

The Emancipatory Potential of Critical Theory: With Bourdieu and Beyond

David L. Swartz*

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Abstract

A comment on Mariano Croce's "The Levels of Critique. Pierre Bourdieu and the Political Potential of Social Theory."

Mariano Croce offers here a tightly structured argument on the political potential of critical social theory as conceptualized by Pierre Bourdieu. The paper takes up two frequently voiced objections to Bourdieu's thinking: first, that Bourdieu dismisses actor capacity for self-insight and autonomous action thereby reducing actors to helpless reproducers of social structures, especially among the dominated; second, that he elevates excessively the liberating role of social theory and its chief purveyors, sociologists. Croce has in mind two particular representatives of these two lines of criticism: Bruno Latour and Luc Boltanski. Croce shows these two criticisms to be fundamental misreadings of Bourdieu's thinking on human action and the role of critical theory — and theorists — in promoting social change. This is particularly well done for Bruno Latour's criticism of Bourdieu, and critical sociology more generally, that I find dilettantish and unconvincing. Luc Boltanski's criticism, however, is more probing and cut from a different cloth.

The presentations of Bourdieu's thinking and the criticisms are not new but succinctly articulated in the paper. Given that they continue to be widely repeated criticisms it is probably worthwhile for a paper like this to help set the record straight. The promise of the paper, however, comes at the very end where Croce outlines for a future text how the emancipatory potential of critical theory might be elaborated from Bourdieu's thinking in two ways: first, from within those "interstitial micro-spaces where innovative practices are produced" outside the grid of prevailing discourses; second, the potential role played by "material practices" that disrupt existing discourse. Unfortunately, these are only suggested not probed in this paper, but they seem potentially promising ways of moving with and beyond Bourdieu on this topic. What needs demonstrating, but is not, is how Bourdieu "could easily take up these challenges." I would suggest three caveats, however, that Croce might consider in working on this future project.

* Boston University (United States); ✉ dswartz@bu.edu

First, why limit the idea of “interstitial nature of social transformation” to micro-level processes or spaces where significance seems vested in individual actions? How about macro ones? How about interstitial macro-spaces where where forms of important social organization occurs between fields as in the case of the European Union? Second, what kinds of “material practices” are to be considered as disrupters of prevailing discourse and that seem to fall outside of available meaningfulness. This seems like a way of reintroducing Latour’s dubious claims for material agency external to human actors. Would arbitrary expressions of physical violence be included? And third, critics no doubt can accuse Croce of cherry picking relevant texts from Bourdieu to suit his argument just as the critics themselves have cherry picked from Bourdieu in their criticisms. What is missing in both accounts is deep contextualization of Bourdieu’s writing and also an explicit assessment of how this present text is to speak to current pressing issues. Bourdieu is well known for shifting the emphasis of his work to speak to the changing contexts he found himself in. In his words, to “twist the stick in the opposite direction.” This cries out for contextualization to both understand and assess the significance of particular texts. But in a reflexive spirit the current text also needs to point up the current issues it attempts to address and correct. Getting Bourdieu straight in my view is not enough to challenge current thinking. In what prevailing ways do social scientists think about critical theorization and politics that need revision? The paper stops short of telling us.

Finally, a comment on how Croce presents Bourdieu’s thinking about social theory. It is one thing to claim that Bourdieu “grants social theory a special position” in helping create windows of opportunity for potential social change and quite another to claim that this view “makes theory the main instrument of social change.” The latter leads Croce to conclude that Bourdieu remains caught within an “intellectual inclination” where “everything occurs at the level of meaning” when considering the origins of change. The first claim is correct and the second is wrong.

First, a necessary qualification on the first claim is in order. It would be more correct to say in the case of Bourdieu that “sociology” rather than “social theory” is accorded a “special position” in Bourdieu’s thinking because he regularly insists that theory and empirical work are to be combined and they usually are in his writing. That said, Bourdieu certainly does accord sociology a special role in helping to bring about change. But in a sense that is a banal claim. Why else would one do sociology!

The second claim does not logically follow from the first if one takes into account the ensemble of Bourdieu’s oeuvre. Indeed Bourdieu is quite explicit in places where he points out that change requires political mobilization and this need not wait around for sociologists to show up. I suspect Croce is led to this conclusion because he considers Bourdieu’s work exclusively through the prism of the “linguistic grid.” If the linguistic grid is extensive and deeply affecting the consciousness and dispositions of the dominated so that by themselves they are unable to break out of their prison house of language through only their everyday linguistic practices, then indeed an alternative external grid would seem necessary to raise their awareness. But Bourdieu is quite critical of such “internalist” analysis that considers only the properties of discourse. Bourdieu’s conceptual language of fields and capitals is in part designed to avoid the trap of discourse analysis exclusively. Croce acknowledges this in noting Bourdieu’s criticism of Foucault’s focus on discourse. But then he shifts focus from discourse to meaning by claiming that Bourdieu remains trapped in the world of meanings (an “intellectualist” bias) and thereby misses those meaningless material practices, which is probably a claim without meaning. “Ways of words” like “ways of seeing” are intricately linked to ways of authority. To invest the former with some mysterious power independent of the latter defies the sociological imagination.

References

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David L. Swartz: Boston University (United States)

✉ dswartz@bu.edu

David L. Swartz is currently Visiting Researcher in sociology at Boston University. He is a Senior Editor for Theory and Society. His most recent book, *Symbolic Power, Politics, and Intellectuals: The Political Sociology of Pierre Bourdieu* (University of Chicago Press, 2013) was co-winner of the ASA History of Sociology Section Best Book Award in 2014. He is currently researching American scholars who support the Trump presidency.