

The Levels of Critique. Pierre Bourdieu and the Political Potential of Social Theory

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Abstract

This article centres on Pierre Bourdieu's conception of social critique and its political potential. It first examines important objections to his view of the way in which critique works, particularly from those scholars who claim that it implies an objectivist notion of people's cognition and agency. It continues by clarifying that this objection rests on a misplaced understanding of Bourdieu's idea of the levels at which critique takes place. It then explores his understanding of the semantic struggle that social critique requires and what it takes to change the dominant configuration of the social. The analysis finally claims that this conception of critique, although far from objectivism, still retains an intellectualist inclination.

Keywords: Bourdieu; Cognitive Struggle; Critique; Social Theory; Unspeakability.

1 Introduction

On Pierre Bourdieu's account, producing the configuration of the social bears resemblance to the activity of signification with which Ludwig Wittgenstein (2009, § 257) takes issue in *Philosophical Investigations*. Giving names, Wittgenstein avers, is not the source of meaning, if it is true that "much must be prepared in the language for mere naming to make sense." On Wittgenstein's view, giving a name to something takes place within the public practice of language, based on which an individual can assign a label to this something. As a result, the meaning of this label does not lie in the thing that it names, but in the broader practice that allows individuals to talk about things in the world that they inhabit (see Kenny, 2007, pp. 134–135). The relation between name and thing is not direct, as it is mediated by the broader linguistic grid that the individual applies when she names things. Thus, the named thing (or better, the position people can take to the named thing) changes according to the way it is accounted for within the public practice. In short, the way in which people see and talk about things depends on a public practice that issues a linguistic grid assigning specific positions to those things. Accordingly, changing

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the meaning of something implies changing the general practice of signification that gives this something a specific place.

Such a Wittgensteinian lesson is at the heart of Bourdieu's view of social critique.¹ Bourdieu maintains that "the social world can be uttered and constructed in different ways. It may be practically perceived, uttered, constructed, according to different principles of vision and division" (Bourdieu, 1985, p. 726). The crux of this view is that the construction of the social relies on a discourse — as a public description, or better, a speech act of representation — which emphasizes some elements of the social world and downplays others with a view to creating links among social agents. These connections are intended to draw the borders of groups as meaningful social units and to prevent the constitution of alternative groups that jeopardize the description of the social world fostered by the dominant discourse. In this way, the speech act of representation exerts performative effects not so much on social agents as on the linguistic grid that allows them to name things in the social world and thus to perceive them in such and such a way. Accordingly, Bourdieu believes that the critique of the social requires unveiling the semantic repertoire through which social agents are led to perceive the social world in such and such a way and to understand their own position within this world as socially situated actors.

Unlike Wittgenstein, Bourdieu gives a critical twist to this conception: it is not a merely public practice that produces the grid, but a more demanding struggle over meaning. In saying so, he was particularly concerned with the (mostly unaware) connivance between dominant and dominated individuals. For example, in *Masculine Domination*, where he dwells on the sexist and heterosexist structure of the social world, his account revolves around the "categories of understanding" (Bourdieu, 2001, p. 5) that emerge out of a "*cognitive struggle* over the meaning of the things of the world" (p. 13) and that come to colonize the thoughts and perceptions of those who lose that struggle. The idea of the linguistic grid being the outcome of a cognitive struggle leads to an intricate riddle: in order for the dominated individuals to redeem their condition, they have to denounce domination; and yet, denouncing domination entails recognizing their own state of being dominated. In effect, Bourdieu claims, "acts of *cognition* are, inevitably, acts of *recognition*, submission" (*ibidem*). Based on this, even acts of seeming defiance and refusal end up reinforcing the public description that enshrines and supports those categories of understanding. The dominated irremediably fall prey of a social mechanism that they are not aware of.

This seems to force Bourdieu to make two capital mistakes that affect various paradigms of social critique.² First, a portrayal of social agents as trapped in the opaqueness of their impoverished knowledge of the world. Second, the supercilious idea that only the theorist can see that which governs people's doings and rescue them. Bourdieu's view of social critique would turn out severely weakened. People's being blind to that which makes them see reality in such and such a way turns opposition to domination into its confirmation. In effect, like in the Wittgensteinian picture, Bourdieu believes that changing the name of things, even as a political act of defiance, already-and-always presupposes the mediation of the linguistic grid that it is supposed to be challenging. This impasse leads to an even worse conundrum. As social agents are doomed to reinforce domination even when they fight against it, it is social theory that ought to play as a key instrument of political engagement. Its task is to provide social agents with reliable conceptual instruments that help them historicize and, by doing so, denaturalize and defatalize how things stand in the social world (e.g. Bourdieu, 1990b, p. 15). This view of social theory once and for all confines people to the role of inadvertent victims of the tentacular reach of an undoable semantic grid that only social theorists can sever.

In this article I set out to demonstrate that Bourdieu's conception of social critique is not affected by the two mistakes I mentioned above. First, he does not reduce people to oblivious puppets. Second, he never claims theory to enjoy any special position vis-à-vis people's knowledge and verbalizations. Yet, as I will say in the Conclusion, he still holds that changing the semantic grid is a theoretical activity that

1. Bourdieu does not mince words when it comes to praising the unmasking power of Wittgenstein's philosophy (see e.g. Bourdieu, 1977, Sec. I; 1990a, Book I; 1990c; 2004, p. 7). In particular, he capitalizes on Wittgenstein's ability to illustrate how the shortcomings of many solutions stem from the wrong formulation of the problem.

2. Although I cannot touch upon this issue here, I am drawing from the analyses offered by so-called postcritical scholars on the defects of social critique in various disciplines, from literary criticism to philosophy, from sociology to anthropology. See in particular Croce (2017a; 2017b; 2019), Felski (2015) and De Sutter (2019). In this article I will rather refer to two pioneers of postcritique, namely Luc Boltanski and Bruno Latour.

relies on the production of alternative meanings. While this is not necessarily a defect, it still grants social theory a special position, to the extent that people themselves are called to produce it. This makes theory the main instrument of social change. I will contend that this intellectualist conception of social critique obliterates other important forms of social transformation.

In what follows, I will first debate the charge that Bourdieu's is an objectivist theory that eventually drains the agents of proper cognition and agential power. I will then explain what the real target of critique is in Bourdieu's theory and will argue that it is not affected by those defects. Based on this, I will discuss what it takes to change the configuration of the social. Finally, I will explain why this view of critique, although far from objectivism, still retains an intellectualist inclination.

2 Critique and the Demotion of Social Agents

In the enduring confrontation between theories that emphasize the role of ordinary knowledge and theories that take it to be always afflicted by a scarcity of reflectiveness, Bourdieu's is claimed to belong to the latter strand. On the one hand, as Luc Boltanski (2011) observes, Bourdieu's overall oeuvre is an attempt at employing the analysis of the social and its mechanisms as an instrument against domination. "[T]he enterprise of emancipation is mainly based on the practice of sociology itself" (p. 19). However, this theoretical enterprise is fully entrusted to the social theorist. For Bourdieu is said to endorse a view of social agents as "socially incompetent," in the sense that they are scarcely capable of verbalizing what they do, and if they happen to be, their verbalizations bear limited socio-scientific value.

This position is generally known as "objectivism" in that it postulates the existence of a series of social constraints that frame and shape the agents' vision and activity within the social world. Bruno Latour (2005), who regards this as the hallmark of sociology since its very onset, submits that Bourdieu's theory is the epitome of this despicable attitude. He chides his "critical sociology," as Boltanski dubbed it, because it drains the agents of agential autonomy and self-awareness. Latour claims that critical sociology in general conceives of social agents as "hapless bearers of symbolic projection" (p. 10). Bourdieu in particular is treated as the most illustrious specimen of this kind of sociology that replaces the object of study with its own explanatory categories. As the doyen of critical sociology, Bourdieu uses the study of the social as a pretext to reconfirm his own understanding if it.

Based on these charges, Bourdieu's social theory turns agents into pawns on a chessboard that move in compliance with forces that they can neither grasp nor verbalize. As if this were not enough, the agents' discursive performances, when they revolve around their doings, are claimed to be theoretically defective, in that the (real) rules, reasons and motives lying behind actions are not transparent to them. The conceit of such a sociological attitude is exemplified by their conviction that the any potential disagreements between the agents' verbalization and the theorist's explanations "offer the best proof that those explanations are right" (p. 9). In this way, the agents' "own elaborate and fully reflexive meta-language" (p. 30) is silenced and replaced with the theorist's overintricate repertoire of socio-conceptual tools.

The offensive against the objectivist bias of many sociological paradigms is far from recent.³ But Latour reiterates it with admirable polemical bite. Postulating the existence of structures invisible to the agents, which constrain and guide their actions, is a makeshift of critical sociologists who aim not so much to understand reality as to prove their own theory — one that they project on social agents and claim to be the uncovered truth enshrined in their actions. Quite the reverse, non-objectivist investigations should refrain from forging unneeded social entities and to explain how social meanings and categories are accountable for social agents.

3. Such prominent a school as ethnomethodology — initiated by Harold Garfinkel in the 1960s — was born as a response to the dominance of macro-structural analysis neglecting the agent's point of view. Ethnomethodologists submit that social agents "are not only knowledgeable, but their knowledge of macrostructural phenomena is not treated as impoverished or naïve" (Berard, 2005, p. 9). There is no divide between a hidden, sociologically relevant reality (only visible to the theorist), that agents are supposed to be unaware of, and a sociologically irrelevant reality that agents experience but cannot competently articulate. Accordingly, for ethnomethodologists, the object of study is not the structures that constrain and shape social agents' actions and worldview, but the way they account for their actions and worldview. Social agents are treated as cognizant and conscious producers and reproducers of meanings, who should be investigated in their interactional performances as well as in the way they put these interactions into words.

The reason why Bourdieu's is considered as the most nuanced kind of objectivism is that he himself considered objectivism as serious a mistake as subjectivism. While subjectivism envisions a free, utterly self-conscious subject and provides accounts based on a causal relation between one's motives or intentions and the consequence of one's actions, objectivism hollows out the relation between the agent and her actions. In this latter case, the action is taken to be the application of supra-subjective normative schemes that the agents unconsciously apply when they interact in the social world. Objectivism is the apotheosis of the theorist's hubris, as she believes she has identified the schemes that guide social agent's conduct, ones that make sense of the mystery of social regularities.

The theorist's reliance on such schemes "introduces a radical discontinuity between theoretical knowledge and practical knowledge" (Bourdieu, 1990a, p. 26), to the extent that the former is claimed to pin down and establish the particular conditions in which the latter is possible and intelligible. This chasm cannot be filled by the agents' practical experience, because they lack the theoretical knowledge that is necessary to gain a bird's eye view on the possibility conditions of their interactions. While Bourdieu intended to bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical knowledge, he is said to have failed. For example, Alex Van den Berg (1998, p. 220) argues that this was an original sin of Bourdieu's theory as he never dispensed with the aim of "explaining" actions, while "the various 'subjectivistic' approaches simply do not possess any conceptual tools for explaining social behavior."

On this reading, one should conclude that Bourdieu's theory did not live up to the expectations he himself had fed. His valorization of practical knowledge (one that is inscribed in one's own bodily postures, gestures, manners, gait, linguistic competence, accent, and so on), as the deposit of a particular position within the social world, clashes with his insistence on social agents' naïve reliance on a normative lexicon that conceals the reality of social mechanisms. In the end, for Bourdieu (1990a, p. 102), social agents master a kind of knowledge that cannot account for itself:

They thus conceal, even from themselves, the true nature of their practical mastery as learned ignorance (*docta ignorantia*), that is, a mode of practical knowledge that does not contain knowledge of its own principles. Native theories are in fact dangerous not so much because they lead research towards illusory explanations, but rather because they bring quite superfluous reinforcement to the theory of practice that is inherent in the objectivist approach to practices, which, having extracted from the *opus operatum* the supposed principles of its production, sets them up as norms governing practices.

Therefore, something more is needed for the agents to get to grips with the mechanics of their actions, something that only the theorist is able to offer. This brings to the surface what seems to be an inner flaw of Bourdieu's social theory. Indeed, as Anthony King (2000) avers, Bourdieu is thoroughly aware that the theorist's devising a scheme for interpreting people's conduct is devoid of explanatory force, as it is the theorist's own view projected on the phenomena she is studying. Bourdieu reckons, says King, that the theorist's talk of objective structures reifies "the complex and negotiated exchanges over time between individuals into a static, timeless system which exists before any individuals" (p. 421). Yet, he continues to envision a gulf between the order of practice and the order of knowledge, one that cannot be filled by the agents' limited conceptual resources and then calls for the expertise of a learned observer providing conceptually enriched lenses to make sense of what makes people act in such and such a way. This is evidence that Bourdieu did not settle the score with objectivism, but simply perfected it. He recognized the agents' contribution to the production of the social world but eventually put the theorist on a pedestal, as only she can penetrate the opaque relation between practical knowledge and social action.

3 Reflexivity as Self-Criticism

There is no doubt that objectivism reinstates the theoretical primacy of an omniscient theorist who is called upon to detect the principles lying behind people's weak knowledge. But while I think the attacks on critical sociology are appropriate to paradigms that envision a chasm between one's theory and the practices she intends to analyze, it is my claim that Bourdieu's deft treatment of this problem is worth

some more scrutiny. He is not a critical sociologist in the derogatory sense that I specified in the previous section.

Bourdieu's argument, as I understand it here, hinges on a basic methodological tenet: the target of theorists' critical attitude should never be people's doings and sayings, but their own activity as theorists who investigate people's doings and sayings. In the article "Participant Objectivation" — based on a lecture he gave at the Royal Anthropological Institute as the recipient of the Huxley Memorial Medal — Bourdieu (2003) brings into question the point of view of the theorist who observes a particular practice or field. He makes the claim that one of the crucial aspects of the theorist's methodology is the ability to objectify what she is doing as an observer. This does not entail, Bourdieu warns, post-modernist skepticism as to the possibility for one to leave behind her own cultural background in order to throw herself into an alien culture with neutral means of observation. Nor does it imply the espousal of a naïve cultural relativism that urges scholars to believe that all they do is tainted by their cultural prejudgements and that therefore their real object of study should be themselves and the way they smuggle bits and pieces of their own native culture into the culture of those they observe. These tendencies, according to Bourdieu, betray "scholastic narcissism" and have nothing to tell about the possibility conditions as well as the limits of observation methods.

The theorist's attention, he continues to say, should rather be drawn to the variables that affect *her own research methods and research practice*. These however are to be found not in the black hole of her cultural horizon but in the concrete mechanisms that govern the field where the theorist is recognized as a scholar. It is in her own scholarly field that the theorist has to find "the set of cognitive structures which can be attributed to specifically educational experiences and which is therefore to a large extent common to all the products of the same (national) educational system or, in a more specified form, to all the members of the same discipline at a given time" (Bourdieu, 2003, p. 285). The difficulty is that the cognitive structures that affect the theorist's point of view are not visible to her, in that a point of view, says Bourdieu (*ibidem*, p. 284), is "nothing other than a view taken from a point which cannot reveal itself as such." Nevertheless, this is no justification for the observer. Rather, she has to be able to circumvent this difficulty and to make herself the object of an inquiry of the dynamics that govern her own activities.

On the one hand, Bourdieu rejects the idea that researchers should be entirely neutral and refrain from putting anything of themselves into their research.⁴ On the other hand, they should stay alert to such an inevitable mechanism of projection. How can theorists reconcile their obliviousness to this mechanism with their methodological duty to detect them? Bourdieu suggests that it is a matter of methodological position. He contends that it is not the task of observers, while they are observing, to draw out the contents they are projecting on the observed entities. This would be unachievable, a glaring lapse into scholastic narcissism. On the contrary, observing themselves can be the observers' objective when they get to analyze their own research practice and to objectify their own tendency to put into the head of the agents the problematics they are seeking to solve. Bourdieu is implicitly distinguishing two levels: *the level of practice* and *the level of the critique of practice*. In the former, one can hardly unmask, and get rid of, the preconditions of one's being embedded in a practice. In the latter these intuitive preconditions can be subjected to critical scrutiny. It goes without saying that these two levels can hardly be entirely severed in actual practice, as they often overlap and merge. And yet, it is evident that Bourdieu refers to two distinct positions, which presuppose different attitudes and centre on different objects.⁵

In one key passage of *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, Bourdieu (1977, p. 29) quotes Wittgenstein's (2009) remark 82. He does so to contest the explanatory power of rules from two vantage points that I called "first level" and "second level" perspectives.⁶ The *first level perspective* is the agents' attitude to the rule that is supposed to govern their doings. The *second level perspective* is the position of someone who

4. On this key methodological amendment to the notion of reflexivity see Martin (2003, pp. 24–25).

5. In Croce (2015a) I distinguish between a *first level* and a *second level* perspectives to foreground the affinities between Bourdieu's concept of the *habitus* and Wittgenstein's notion of rule-following. The first level perspective is the attitude of the agent to the rule that is supposed to govern her actions, while the second level perspective is the position of someone who accounts for an agent's actions. My argument is that both authors believe that, first, the agent does not have special access to her own actions; second, the observer does not possess any bird's-eye view on the agent's action.

6. I discuss this distinction in detail in Croce (2015b).

aims to account for an agent's actions — and importantly this someone can be the agent herself. This distinction solves the impasse of the more traditional distinction between the agent and the observer, in that it makes sense of the continuous back-and-forth from one level to the other. The second level perspective clearly raises a meta-level issue, because it has to do with someone observing, or describing, or commenting upon (second level perspective) one's acting (first level perspective). Therefore, the first and the second level perspectives can be adopted either by *two different agents* (one acting and the other observing) or by *the same agent* who acts and then tries to make sense of her own conduct.

It is well known that Bourdieu is skeptical of rules from the first level perspective. The idea of someone deliberately obeying rules implies a fallacy relating to the alleged consciousness of the individual agents. Here he echoes Wittgenstein's proving that rules are by no means formulae that guide the agents' deliberate conduct. Nonetheless, Bourdieu's core concern is with the second level perspective. In the section of *Philosophical Investigations* that he quotes, Wittgenstein discusses the problem of how one can determine what rule an agent is following in a specific circumstance: "What do I call 'the rule according to which he proceeds'? — The hypothesis that satisfactorily describes his use of words, which we observe; or the rule which he looks up when he uses signs; or the one which he gives us in reply if we ask him what his rule is?". This has to do with the second level whereby one tries to understand another's conduct with reference to the rule that underpins it. Famously, Wittgenstein thinks it pointless to seek to ferret out this rule and to provide an explanatory model for the observed conduct. For any finite set of observations based on rules can always be subsumed under an alternative explanatory model based on other rules. The rule is of no heuristic avail.

Wittgenstein's methodological discussion elicits Bourdieu's approving interest. Neither of them intends to claim that the explanation of conducts is useless because conducts are already-and-always opaque. Rather, explanations emerge out of a constant interchange between the level of practice and the level of the critique of practice and should be considered as fallible verbalizations. More importantly, given that the second level perspective *is* a perspective, and is not attached to anybody in particular, the position of the observed agents in their everyday activities and that of theorists who observe these practices are potentially exposed to the same cognitive bias. Conversely, both agents and theorists have the possibility (at least in principle) of thematizing the preconditions of their action in a given practical field. This was something that Bourdieu had already clarified in such books like *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Bourdieu, 1977) and *The Logic of Practice* (Bourdieu, 1990a). But in "The Scholastic Point of View" (Bourdieu, 1990c) he again echoes Wittgenstein when he criticizes the (alleged) causal connection between people's concrete actions and the verbalized entities they verbalize if asked to do so. He explains that this urged him to "construct the object differently" (p. 383), that is, to look for different variables that might help him account for the practices he was examining. The example he provides relates to his study of kinship relations, which he no longer based on the structuralist method of recording genealogies to draw a map of the kinship structure as a whole. He started to look at other elements, such as "the age difference between spouses, differences in wealth, material and symbolic, between the two families, the legacy of past economic and political relations, etc." (*ibidem*). But he did so because he was aware that theorists can hardly dismiss the first level perspective. Bourdieu avers: "[W]e must realize that the anthropologist is not, when faced with marriage, in the position of the head of household who wishes to marry his daughter, and to marry her well" (*ibidem*). In sum, he never dismisses either the perspective of those who act or the accounts they could provide of what they are doing. His methodological proviso is of another type: the second level perspective of the observers, contrary to that of the agents, relies on conceptual instruments that do not belong to the latter's toolkit. The observers have theoretical means to analyze the agent's conducts which are produced by the observed themselves. And yet, both the agents' verbalizations and the observers' explanations lie on the second level.

This is key to rejecting the accusation of practicing a *critical sociology*, in the negative sense that Boltanski and Latour attribute to this label. For Bourdieu's recurrent reference to the opaqueness of practices is by no means a dismissal of the agents' point of view. Indeed, it is an attack on the 'scholastic' inability of theorists to come to terms with their own pre-reflexive background. The scaffolding of Bourdieu's critical methodology rests on the dismissal of two separate perspectives (practice, on the one hand, and discourse over practice, on the other) that are erroneously claimed to pertain to two separate kinds of agents (agent and observer). The disappearance of this distinction calls for a different attitude on the

part of the theorists. What they do when they draw out the mechanisms governing people's action is the production of explanatory schemes that are dependent on the historical conditions of possibility of their own inquiry. Hardly are these schemes universal explanations, as theorists do not merely observe, but construct an object on the second level perspective. If they lose sight of this, they incur the even more serious risk of divorcing from the point of view of those whose practices are being studied. The remedy to this, Bourdieu (1990c, p. 388) insists, is "an analysis of the genesis of the specific structure of these quite peculiar social worlds where the universal is engendered and that I call fields." This invitation can well be extended to those who operate in the social world: they can, as the theorist can, bring into question their pre-reflexive experience of the world and make sense of the preconditions of their own action in the various fields. This comes clearly into sight in those texts where Bourdieu examines social classifications that result in blatant domination, whose disruption requires an active participation on the part of the dominated.

This is the case with *Masculine Domination*. On the one hand, as I hinted at the outset, this text seems to provide the grounds for holding that Bourdieu's objectivism suppresses the point of view of the dominated. Social classifications hold sway over those who are classified because the latter adhere to, and thus support, the structure within which the classification produces effects: "[T]he dominated apply to what dominates them schemes that are the product of domination" (Bourdieu, 2001, p. 13). This mechanism leads to a durable transformation of both bodies and perceptive categories of the dominated, which keeps this very mechanism from their view. On the other hand, however, Bourdieu does not seem to think this is an inexorable destiny meant to be reproduced over people's head. Rather, he urges political movements, and politically engaged individuals more generally, to take up the critical attitude he believes should hallmark sound socio-anthropological studies: "[T]he fact remains that the best of political movements will inevitably produce bad science, and, in the long run, bad politics, if it is not able to convert its subversive dispositions into a critical inspiration — *critical firstly of itself*" (Bourdieu, 2001, p. 114 — emphasis added).⁷

4 Habitus, Fields and Unspeakability

So far, I have made three points. First, Bourdieu has no intention of devaluing the agents' verbalizations from a second level perspective. Second, he thinks that the theorists' critique should not be addressed to the scarce transparency of the agents' activities but to the symbolic and material conditions that lead themselves to formulate that very critique. Third, he recommends that, as theorists observe their object, they always bear in mind that they are partaking in the observed scene from a second level perspective with recourse to the special toolkit of their theory. Evidently, this has nothing to do with that which Boltanski and Latour define as critical sociology: the agent is not an oblivious puppet, critique mostly concerns the theorist's own position, theory is not confused with the social world but is a technique of inquiry.

Yet, it remains true that, as Boltanski points out, critique is a matter of social theorizing. So, how is it that it works? Bourdieu's answer, in this case, is much closer to traditional critical sociology than his methodological premises. People have first and foremost to become able to objectify their own position in the social field and to adopt a critical point of view on their own activities. This is not something agents can freely choose to do. It depends on the availability of conceptual instruments that help them question the possibility conditions of their taking a position or another. Bourdieu believes this is a challenge that theory should take up by exerting what he calls "theory effect" (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 132). This is an effect of "social semantics," that is, the objectivation and consequent resignification of the dominant discourse that make things visible in such and such a way and thus produce the basic grammar of the social. Resignification makes visible that which is not visible and makes speakable that which is not speakable. As people *denaturalize* and *defatalize* the dominant view that constructs their intelligibility grid, they can utter things differently and offer an alternative to the social as it is.

7. Feminist theorists who have built on Bourdieu's social theory or have seized on some of its tools are many (see Lane, 2006, Chap. 5). Others have warned against his hasty juxtaposition of such different social environments as the Western and the Kabyle. For a thorough discussion of this methodological and substantial aspects see Adkins and Skeggs (2004).

Bourdieu (1985; 1991) explains that the social world comprises collective entities or groups as ensembles of individuals who are associated not because of any natural features, but because they are described in such a way that they might be claimed to belong to the same entity or group. This is the outcome of a “labour of representation” (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 130) whereby the public description of something performatively produces this something by shaping the perception of social agents in such a way that they might see what the description describes. It “enables agents to discover within themselves common properties that lie beyond the diversity of particular situations that isolate, divide and demobilize, and to construct social identities on the basis of characteristics or experiences that seemed totally dissimilar” before the public description put them together. In other words, the public description yields connections between properties that bring about meaningful social units. According to Bourdieu (1985, p. 727), this process takes the form of a “double structuration”: objective and subjective. From an objective viewpoint, the properties that unite a given group are not visible *in se*, but are assembled by a speech act. From a subjective viewpoint, the speech act glues properties together but does not create them, as they are the product of previous social experiences or the effect of existing power relations. In that respect, social units are *socially constructed*, because assembled with reference to properties that are artificially associated with each other, but are *not created*, because properties, although naturally dissociated, appertain to social agents.

But how can we account for the double nature, objective and subjective, of the production of meaningful social units in more practical terms? Or better, what are the concrete processes that occur within the political field? The aspects of Bourdieu’s social theory we should look at to answer this question are the *habitus* and the field.

The *habitus* is a highly contested theoretical device. It is charged with reintroducing a determinist, functionalist and even objectivist understanding of social action. As I pointed out elsewhere (Croce, 2015b), however, these criticisms dissipate as we de-objectify the *habitus* and regard it as a theoretical instrument used by the theorist to spotlight the historical character of people’s actions within the social field. The *habitus* is social agents’ embodied history that turns into a prism through which they “apprehend the social world” as “the product of the internalization of the structures of that world” (Bourdieu, 1989, p. 18). It amounts to a set of “mental schemata of perception and appreciation” (Wacquant, 2013, p. 275) whereby “agents, even the most disadvantaged ones, tend to perceive the world as natural and to accept it much more readily than one might imagine” (Bourdieu, 1989, p. 18). This means that the *habitus* is nothing other than a grid of intelligibility through which people perceive and make sense of the structure of the social world and their position within it. It is a set of “socially constituted taxonomies” (Bourdieu, 1990b, p. 15) that implement distinctions which appear to be affixed to the nature of the social world. This means that, strictly speaking, the *habitus* cannot be said to mechanically determine people’s actions. Instead, it affects their schemes of perception through which they understand what is appropriate and what is not in a given context. Thus, a theory that seizes on the notion of *habitus* intends to capitalize on the basic conclusion that certain schemes of perception make certain political alternatives invisible, unspeakable and thus impossible to verbalize or even imagine.

The *habitus* does not unfold in a vacuum. It works in a regime of “ontological complicity” (Bourdieu, 1993, pp. 273–274) with the field in which it is at play. However, as the *habitus* is a flexible and mutable set of perceptive schemes that depend on people’s history and concrete experience, so is the field a flexible and mutable context that depends on people’s position to each other. In this regard, a theory that centres on fields “is an analytic approach, not a static formal system” (Martin, 2003, p. 24). In effect, the field is not a picture of the way things stand in reality, if only because the way things stand essentially depends on the interactions among social agents, their past and current experiences, and the material and symbolic resources they can count on. Instead, the field is a way for conceptualizing how one’s individual biography interacts with the ones of the others and how this interactional flux gives birth to a “field of forces” shaping up around “the stake” of the field. In this dynamic portrayal, nothing is pre-determined. Neither is the stake an objective good, because it depends on how the field gets to be structured and evolves; nor is the field fixed and stable, because it depends on the changing position of the various players to each other. It follows that the field is an analytic map of how the mental schemata of perception that the *habitus* affect the possible range of strategies that the agents (by and large unconsciously) adopt to achieve their goals within a given interactional context. As Bourdieu (1985,

p. 725) puts it, this view of the social as composed of fields eschews the drawbacks of both “nominalist relativism” and the “realism of the intelligible.” For, against the former, the differences in the positions of the various social agents are not neglected; but, against the latter, groups of people or social contexts of interaction are not reified into stable entities that subsist independently of people’s ongoing interactions.

But what is the relationship between political speakability and the nexus *habitus*/field? In “The Social Space and the Genesis of Groups,” Bourdieu (1985) illustrates how the political discourse affects the social world. The political speech act has the performative power to institute groups. Still, the performative value of the speech act does not reside in a mere form of knowledge that exerts invisible effects on social agents. Bourdieu intends to avoid recourse to explanations that ignore the multiple stages through which knowledge comes to have effects on its addresses and its users. It is no coincidence that, as Staf Callewaert (2006, p. 91) notes in his analysis of the (indirect) relationship between Bourdieu and Michel Foucault, the former had many reservations about the analysis of the discourses and knowledge practices that inform the institutional environment and are deemed to govern the population: “The negative aspect lies in the danger of assuming that these official discourses also are the causal instruments of action.” In other words, the main defect of this approach inheres in believing that “things are implemented as they are expressed in discourses” (Callewaert, 2006, p. 92), to the extent that both causal mechanisms and actual processes are taken out of the picture. Quite the reverse, Bourdieu’s concern is with the actual processes through which knowledge comes to affect people’s perception of it.

The force of political speech acts, according to him, rests on a mechanism whose linchpin is people’s *habitus*. The aim of the political labour of representation is to mobilize the connection between people’s public identity and their past experience, which is brought to bear on their present one. More specifically, the political description of the social world emphasizes some elements of people’s biography and demotes others with a view to producing a cohesive image of a group, as if the group were a natural entity and its members had inborn links with each other. This is by no means a mere activity of fabrication, because political mobilization requires the concrete existence of biographical elements anchored to people’s *habitus*. The heart of this mechanism, then, is the hypostatization, objectivation and naturalization of some features that bind social agents to their group and the simultaneous concealment of other features that might bind these very social agents to other groups. The political labour of representation is intended to make something speakable and socio-politically visible:

The capacity to make entities exist in the explicit state, to publish, make public (i.e., render objectified, visible, and even official) what had not previously attained objective and collective existence and had therefore remained in the state of individual or serial existence — people’s malaise, anxiety, disquiet, expectations — represents a formidable social power, the power to make groups by making the common sense, the explicit consensus, of the whole group (Bourdieu, 1985, p. 729).

5 Conclusion: The Theory Effect

It is worth stressing two elements of this perspective. First, this is a tenable form of constructivism⁸ laying emphasis on the connection between the properties of individuals (and their environment) and the production of knowledge around them. Second, the relationship between this knowledge and the practices it affects is not tantamount to a top-down movement whereby practices are conditioned from above. On the contrary, the labour of representation calls for an active cooperation on the part of social agents. In effect, it is the particular collusion between people’s *habitus* and the stake in the field that permits the representation to have effects. This is further evidence that, in Bourdieu’s (1985, p. 727) view, no theory can afford to neglect “the contribution that agents make towards constructing the view of the social world, and through this, towards constructing this world, by means of the work of representation (in all senses of the word) that they constantly perform in order to impose their view of the world or the view of their own position in this world — their social identity.”

8. For a convincing critique of radical forms of constructivism, see Hacking (1999).

On this account, the relationship between the political labour of representation and the identity of a group is bidirectional. On one side, once group members endorse the representation, they come to identify themselves with recourse to the lexicon through which the representation is framed. On the other, group members' endorsing the representation turns out to be a constitutive element of there being such a group. This mutual integration makes sure that the distinctions and classifications that the description entails are perceived as structural elements of an alleged genome of the social. Consequently, individual identities, groups and/or practices that exceed the seeming inevitability of this grid, or are at odds with it, lack the symbolic resources to make themselves audible or even cognizable to those who are inside the grid. Despite this, according to Bourdieu, it is the friction between speakability and unspeakability that allows the emergence of alternative and potentially defiant descriptions.

But here surfaces a limit in Bourdieu's view of how social critique works.

It is well known that he has no confidence in the capacity of what exceeds the grid of intelligibility to effect a change *on its own*. This is the sticking point with Judith Butler (1999, p. 122), who laments Bourdieu's scarce sensitivity to representations of the social world that are not produced "by a representative of a state apparatus."⁹ She insists that "unauthorized" speech acts — which is to say, those that are produced outside the hegemonic grid of intelligibility — have the potential to ignite a resignification of the constitutive elements of the latter. Bourdieu (2001, p. viii) is as skeptical of visions that claim social classifications to be natural as it is of paradigms, such as Butler's, which charge "individual acts or the endlessly recommenced discursive 'happenings'" with the daunting task of engendering "heroic breaks in the everyday routine." He is not discrediting individual acts of resistance as *acts of resistance* but as *individual*. Yet, he thinks that single subjects or minority practices cannot defy their own schemes of perception with the cognitive and symbolic resources that these very schemes provide them with. As in Wittgenstein's remark that opened this article, they would be relying on that which is already prepared in the language for criticizing this very language. In this case, the risk that acts of cognition might result in acts of recognition would be unreasonably high.

Effective counterpolitics is destined to reinforce the political representation they oppose unless it is *orchestrated* and *theoretically-grounded*.

First, as Bourdieu (2001, pp. 113–124) argues while speaking of feminist and LGBT movements, engaging in socio-political battles as organized groups is likely to enhance the groups' ghettoization precisely because these battles confirm their being groups. This evidences again Bourdieu's misgivings about a socially classified group's capacity to combat this classification while *de facto* recognizing it the very moment it accepts to act as a group. The way-out of this riddle is the effort to enlarge the scope of the political battle. It should not be aimed at the mere recognition of the group's rights and benefits, but at a "symbolic destruction and construction" that might impose "new categories of perception and appreciation, so as to construct a group or, more radically, to destroy the very principle of division through which the stigmatizing group and the stigmatized group are produced" (Bourdieu, 2001, p. 123). In other words, political battles should be party to a joint activity of ongoing critique of the very representation that produces the groups and, therefore, fosters the marginalization and oppression of a large variety of individuals and groups. In this way, not only would all battles be outward-looking, as they would target the principle itself of classification, but groups would be performing the critical job that allows them to question their own position within the practice. The group would be questioning those schemes of perception that make them see themselves as a group and, in doing so, subtract other linkages and intersections with other groups from the space of visibility.

However, for the purposes of the present article, it is particularly important to tease out the fundamentally *theoretical* nature of this enterprise. Individuals and groups involved in these battles should consciously rely "on the theory of the theory effect" (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 106), which works as a form of "authorization" in the production of an alternative way of seeing the social world and of constructing it. Here theory is not intended to provide an alternative image of society. Rather, it conveys the crucial message that an alternative vision is always possible, and that politics constitutes the field where "alternatives" confront each other in order to impose themselves as the "ordinary" and the "real." On this reading, the theory effect is nothing but the impact that the attempt itself to defy the current representation of the social world exerts when it tries "to make something explicit" (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 132).

9. On this controversy see Lawler (2004). On its relevance to LGBT studies see Croce (2015a; 2018).

Theory operates as a “pre-vision,” that is, a conceptual grid that allows seeing what has yet to come and thus forces the limits of the grid of intelligibility that the existing representation of the social world imposes. Theory works in such a way that a break might emerge between “the order of practice” and the “order of discourse,” in that it illuminates “what was previously ignored, i.e. what was (according to the case in question) implicit or repressed” (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 133). It therefore permeates the fissures of orderly normality and breaks the spell of the naturalization and de-historicization of the social.¹⁰

Although Twentieth-century philosophy and sociology extolled the emancipatory potential of theory, there is no doubt that it is just one of the ways in which the social can be reconfigured. It is certainly a powerful instrument of change, if one only thinks of the way certain produces of theoretical thinking rubbed off on social reality and changed its configuration. However, the strong point of scholars who censure some extreme tenets and conclusions of critical sociology is that the latter downplays two main features of social change. First, the interstitial nature of societal transformation, that is, those micro-spaces where innovative practices are produced. These are evidently not in the position to defy conventional life, and yet depart from it in a way that new conceptual resources are continuously produced. Second, the role played by material practices that cannot be linguistically verbalized and cannot be redeemed by semantic resignification. Not only can the production of a new language be not enough for changing the dominant configuration of the social, but at times a new language can efface material practices that are not covered by this new language.¹¹

While Bourdieu’s conception of the agents’ contribution to social change could easily take up these challenges, his understanding of how it concretely takes place is intellectualist in the sense I sought to clarify. Change, he thinks, requires the demolition of the dominant lexicon and the fabrication of a new semantic repertoire. Only in this way are people drawn to perceive and classify the world differently. Obviously, also in this frame, theory can be regarded as one of the sources of symbolic mobilization, as literature, poetry, arts and science can be just as fruitful contexts of symbolic production. Nevertheless, the fact remains that everything occurs at the level of discourse and lexical representations. While these are certainly central to human life, too many things take place at other levels. Discussing further this limit would require an article of its own, and it is obviously not for me to carry out this analysis here. The chief objective of this article was to make the case that, while Bourdieu did not go down this road, he provided reliable conceptual instruments to do so. And this is no facetious endeavor.

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10. The central role of history is one of the reasons why a good many historical sociologists have turned to Bourdieu’s work in recent years (see e.g. Gorski, 2013).

11. One of the texts that best articulates these remarks is Cooper (2014). Amongst the most important contributions on the relevance of the nonlinguistic are Michel Serres’ and Bruno Latour’s.

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