

Introduction: Symbolic Power and Democratic Practice

To the friends and colleagues who, from time to time, queried me about Pierre Bourdieu's outlook on politics, I used to say that he was without contest the single most intensely political person I had ever encountered, yet that he was not "political" in the conventional sense that they and I would spontaneously recognize and agree upon (as when we speak of someone being "into" politics). Although I was not fully satisfied with this curtailed characterization, I was never quite able to encapsulate the tensionful stance, made up of consuming interest and principled diffidence, abiding ardor and disenchanting lucidity, that animated him until I worked on this volume of essays that explicate, illustrate, and extend his theories of and for the social production of democratic politics. Now, reflecting back, I would simply respond that he was, if I may be permitted this near-oxymoronic expression, *sociologically political*.

By this I mean that Pierre Bourdieu never let his sociological guard down an inch, never put away his analytical artillery to cool off for a minute, especially not when he was dealing with political matters, whether in his private ruminations about current events or in his scholarly investigations into the affairs of the City. He engaged with issues of power, public policy, and social justice in a manner that breached the accepted separation of science and life, the conceptual and the personal, and continually crossed that "sacred border between culture and politics, pure thought and the triviality of the agora"¹ that he saw as one major obstacle to a genuine democracy. He did so not by wishing away their constitutive differences but, rather, by articulating them through the ceaseless intellectual ascesis

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mandated by his sociology. In Moebius-strip fashion, Bourdieu's scientific vision of the world was the vessel for his perception of politics at the same time as his political appreciation of social reality was the engine of his interest in and indignation at that reality, and the fount of his urge to thrust it into the sill of social science so that we may increase our chances of transforming it, of eventually becoming something like "political subjects" – a regulative ideal to which he was always committed, however guarded he might have been about the likelihood of its practical realization. His was a dogged and all-encompassing effort "to think politics without thinking politically"² so that we may put ourselves, individually and collectively, in a position to reflect and act in accordance with our cherished political values, in our intimate dealings and our professional endeavors no less than on the public stages set up for civic action by liberal democracies.

As with all of his thought, Bourdieu's views on democracy are the product of the resolute application of a small number of analytic principles and methodological postures. The first is the questioning of customary ways of thinking and acting politically through the *radical historicization* of everything having to do with democracy:³ its vocabulary, its official discourse and ordinary representations, its distinctive devices and associations, and, last but not least, the discipline that claims to study it, political science – which enters into the reflexive sociology of politics not as an instrument but as an object of analysis, as one of the loquacious agencies that contribute to the ongoing operation of democratic regimes. The second is to undertake precisely what this science studiously omits, namely, the systematic *excavation of the social conditions of possibility* of democratic practices,⁴ which necessitates a twofold shift of focus. It demands, first, that we descend from the heavens of abstract ideas and lofty ideals (lionized by the spiritualist strand of political philosophy that has come into fashion since the anti-structuralist backlash of the mid-seventies) to till empirically the soil of actually existing political behaviors, meanings, and organizations; and, second, that we locate not only political capacities inscribed in formal structures but also the varied political proclivities and expectations of concrete agents and how they come to be endowed (or not) with the categories, skills, and desires required to play the democratic game. In short, it asks that we ask the question of how the division between what Max Weber called "passive political agents" and "active political agents" is produced and reproduced.

This is because, according to Bourdieu's third major tenet of social inquiry, like all institutions democracy exists in those *two states of the*

social that are objective systems of *positions* and subjective bundles of *dispositions* deposited in agents in the guise of the cognitive and conative schemata that inform their thoughts, feelings, and conduct.⁵ The former are crystallized in the political field (the semi-autonomous microcosm within which parties and politicians vie to offer their services to the citizenry) and the bureaucratic field (the notion Bourdieu elaborates to reframe the state as an arena of struggles over the definition and manipulation of public goods), and the latter in the mental structures that compose the political habitus. Sociology must grasp each by means of a genetic analysis of their constitution in order to reconstruct the evolving dialectic of habitus and field across the gamut of historical configurations, ranging from situations of agreement and reciprocal reinforcement at one end of the continuum to cases of discordance and mutual undermining at the other. Both of these states of political action, the objectified and the embodied, must in turn be subjected to a nested *double reading*, objectivist and subjectivist (or, in another language, structuralist and phenomenological), capable of capturing the “twofold truth” of the political cosmos:⁶ citizens are inserted in a web of constraining relations “independent of their consciousness and will,” as famously put by Marx, but politics is crucially about “will and representation,” to cite a phrase of Schopenhauer that Bourdieu liked to invoke to remind us that the social world is also made of and made by cognitive activity.

This brings us to the fourth principle of Bourdieuan analysis: pay special attention to the *specific efficacy of symbolic power* and to the social tricks it plays on us all, including on the social analyst who must beware not to get caught up in the very classification struggles she sets out to describe and explain. This principle is especially apposite to the analysis of politics, inasmuch as “political struggle is a cognitive struggle (practical and theoretical) for the power to impose the legitimate vision of the social world”⁷ – that is, the power to (re)make reality by preserving or altering the categories through which agents comprehend and construct that world. This means that sociology is an inescapably *political* science, in that it continually finds itself in competition with other professional producers of authoritative representations of society, such as politicians, journalists, official experts, and political pundits, and that it necessarily perpetrates this “absolute barbarity that consists in questioning the fundamental presupposition that only politicians can speak politically.”⁸ The development of a lucid sociological understanding of political institutions and the nurturing of sociologically informed political dispositions are all the more urgent in an epoch when the derivative products of social science – such as the market rhetoric of efficiency, opinion polls, focus

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groups, and other political marketing techniques – have become major ingredients in the rationalization of domination:

To realize that science has become an instrument of legitimation of power, that the new rulers govern in the name of the appearance of the political-economic science that one acquires at Science-Po [the French equivalent of Harvard's Kennedy School of Public Policy or the London School of Economics] and in business schools, must not lead us to a romantic and regressive anti-scientism, which always coexists within dominant ideology with the professed cult of science. Rather, it calls for producing the conditions of a new scientific and political spirit, liberating because liberated from censorship.⁹

This book proceeds from the conviction, acquired through lecturing intensively over the past several years to both academic and general audiences in a dozen countries swept by the neoliberal revolution, from Argentina to Germany and from Canada to Greece, that the work of Pierre Bourdieu contains untapped intellectual resources for rethinking and renewing democratic struggles. For scholars, his writings harbor a trove of conceptual tools to plumb the perennial puzzles and the sweeping makeover of politics and policy in contemporary societies; for progressive activists and interested citizens around the globe, they are a signal source of insights, vista points, and inspiration in their battles to reclaim a measure of control over their collective fate in the age of deregulated labor, hypermobile capital, and pusillanimous states. Correspondingly, this volume examines Bourdieu's manifold contributions to the theory and practice of democratic politics by explicating his core concepts of political field and field of power, his historical model of the emergence of the modern bureaucratic state and its built-in possibilities and limitations, and his influential analyses of the predicaments, practices, and institutions entailed in the sociosymbolic *alchemy of representation*. The cogency and flexibility of these analytic instruments is demonstrated in a series of integrated discussions of voting, public opinion polls, party dynamics, class rule, and state building, as well as by rigorous and vigorous exegeses of Bourdieu's own political engagements and theoretical treatment of the politics of recognition and reason.

The opening chapter provides "Pointers on Pierre Bourdieu and Democratic Politics." It charts the connections between his personal political views, the main nodes of his sociology of political life, and the implications of this sociology for progressive civic thought and action. It suggests that this work contains an original model of

democratic politics in both the positive and the normative sense that calls for elaboration, application, and extension. The next two chapters by Pierre Bourdieu lay out core historical and thematic building-blocks of that model. The first chapter, “From the King’s House to the Reason of State,” mines historiographic studies to theorize the epochal transition from the dynastic to the bureaucratic state and the correlative shift from the family-based to the school-mediated mode of reproduction of rule that anchors the two antagonistic poles of the field of power in differentiated societies: the dynamic opposition between blood and merit, heredity and competency (or, in our times, property titles and credentials), issued out of the long gestation of the state bureaucracy inside the monarchic apparatus and stands at the crux of the division of labor of domination whose advance spawned the invention of the political field.¹⁰

The second chapter by Pierre Bourdieu, “The Mystery of Ministry,” tackles what constitutes in his eyes the epicentral conundrum of that field: the veritable transubstantiation whereby a group comes to exist through the words and deeds of its “representative,” who receives from the collective the paradoxical power to make it act as such but also to shape it – and even to betray it. This is what, borrowing an expression from the scholastics, who liked to play on the similarity between the two words, rooted in a common etymology that led them to be frequently confounded in medieval texts, Bourdieu calls the “*mysterium of ministerium*,” which one might translate in this context as the enigma of political office.¹¹ The social technology of delegation by which the spokesperson officially speaks in the name of the group and in its stead, in effect becoming the group by giving it a personal incarnation, voice, and will, challenges the aggregative logic of the individual vote, which is near-universally seen as the touchstone of democracy but which Bourdieu contends is prejudicial to subordinate groups insofar as it forces them to enter into the political game serially, in mechanical isolation, against a social order that is already constituted to their detriment. In chapter 4, Franck Poupeau and Thierry Discepolo complement Bourdieu’s two texts by offering a precise and comprehensive survey of his public interventions over the span of his intellectual career. They map out the organic links between his political vision and his scientific positions that impelled him to practice a “Scholarship with Commitment,” from his early research on Algeria in the throes of colonial war to the unveiling of the socially corrosive effects of policies of state retrenchment in Europe at the turn of the century.

The next four chapters take up the key conceptual tools and methodological principles that Bourdieu offers for investigating

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democratic politics and apply them to its distinctive ingredients. In “Ancien Régime Ballots,” Olivier Christin re-historicizes the seemingly timeless practice of voting by revealing the prevalence of elections during the absolutist age. Realizing that organic-collegial voting and individual-majoritarian voting overlapped and competed as alternative procedures of representation from the Renaissance to the French Revolution belies the hasty assimilation of voting to democratic suffrage and the unreflective belief in the invariance of social devices for decision making in civic affairs. In “Making the People Speak,” Patrick Champagne extends this questioning to the political uses of and reactions to public opinion polls. He discloses how producers, consumers, and commentators of polls have conquered a major role in the current division of political labor by playing on the rhetoric of scientificity and representativity to impose an unnoticed transformation of that which they claim merely to measure: today “public opinion” is no longer the opinion of elected representatives, union and association leaders, and “opinion makers” such as intellectuals, as it was from the 1870s to the 1970s, but the artefactual product of the pairing of active pollsters and a demobilized and artificially atomized citizenry. Far from enhancing the voice of “the people,” the expanded place of polls in democratic life partakes of the general rationalization of public action that reinforces the exclusive control over state decisions by professionals of politics.

In “Symbolic Power in the Rule of the ‘State Nobility,’” I argue that Bourdieu’s sociology of symbolic forms opens a new path for the comparative-historical anthropology of ruling class formation and state making. His analysis of the contribution of the field of elite schools to the legitimation of political and economic power in advanced society discloses how the social and mental integration of the diverse fractions of the ruling class reinforces class rule by establishing a *pax dominorum* recognizing the rival forms of capital they possess. It also exemplifies Bourdieu’s effort to dissolve the dualism of structure and agency and to craft a conception of power as an effect of the homologies of mental and social structures across criss-crossing fields that diverges from Foucault’s in that it does not presuppose the mediation of “discourse” and it recognizes that the social energy constitutive of species of capital is not “dispersed” throughout the social body but accumulates in the field of power (rather than in the state *per se*). In chapter 8, Gil Eyal takes the conceptual doublet of field of power and political field to Eastern Europe. He deploys Bourdieu’s dynamic model of the relationship of social space and political struggles to explain how the electoral strategies and party

maneuvers entailed in “The Making and Breaking of the Czechoslovak Political Field” after the collapse of the Soviet empire set off a dynamic of polarization that led to the eventual split between the Czech and the Slovak republics. Owing to its relative autonomy, the political field has the prismatic capacity to transpose, invert, and in some cases subvert the social divisions among the electorate, leading to unforeseen outcomes that attest to what Bourdieu calls the “symbolic elasticity” of the social world.

The book closes by shifting from the national to the global level to probe the manifestations and mechanisms of a novel form of symbolic colonization of which academics are at once perpetrators and victims. “The Cunning of Imperialist Reason” poses the question of the social and intellectual conditions for a genuine social-scientific internationalism through an analysis of the worldwide spread of a neoliberal “newspeak” forged through the uncontrolled universalization of the folk concepts and preoccupations of American society and university. The terms, themes, and tropes of this emerging planetary lingua franca – “multiculturalism,” “globalization,” “fragmentation,” “race,” “underclass,” “minority,” “identity,” etc. – tend to project and impose on all societies the concerns and viewpoints of the United States intelligentsia, thereby transfigured into tools of analysis and yardsticks for policy fit for naturalizing the peculiar historical experience of one peculiar society, tacitly instituted as a model for all of humankind. This chapter suggests that the logic of the international circulation of ideas, the internal transformations of the academic field and its growing subjection to market criteria, the strategies of foundations and publishers, as well as of local collaborators in global conceptual “import-export” converge to foster a particularly pernicious form of cultural imperialism that amputates our ability to make out the limitations and possibilities of contemporary politics.

It seems fitting to conclude with a text dealing with the perils of symbolic power inside the academic world that has triggered lively controversy and discussion in a number of countries, since the aim of the present volume is precisely to stimulate its readers to grapple with and gauge Bourdieu’s multi-sided contributions to the theory and practice of democratic politics, of which open intellectual debate is a crucial component. It is the collective hope of the contributors to this book (which is being published near-simultaneously in half a dozen languages) that it will, at minimum, illustrate and propagate Bourdieu’s admonition that “it is worth fighting for the recognition of the universal right to speak, and to speak to ensure the return of the socially repressed.”¹²

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Notes

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- 1 Pierre Bourdieu, “Penser la politique,” *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales* 71–2 (March 1988): 2.
- 2 Ibid., p. 3.
- 3 This radical historicization applies to reason, truth, and the law, and *a fortiori* to politics and democracy: “In the beginning, there is only custom, that is, the historical arbitrary of the historical institution that makes itself be forgotten as such by striving to found itself in mythical reason, as with the theories of contract, these veritable myths of origin of the democratic religions” (Pierre Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations* (Cambridge: Polity, 2000 [1997]), p. 94, my trans.).
- 4 “The silence over the conditions that place citizens, all the more brutally as they are more deprived economically and culturally, before the alternatives of abdication through abstention and dispossession through delegation is to ‘political science’ what the silence over the economic and cultural conditions of ‘rational’ economic conduct is to economic science” (Pierre Bourdieu, “Political Representation: Elements for a Theory of the Political Field,” in *Language and Symbolic Power* (Cambridge: Polity, 1991 [1982, this essay 1981]), p. 171, my trans.).
- 5 Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*, pp. 182–8.
- 6 Ibid., pp. 188–91.
- 7 Ibid., p. 185. Elsewhere Bourdieu reminds us that whether something is political and worthy of collective action aimed at redress is itself an object of political contention as, in all social confrontations, “*the stake of the struggle is a stake of struggle*: at every moment there is a struggle to determine whether or not it is ‘proper’ or not to struggle

- over such and such issue” (Pierre Bourdieu, “Strike and Political Action,” in his *Sociology in Question* (London: Sage, 1990 [1980]), p. F258).
- 8 Pierre Bourdieu, *Interventions, 1961–2001. Science sociale et action politique* (Montréal: Comeau & Nadeau, 2002), p. 163.
 - 9 Bourdieu, *Sociology in Question*, p. 18.
 - 10 This chapter also typifies two key features of Bourdieu’s approach to politics, and of his sociology more generally, that refute a certain conventional reading of his work as static and mechanical (as in the scholarly fable the “reproduction theorist”): the inseparability of the structural and the historical modes of analysis, and the keen attention accorded to disjuncture and contradiction.
 - 11 *Mysterium* is Latin for the ancient Greek *mustērion* originally meaning “secret rite” and referring later to something unexplained or unexplainable, while *ministerium* evolved to mean service, office, trade, or craft (under the spelling *misterium*).
 - 12 Pierre Bourdieu, “Le droit à la parole,” interview in *Le Monde*, 11–12 October 1977; repr. in *Interventions*, p. 107.