

## A Reply to David Swartz's Comment on "The Levels of Critique. Pierre Bourdieu and the Political Potential of Social Theory"

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David Swartz is too refined an interpreter of Bourdieu's thinking for me to provide a satisfying reply to his perceptive comments. And most of what I will argue in this short text is likely to meet with disagreement, especially when it comes to interpretive issues — or more precisely, to what it means to use a thinker's thinking. As a political philosopher who has a strong interest in social theory, my aim was to ferret out Bourdieu's contribution to understanding how change comes about in the daily activity of social agents. Accordingly, my use at times turns out to be a misuse or even an abuse. In the next few paragraphs, I will try to take stock of Swartz's comments with a view to clarifying what the article's main objectives were and how I tried — or maybe failed — to attain them. I am grateful to Swartz for the opportunity to go through my paper once more with the trustworthy guidance of his insightful reading.

To encapsulate my overall argument, my article initially claims that some of the reiterated criticisms against Bourdieu's monumental theory are ill-placed. However, my intention, as I will specify below, was not to defend Bourdieu, but to show that his conceptual instruments can be of help even to those who criticize him. This is why in the course of the article I argue that, if we sever Bourdieu's approach to practices from his reliance on what he calls "theory effect," we can apply the former to the study of small-scale interstices where the transformation of the social occurs on a daily basis. In this frame, Bourdieu becomes the advocate of a microsociology that can be the propeller of micropolitical resources. But it is worth referring to Swartz's observations.

At the outset of his comment, he deftly brings out two difficulties that inevitably affect all micropolitical projects. First, how can we underrate the macro scale to focus on the micro? Second, what are the material practices that should be considered as agents of transformation? Then, he points to a third, orthogonal difficulty relating to the way I use the Bourdieusian primary literature. Is my account of Bourdieu's social theory not purposely tailored to my case?

I would like to begin with this latter difficulty and say that Swartz is right, although not for want of accuracy — as far as I could tell about my own activity. At a fundamental level — which I was not able to address in my article and certainly cannot satisfyingly vindicate here — I think that drawing on a thinker's thinking always entails some sort of betrayal. So, to cut a long story short, I would like to say

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that I did not so much want to defend Bourdieu, as I intended to elicit a conceptual line that crosses his theoretical edifice. In the end, as far as the thankless job of the hermeneutical enterprise is concerned, I believe that trying to detect a consistent structure in an author's work runs the risk of forcing her/him into the straitjacket of thorough coherence — which is ultimately unattainable in one's intellectual biography. So, while in the voluminous series of Bourdieu's texts contradictions unsurprisingly pop up here and there, the subject-matter of my article is arguably the one that is beset by the most blatant ones. Objectivism and determinism: Bourdieu's curse. This explains why, as Swartz remarks, "they continue to be widely repeated criticisms." Bourdieu was at times contradictory, depending on the type of intellectual activity he was undertaking — although this hardly impinges on the cogency of his theory as a whole.

But I would like to clarify that I don't claim that Bourdieu's texts are consistent on this, though this is no facetious enterprise. Nor did I want to tease out a consistent treatment of objectivism and determinism. Rather, I approached Bourdieu as an impersonal seedbed of precious conceptual resources. He touches on a few important traits relative to how and why the contribution of social agents is crucial to the study of the practices in which they themselves engage. More correctly, it is the Bourdieu-Wittgenstein junction that is my point of reference in the article. The Bourdieu-Wittgenstein junction, most probably, is neither specifically Bourdieu nor specifically Wittgenstein on their own. It is a conceptual line that has emerged in many of Bourdieu's writings. In this sense, it is worth evoking Gilles Deleuze's (1995) notion of what the history of philosophy is:

But I suppose the main way I coped with it at the time was to see the history of philosophy as a sort of buggery or (it comes to the same thing) immaculate conception. I saw myself as taking an author from behind and giving him a child that would be his own offspring, yet monstrous. It was really important for it to be his own child, because the author had to actually say all I had him saying. But the child was bound to be monstrous too, because it resulted from all sorts of shifting, slipping, dislocations, and hidden emissions that I really enjoyed. (p. 6)

Once I have clarified that I am conscientiously amenable to the charge of misinterpreting (yet not of cherry-picking), I can get back to the first and the second difficulties. Here again, it could seem counterintuitive, to say the least, to conjure Bourdieu for advocating micropolitics — as he insisted that individual defiance has limited or even no success, to the extent that it might reinforce domination. But the point is that micropolitics is not individual whatsoever. Micropolitics always implies macropolitics. If we take seriously the idea of the social being a net, or a "meshwork," to use Tim Ingold's metaphor (2011), change in one node always sparks change in the connected nodes. The idea is not that of dismissing Bourdieu's orchestrated battles, but to refocus change by taking stock of theories — like Deleuze's and Latour's — claiming that the social is not a sedimented structure although it is certainly stratified. So, one of the main objectives of my article was to emphasize Bourdieu's sensitivity to the micro-activity of social agents (while of course he was concerned with comprehensive and durable social regularities) and at the same time to pinpoint a main mistake he made — which is to say, the conviction that theory is called upon to yield a utopian pre-vision that might become a vision insofar as it contributes to historicizing and dereifying the existing principle of vision and division.

Why is this so crucial to my overall argument? Better than his critics, Bourdieu identified the small-scale dimension of the production of the *habitus*. I sought to make this case by distinguishing a first level perspective from a second level perspective (see also Croce, 2015). Only a microsociology that is prepared to recognize the circle (whether vicious or virtuous) between the two levels is well equipped to contribute to understanding the macro level. This comes with the methodological conviction that the structure of the social is never fixed, as it is the sedimented negotiations of the practical activities of social agents. At this point, it makes sense for me to take up a criticism that Swartz raises at the end of his comment. For he argues that Bourdieu never really concerned himself with the discursive nature of domination. Thus, he can hardly be charged with what I call an "intellectualist bias."

Intellectualism is exactly the type of flaw that Bourdieu aimed to fend off by drawing on Wittgenstein. As the Wittgenstein rule-following is never an interpretive, cognitive, intellectual practice, so do Bourdieu's strategies not rely on an intellectual mediation. Most of the time, strategies are the result

of interiorized dispositions and get actualized within particular fields in accordance with the relevant capitals. Despite this, it is a recurring theme in Bourdieu's works that domination, which is both inscribed into people's body and absorbed into their principle of vision and division, can only be defied if dominated people become aware of their opaque "complicity" with domination, that is, their active allegiance to what dominates them. So, while he never said that domination takes the form of discourse, he avers that a cognitive struggle is necessary step to smashing domination. It is a type of struggle that casts light on the principles that enable and govern the formation of groups and the hierarchies between them. Symbolic struggles over the perception of the social world take two forms. Objective actions of representation, both individual and collective, such as mobilizations and demonstrations. Subjective attempts at trying to transform one's own categories of perception and appreciation of the social world. And here again Bourdieu (1989) goes back to the issue of the discursive form of power:

The categories of perception, the schemata of classification, that is, essentially, the words, the names which construct social reality as much as they express it, are the stake par excellence of political struggle, which is a struggle to impose the legitimate principle of vision and division, i.e., a struggle over the legitimate exercise of what I call the "theory effect". (pp. 20–21)

It is such a twofold nature that makes the Bourdieu-Wittgenstein junction problematic. The concern with the particular culminates in the reliance on the general — from which the particular can be amended. But in my view, the interest in the particular is valuable in its own right. In this sense, my article had the related objective of giving Bourdieu a postcritical twist. It is because Bourdieu is by no means objectivist — and critical in the derogatory sense that I elucidate in the article — that his understanding of how regularities (normality) get inscribed into the *habitus* can become an arrow in the postcritical quiver. If we separate the microsociology of the *habitus* from the exaltation of the theory effect, we can arrive at a different understanding of how *habitus* can be transformed on a daily basis within daily life. This different type of approach requires a deep scrutiny of small-scale contexts without jumping too easily, as Latour warns, from the local to the global. In this context I can only hint at one project that fruitfully goes down this road.

This illustrative example is Davina Cooper's (2014) inspirational discussion of the potentials of transformative politics within interstitial contexts (what she calls "everyday utopias"). Hers is a catchy invitation to reorient critical attitudes. To put it briefly, critical work should dispense with the conceptual Manichaeism leading political and social theorists to almost exclusively concentrate on large-scale socio-political dynamics and to devalue small-scale contexts as too peripheral, idealistic, or even delusional. To this end, she illustrates how concrete alternatives are imagined and enacted in the smaller sites she analyzes. With a hopeful methodological attitude, she engages in colorful accounts of particular places (e.g. a sexual bathhouse for women and transgendered people in Toronto, Summerhill School in Leiston, Speakers' Corner in London, the Local Exchange Trading Schemes), in which transformative politics is practiced in such a way that these sites' conceptual potential might fruitfully speak to mainstream politics. In doing so, Cooper identifies theorists' crucial task. For instance, while discussing the contribution of nudist politics to transformative politics, she claims that equality as a presupposition of the former might not be explicitly verbalized or even consciously deployed as a presupposition. Nudists might well frame their claims in terms of individual rights or group rights, but equality is presupposed nonetheless:

Presupposition concerns the norms required to be in place for a particular practice to be intelligible, appropriate, or possible. Such norms may become apparent only as new practices take shape; they may also be invented or asserted by those claiming legitimacy, as past conditions get imagined as already there in order to drive their future reality. As a presupposition, equality is particularly evident in the conditions animating nudist activism. The contemporary focus of nudist politics may largely revolve around rights and freedom, but these are authorized and gain meaning through notions of a moral equality between nudists and others. (Cooper, 2014, p. 6)

In this example, Cooper nicely brings to light the crucial contribution of theorists to the practices they study. An ongoing back-and-forth from (what with reference to Bourdieu I dubbed) the level of

practice to the level of the critique of practice. Cooper contends that this is a continuous oscillation between how things are imagined and how they are actualized — an oscillation that gets revived in the intercourse between practices and the study of practices, and thus agents and theorists. This oscillation is what I hoped to draw out in Bourdieu's notion of an ongoing transition from a first to a second level perspective. In this sense, Bourdieu's project can be squared with his critics'. Indeed, the recognition and elicitation of the conceptual resources that are produced by the agents requires taking seriously Latour's distinction between intermediaries and mediators. While an intermediary "is what transports meaning or force without transformation," mediators "transform, translate, distort, and modify the meaning or the elements they are supposed to carry" (Latour, 2005, p. 39). In this light, theorists and scholars should be aware of, and even exploit, their mediatory role. They should endeavor to identify "more oblique" lines

that emerge when actualization and imagining don't do what is expected, producing complex relationships of nonresemblance [...] when community imaginings of particular concepts acquire, in their operational pursuit, an undesired or unsought practical shape; or when concepts are manifested in ways that differ significantly from the expressed imaginings of participants. (Cooper, 2014, p. 13)

This is the core meaning of the adjective "postcritical" which I used above. The postcritical one is a methodological approach that prompts theorists to contribute to the transformative potential of the phenomena they study. In this sense, it is not so much the theory they deploy and its utopian potential which do the job, but their activity *in actu*. Theorists tease out the conceptual potential that underpins the agents' activity as a linguistically unarticulated and often intuitive presupposition. On this view, while agents are not reduced to socially incompetent pawns — what Bourdieu always refused to do —, they still need someone who observes and interprets (and thus ignites a renegotiation of) what they do. It is within the interaction between practices and study of the practices that change continuously crops up.

All in all, I think Bourdieu, or the Bourdieu-Wittgenstein junction, is not at variance with this post-critical approach to interstitial, unconventionally normative contexts. It is my article's claim that Bourdieu did throw light on that which is needed for theorists to contribute to small-scale change: the theorist's work as an oscillation between the level of practice and the level of the critique of practice. This oscillation is a type of *politics in the making*, a political proclivity for the mediatory role that theorists always play. Only in this way can our hopes for a better society not be contingent on a comprehensive socio-political revolution — which is hard to come by —, but on the micro-revolutions that take place every day in the smaller interstices of the ordinary world.

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