

## Taking Bourdieu Into the Field\*

Loïc Wacquant

**At the outset of our dialogue, I want to ask you how you met Pierre Bourdieu—not your seminar meeting in Chicago in the winter of 1987 which led you to write *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology* together (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992), but the first time you came face-to-face with him. If you will forgive this joke, how did the ‘ontological complicity’ between the ‘history embodied’ in you and the ‘history objectivized’ in his writings take place concretely?**

It is a joke that I like because it captures something very real in the process of knowledge sharing and intellectual production: theories elaborated by one thinker can come to live and evolve in the minds, activities, and works of many others around and after him. We saw this well with Marx and especially with Durkheim and the members of the *Année sociologique* in the classical era, and we are witnessing it again with Bourdieu, who has spawned not disciples (social science is not a religion, and its innovative figures leaders of sects, as some would like to believe) but collaborators and co-workers in the project of a critical and reflexive science of society, all across the world.

I met Pierre Bourdieu by chance, in November of 1980. At the time, I was a first-year student in industrial economics at the *Ecole des hautes études commerciales* (HEC), France’s top business school. I was disappointed and bored by my studies and groping about for something intellectually engaging. A friend of mine took me to a lecture Bourdieu was giving on “Questions of Politics” at the *Ecole polytechnique* near Paris, on the occasion of the publication of *Le Sens pratique* (I had only read *The Inheritors* (Bourdieu and Passeron 1979) at that point, so I had only the vaguest notion of who Bourdieu was and what he was up to). I was impressed and intrigued by that talk, even as I did not understand half of it, frankly! I understood just enough to sense that something novel and important was being said which deserved to be inquired into. So I hung about with a group of students who cornered Bourdieu at the close of the event. We went to a nearby cafeteria and launched into a discussion of the upcoming elections—this was a few months before the presidential contest that brought Mitterrand and the Socialist Party to power in May of 1981. There, till four the next morning, Bourdieu proceed to dissect French politics and society with surgical acuity,

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cutting the social system open and displaying its innards in a way I had never imaged possible. I was instantly taken: I thought, “if this is what sociology is about, that’s what I want to do.”

So I took up sociology at the University of Paris, concurrently with my training in economics, and a year later, when Bourdieu gave his inaugural address at the *Collège de France* (Bourdieu 1982), I went to hear and congratulate him. He encouraged me to attend his course. Soon I found myself skipping classes at HEC to go and listen to his lectures at the College. And I developed the habit of waiting him out to ask questions and more questions. Out of this pattern of ‘intellectual harassment’ grew an exchange that evolved over the next few years while I was doing research in New Caledonia that later blossomed into full-fledged collaboration when we rejoined in Chicago, resulting in our book *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*.

**Could you tell us more about the strategy you followed in that book, in particular your use of a “linear technique of exposition” to render Bourdieu’s characteristic “recursive and spiral-like way of thinking” (as you put it yourself)? How did this technique of questioning influence his strategy of answering?**

You must realize that the central part of the book consists of an ‘interview’ in appearance only: in reality, it was fully thought out and written out, directly in English, as *a text*, and a text in which we invested nearly three years of work—but we could not call it a ‘Socratic dialogue on the theory of practice’ without risking being misconstrued... We took from the workshop on Bourdieu’s thought I had organized with other graduate students at the University of Chicago the dialogical format in order to produce an accessible yet systematic explication of his theories, show internal linkages between his various investigations, answer typical queries and respond to recurrent objections. The goal was to enable a reader unfamiliar with his *oeuvre* to gain access to its conceptual and thematic core without being sidetracked, hampered, or misled into culs-de-sac by the common misreadings and misunderstandings, slogans and stereotypes about that work (such as the widespread but silly idea that Bourdieu is a proponent of ‘reproduction theory’).

For the middle section of the book, disguised as the ‘Chicago Workshop’, we worked by assembling questions and answers step by step, rewriting both back and forth across the Atlantic via post, fax and telephone (this is before the era of e-mail and the Internet), circling outward from the main conceptual nodes, reflexivity, habitus, capital, field, symbolic domination, doxa, the mission of intellectuals, etc., and striving in each case to situate Bourdieu dynamically in a space of possible positions, to better clarify his distinctive methods and stances in

relation to rival approaches and critics—for instance, on practical logics, to distinguish clearly his dispositional theory of action from both the teleology of rational choice theory and the ethnocentric mechanicalism of utilitarianism: for Bourdieu, action is oriented without conscious aiming at a goal and the springs that motivate it transcend narrow material interest.

The main challenge was to try and ‘linearize’ a thought that is indeed recursive and spiraling without disfiguring it, to ‘stretch’ it out along intersecting but separable vectors while respecting its internal articulations. If Bourdieu’s mode of argumentation is weblike and ramifying, if his key concepts are relational (habitus, field, and capital are all constituted of ‘bundles’ of social ties in different states, embodied, objectified, institutionalized, and they all work most powerfully in relation to each other), it is because the social universe is made that way, according to him. So we wanted to retain the *intrinsic connectivity* of social reality and sociological reasoning while disentangling both enough to enable readers and users of the book to capture the kernel of Bourdieu’s social ontology, method and substantive theories. The fact that *An Invitation* is now translated in seventeen languages and is considered the standard entryway into Bourdieu in many countries suggest that we were not entirely unsuccessful...

**You recently published a book in France *Body and Soul: Ethnographic Notebooks of an Apprentice Boxer* (Wacquant 2000, forthcoming in English with University of California Press) which reports on three-and-a-half years of intensive fieldwork carried out in a black gym in the ghetto of Chicago. You told me that it applies and develops the theory of habitus. Could you elaborate on this experiment in taking Bourdieu into the field and on how it illuminates the problematics of practical logics?**

*Body & Soul* is an anthropological account of prizefighting as a bodily craft in the black American ghetto, based on intensive immersion and ‘observant participation’ during which I *became part of the phenomenon in order to parse it*. It recounts my tribulations in and around the ring as an apprentice of the trade (including my fight at the Chicago Golden Gloves) and mixes sociology, ethnography and literary narrative, text and pictures, ‘cool’ analysis and ‘hot’ experience, to take the reader into the workaday world of run-of-the-mill boxers and recapitulate in vivid color the manufacturing of their distinctive ‘body-mind complex’ — to use an expression of William James that suggests an affinity between pragmatism and Bourdieu’s conception of action.

So it is a study of the *social production of the pugilistic habitus* as a particular set of dispositions assembled collectively via a silent

pedagogy that transforms the totality of the being of the fighter by extracting him from the profane realm and thrusting him into a distinctive sensual, moral, and practical cosmos that entices him to remake himself and achieve (masculine) honor by submitting himself to the ascetic rules of his craft. It is an empirical radicalization of the theory of habitus in that it shows in quasi-experimental fashion, how habitus as a set of socially constituted desires, drives, and abilities, at once cognitive, emotive, aesthetic and ethical, is fashioned and how it operates concretely. Let me cite a passage from Bourdieu that summarizes what I tried to demonstrate and indicates what boxers can teach us about all social agents:

One could, through a Heideggerian play on words, say that dis-position is ex-position. It is because the body is (at different degrees) exposed, put into play, into danger in the world, confronted with the risk of emotion, hurt, suffering, sometimes death, and thus obliged to take the world seriously (and nothing is more serious than emotion, which touches on the innermost depth of our organic dispositions), that it can acquire dispositions which are themselves opening to the world, that is, to the very structures of the social world of which they are the embodied form (1997a: 168).

*Body & Soul* also takes seriously Bourdieu's admonition that the most fundamental and distinctive competencies that we have as social beings are embodied knowledges and skills that operate beneath the level of discourse and consciousness, in an incarnate sense arising out of the mutual interpenetration of being and world. If it is true that our 'presence-in-the-world' operates via what he calls 'bodily knowledge' (most cogently in the chapter of *Pascalian Meditations* by that title, Bourdieu 1997a: chapter 4), then it follows that to penetrate a given universe as social analysts, we must gain knowledge of that universe through our bodies: we must acquire, and then probe and problematize, the practical categories, sensitivities, and abilities that natives have evolved *in and for practice*. We must elucidate 'illusio as this manner of *being in the world*' that arises from being *of* that particular world (Bourdieu 1997a: 162). We must, in short, do not only a sociology *of* the body — animal creatures as social constructs — but also a sociology *from* the body — the socialized and sensuous organism as social constructor — that foregrounds the kinetic mastery of the world that makes recognized members of a given universe what and who they are.

At yet another level, *Body & Soul* is an implementation of reflexivity as a research requirement and epistemic strategy, and it demonstrates by display one of the central arguments of *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*: that the purpose and touchstone of good social theory is to help us *produce new objects*, detect dimensions and dissect mechanisms of the social world that we otherwise would not be able to grasp. There are two ways of conceiving and using social theory: one is a

*scholastic* mode in which we ‘split, polish and clean concepts’, to paraphrase C. Wright Mills’s (1958) critique of Talcott Parsons in *The Sociological Imagination*, that is, produce theoretical categories as an end in themselves, for ritual display and worship. The other is a *generative* mode, wherein we develop theory to put it to use in empirical research and to prove and expand its heuristic capacity in systematic confrontation with sociohistorical reality. I hope that *Body & Soul* offers an engaging exemplification of that second conception, although it also implies that the theory is less conspicuous and must thus be extracted through a close reading of the observations it guides (and in which it sometimes hides).

**Precisely, our choice of practical logics as theme for this issue dedicated to Bourdieu not only recognizes that he has founded a new topic for inquiry; it is also meant to underline its arrested development, the fact that it remains, for the time being, an unfulfilled promise. Would you not agree that, although Bourdieu has proposed a theory of the non-coincidence of theory and practice and even states explicitly that the problem of a logic that can be grasped only in action finds “its solution solely in a theory of theoretical logic and of practical logic” (Bourdieu 1980: 155), he seems reluctant to develop the theory of practical logics as such? Is this reluctance not due to the fact that, as far as he thinks it possible, he would think of it as an algebra (see Bourdieu 1976: 73; also Bourdieu 1980: 435)?**

In my view, Bourdieu’s focus on and elaboration of the *specific logic of practice* and everything that distinguishes it from the ‘logic of logic’ is arguably his greatest discovery and contribution to social theory. We have barely begun to realize its importance and it will take years of work in a variety of disciplines, from philosophy to linguistics to aesthetics to sociology, to draw out all of its implications (see Wacquant 1998)

Now, this is a thorny problem to which Bourdieu suggests two possible resolutions. In the ‘soft’ version, he proposes that there exists a *hiatus* between the immanent logic of practice, which is temporally embedded, spatially situated, *ad hoc*, fuzzy, unconscious of itself, etc., and the logic of scholastic knowledge, which eliminates this built-in wooliness and ambiguity by disembedding action and stripping it of some of its distinctive properties *qua* action. But this hiatus can be bridged by a conscious effort of theorizing, by a reflexive return upon and analysis of the theoretical posture itself, its social conditions of possibility, and how it impacts research as a practical activity (what questions we ask or fail to ask, what data we construct, what observations we carry out, etc.). This is the Bourdieu of *Le Sens*

*pratique*, for instance when he explicates the decisive shift in the analysis of kinship from a set of ‘rules’ (as with Lévi-Straussian structuralism) to a unfolding sequence of situated ‘strategies’ guided by the position of groups in social space and the body as ‘analogical operator’ of practice (see Bourdieu 1980 and 1987). Or the Bourdieu of *Masculine Domination* (1997b, 1998), who probes the concrete workings of the mechanisms of symbolic violence that are at the root of men’s hegemony through an analysis of Kabyle ritual and mythology and how their structures inform everyday life in their—and in our—society.

In the ‘hard’ version, which is first expressed gingerly in Bourdieu’s (1990, also 1994) piece ‘The Scholastic Point of View’ and surfaces again in parts of *Pascalian Meditations* (although that work is ambiguous on this count: it also advances the ‘soft thesis’...), there is an insurmountable gap between practical knowledge and scientific knowledge, even a *antinomy* between practice as an unthought, immediate and mutual ‘inhabiting’ of being and world, carnal entanglement with the active forces that make social existence what it is, and the effort to capture it through thought, ratiocination, and language. The dilemma is not an aporia but an impasse; the hiatus cannot be bridged. But then again, asserting the hard thesis does not stop Bourdieu from plowing ahead in his own analysis of the social conditions that account for the ‘fundamental ambiguity of the scholastic disposition’, namely, that it enables us to know the world while mutilating it insofar as it requires that we retire from that world and inclines us to view it as something other than what it is for itself, as a *spectacle* liable to be read in the manner of a text (as with Clifford Geertz’s “thick description”) or the autotelic workings of a semiotic algebra (as with Lévi-Strauss and so-called poststructuralism, which is really structuralism by another name) rather than urgent tasks to be practically accomplished *hic et nunc*.

I think the tension is unresolved and the question is whether it will prove fruitful, that is, whether leads to progressive heuristics in Lakatos’s sense of the term. This is what, with Pascalian irony, we could christen the *Bourdieu wager*: that, even though there might be an insuperable contradiction between the logic of practice and the logic of science as a historically dated and situated form of human practice, we are better off doing as if there was not and forging ahead in the project of a science of society. The proof of the theoretical pudding of practice will be found in its practical eating.

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