was always an element of the restricted field (see Varnedoe and Gopnik, 1990).

2. Acts of Resistance notes in its critique of the Bundesbank’s President, Mr. Tietmayer, that while he is anxious to bury the expensive welfare state and remove labour movement “rigidities”, he, like M. Trichet, the Governor of the Banque de France, no doubt reads poetry and sponsors the arts (Bourdieu 1998b: 46).

3. Free Exchange, Polity, 1995. Haacke has also revealed the anomalies in the changed location of the most celebrated modernists’ works, both through showing the changing ownership of their paintings as they come into possession of the more conservative professions and corporate heads and through revealing the discrepancies between the directors’ view of how art museums should be run and those of the general public.

**References**

Selected Works by Pierre Bourdieu:


*The Production of Belief*, *Media, Culture and Society*, 1980, 2, 261-93


*Practical Reason*, 1998c.

**Works by other writers:**


