

Social Space and Symbolic Space

Overview: this is a lecture given in Japan, where PB talks about some of the organizing concepts that activated his early work in *Distinction*. The key for us is that these two readings (this and the selection from *The Logic of Practice*) provide the key concepts that we put into action for Bourdieu's view of class & class formation.

Key Concepts/Terms used throughout:

- **Objectivism:** Externally-based models of social science. Example: Structural Anthropology, Marxism. It's a reference to models that focus on fixed social characteristics.
- **Subjectivism:** Internally-based models of social science. Example: Existentialism of Sartre, Rational Action Theory in economics.
 - Both of these terms fall under the general guise of "**substantialist**" theory.
- **Social Space:** A mathematical/spatial metaphor for how people are related to each other with respect to types of capital.
- **Positions:** Actors occupy positions in social space relative to each other. These are your coordinates on the various types of capital. Similar to "Blau space." Can be defined by any intersection of categories relevant in a given field. Examples include occupations, education, numbers of friends, musical tastes, and so on. People stake their claims to social status based on their *position*.
- **Practices** (aka **Position-taking**): This is what people do. Practices serve to signal and maintain a position in the space. Example: Styles of dress, etc.
- **Habitus.** PB's main action element. Habitus is what links *practices* to *positions*. The definitions of habitus are many, but the most famous is probably:
 - "The conditionings associated with a particular class of conditions of existence produce *habitus*, **systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles which generate and organize practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary in order to attain them**" (p. 53).
 - the *habitus* – embodied history, internalized as a second nature and so forgotten as history – is the active presence of the whole past of which it is the product (p. 56)
 - As an acquired system of generative schemas objectively adjusted to the particular conditions in which it is constituted, the habitus engenders all the thoughts, all the perceptions, and all the actions consistent with those conditions and no others." (Bourdieu 1977, p.95)

- misrecognition: Partial and distorted understandings of things in the world, that are systematically distributed through *Habitus*.
- Dispositions: Left a little vague, but these are presumably relatively stable ways of looking at the world that guide action.
- Capital: Resources in a field.
 - Economic Capital: Money
 - Cultural Capital: Things we know that are relevant to a field / related to prestige. Elements of “taste”
 - Social Capital: Who we know
 - Symbolic Capital: The ability to name / create distinctions.
 Note that every dimension of capital has two qualities: *Quantity*(or volume) and Type (distribution, sorts, etc.). So you can have \$50,000 (volume) all in cash or split evenly between cash and credit.

I. What is he arguing against?

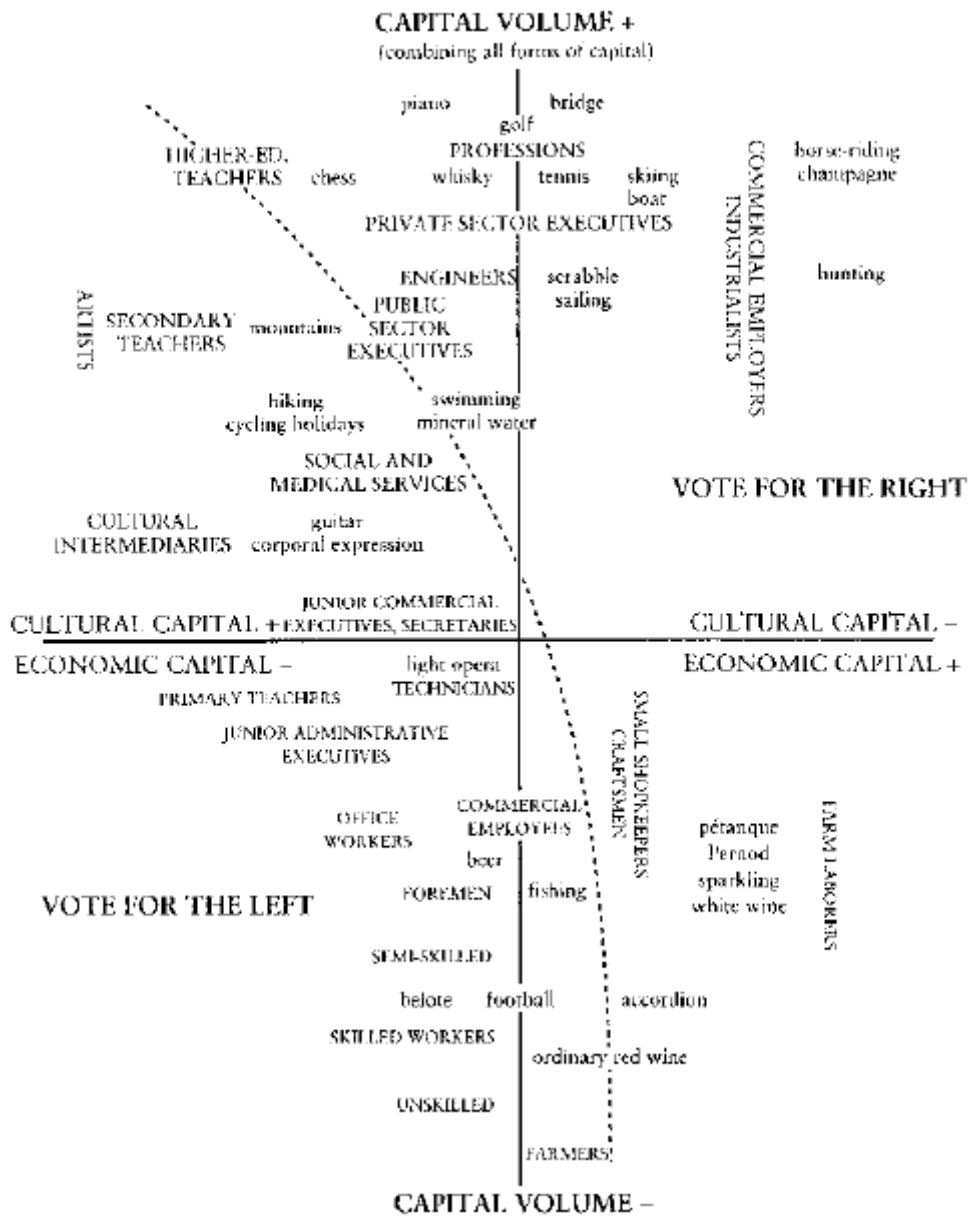
- Important to keep in mind that PB is arguing against “substantialist” points of view. He does not want any social theory that ultimately comes across as fixed in time or carries with it essentialist claims about people and social life. Instead, he wants a theory that is completely relational; in two senses: (a) that peoples characteristics are only important relative to the characteristics of others and (b) that the distribution of people across multiple sets of characteristics shape social interaction, formal & informal relations.

b. See p.269:

by aristocrats at the end of the nineteenth century. In short, one has to avoid turning class practice can sometimes be taken up by nobles. In short, one has to avoid turning into necessary and intrinsic properties of some group (nobility, samurai, as well as workers or employees) the properties which belong to this group at a given moment in time because of its position in a determinate social space and in a determinate state of the *supply* of possible goods and practices. Thus, at every moment of each society, one has to deal with a set of social positions which is bound by a relation of homology to a set of activities (the practice of golf or piano) or of goods (a second home or an old master painting) that are themselves characterized relationally.

- Key to his model is a picture of *social space*. Social space is a metaphor, where distributions in social characteristics are seen geographically. The simplest idea is to think about *distance* first. So if I know the pair-wise distance between any set of cities (think of a millage chart), I could recreate those distances on a map, by placing cities in the right part of a 2-dimensional plane. Similarly with social characteristics. Two people who are differ in age by 10 years are further apart than two people who differ in age by 5 years. Similarly, we may like the same music, same TV, be the same occupation, etc. Anything we do can be a feature that expresses our similarity or difference, and just like mapping a set of cities, we can map a set of people, aggregates of people (like professions) and the

things they do with each other. An example of this is his figure from Distinction about social space in France:



Here the key to interpreting this figure is looking for elements close to each other. So we see “ordinary red wine” is closer to “UNSKILLED (labor)” than it is to “SMALL SHOPKEEPERS” who are closer to “Sparkling white wine”.

He points out that part of what matters here, and hence the title of his first book, is **DISTINCTION**. That is, activities reflect differences upon which actors make distinctions between “like me” or “not like me”, and hence this shapes how we interact.

On social space:

This idea of difference, or a gap, is at the basis of the very notion of *space*, that is, a set of distinct and coexisting positions which are exterior to one another and which are defined in relation to one another through their *mutual exteriority* and their relations of proximity, vicinity, or distance, as well as through relations of order, such as above, below, and *between*. Certain properties of members of the (p.271)

Note that every space is defined by *capital* and that there are many types of capital. He focuses his work in France on the relative position (ratio) of economic to cultural capital. So he's effectively collapsed the two dimensions into their ratio.

The position in a space provides conditions/resources for action, which is guided by *Habitus*.

II. *Logic of Classes*

Unlike Marx, who would look for classes as a fixed feature of one's position in the economic realm (producer or laborer), PB makes a distinction between "theoretical classes" (also referred to as "classes on paper") and "real classes" or "active classes" – groups of people who are self-recognized and working together. This is equivalent to the old Marxist distinction between "class for itself" and "class in itself" – a "class in itself" is pure potential, only after recognizing the group needs and acting on them does it become a real group, or a *class for itself*.

Bourdieu doesn't think that theoretical classes have any fundamental reality:

expected to see mobility. Thus, *difference* (which I express in describing social space) exists and persists. But does this mean that we must accept or affirm the existence of classes? No. Social classes do not exist (even if political work, armed with Marx's theory, had in some cases contributed to making them at least exist through instances of mobilization and proxies). What exists is a social space, a space of differences, in which classes exist in some sense in a state of virtuality, not as something given but as *something to be done*.

(p.275)

That is, classes are always possible to emerge from a space: a group that will see common interests and work together. But, those interests can shift, change and so forth, depending on how the distribution of people across the space changes.

III. *Structure, Habitus, Practices*

This is the bulk of chapter 3 of Bourdieu's most famous book *The Logic of Practice*. It is where he focuses on the concept of *habitus* and links it to theories of structure and action.

Again, he wants to avoid two poles of theory that he thinks are problematic. These are the problems of Objectivism and Subjectivism: of too much focus on ORDER vs. too much focus on ACTION. He wants to balance these two in a reasonable way.

a. *On Objectivism he says: (not in your selection):*

"To make transcendent entities ... out of the constructions that science resorts to in order to give an account of the structure and meaningful products of the accumulation of innumerable historical actions, is to reduce history to a 'process without a subject', simply replacing the 'creative subject' of subjectivism with an automaton driven by the dead laws of a history of nature." (p.41 of *LoP*)

b. *On Subjectivism.*

His main enemies here are rational choice theory and existentialist theory. On rational choice theory

In both cases, he's questioning the ability of individuals to determine their own fate independent of the situation they are embedded within. He's arguing against a radical notion of *free action*

His critique of rational action theory hinges, among other things, on the ability to really choose to believe something. The paradox here is: to *choose* to believe for rational reason is not *really* a belief, but a belief *about* a belief.

"This is because, by definition, by the simple fact of accepting the idea of an economic subjects who is economically unconditioned -- especially in his preferences -- they exclude inquiry into the economic and social conditions of economic dispositions that the sanctions of a particular state of a particular economy designate as more or less reasonable ... depending on their degree of adjustment to its objective demands."

"...even if it is possible to decide to believe *p*, one cannot both believe *p* and believe that the belief that *p* stems from a decision to believe *p*; if the decision to believe *p* is to be carried out successfully, it must also obliterate itself from the memory of the believer." (p.49)

His solution in *Habitus*:

The notion of *Habitus* is designed to bridge purely rule-based objectivism and radically free subjectivism. The key is to take practice - the things people do -- more at face value (though I'm not sure he really believes this, at least given his empirical work).

"The theory of practice as practice insists that the objects of knowledge are constructed, not passively recorded, and, contrary to intellectualist idealism, that the principle of this construction is the system of structured, structuring dispositions, the habitus, which is constituted in practice and is always oriented toward practical functions." (p277)

"Objectively 'regulated' and 'regular' without being in any way the product of obedience to rules, they can be collectively orchestrated without being the project of the organizing action of a conductor." (p.278)

While many have noted a subtle functionalist leaning in PB, I suspect his approach is more akin to a long-term cultural evolutionary argument. Practices are differentially successful in different fields, and thus some are retained / transmitted while others are not.

"In reality, the dispositions durably inculcated by the possibilities and impossibilities ... inscribed in the objective conditions (which science apprehends as statistical regularity..) generate dispositions objectively compatible with these conditions and in a sense pre-adapted to their demands." (p.279)

Thus the Habitus is similar to a grammar or a set of norms, and like Durkheim, these are selected for in particular environments. It links structure and action (his two poles of theory) by making action a result of structure, which later re-creates structure. So the two get linked by people doing the things that structure pre-disposes them to do.

The *habitus*, a product of history, produces individual and collective practices – more history – in accordance with the schemes generated by history. It ensures the active presence of past experiences, which, deposited in each organism in the form of schemes of perception, thought and action, tend to guarantee the “correctness” of practices and their constancy over time, more reliably than all formal rules and explicit norms. This system of dispositions – a present past that tends to perpetuate itself into the future by reactivation in similarly structured practices, an internal law through which the law of external necessities, irreducible to immediate constraints, is constantly exerted – is the principle of the continuity and regularity which objectivism sees in social practices without being able to account for it; and also of the regulated transformations that cannot be explained either by the extrinsic, instantaneous determinisms of mechanistic sociologism or by the purely internal but equally instantaneous determination of spontaneist subjectivism. Overriding the (p.279)

The main root of Habitus is largely forgotten – things we know but don't know why we know them. These are all those little rules of action that we rarely write down (but see

“Miss Manners”), but all react to in similar ways (if we’re from the same position in social space!):

concealing it, in and through practice. The “unconscious”, which enables one to dispense with this interrelating, is never anything other than the forgetting of history which history itself produces by realizing the objective structures that it generates in the quasi-natures of *habitus*. As Durkheim³ puts it:

In each one of us, in differing degrees, is contained the person we were yesterday, and indeed, in the nature of things it is even true that our past *personae* predominate in us, since the present is necessarily insignificant when compared with the long period of the past because of which we have emerged in the form we have today. It is just that we don’t directly feel the influence of these past selves precisely because they are so deeply rooted within us. They constitute the unconscious part of ourselves. Consequently we have a strong tendency not to recognize their existence and to ignore their legitimate demands. By contrast, with the most recent acquisitions of civilization we are vividly aware of them just because they are recent and consequently have not had time to be assimilated into our collective unconscious.

The *habitus* – embodied history, internalized as a second nature and so forgotten as history – is the active presence of the whole past of which it is the product. As such, it is what gives practices their relative autonomy with respect to external determinations of the immediate present. This autonomy is that of the past, enacted and (p.281)

Habitus, since it is a link between positions and practice, tends to be homogeneous within classes (however defined). In fact, this is what makes practices intelligible (at least to a given community).

Note, again, the clear link between position in the space, class, and individual action.

Sociology treats as identical all biological individuals who, being the products of the same objective conditions, have the same *habitus*. A social class (in-itself) – a class of identical or similar conditions of existence and conditionings – is at the same time a class of biological individuals having the same *habitus*, understood as a system of dispositions common to all products of the same conditionings. Though it is impossible for all (or even two) members of the same class to have had the same experiences, in the same order, it is certain that each member of the same class is more likely than any member of another class to have been confronted with the situations most frequent for members of that class. Through the always con- (p.284).