

***Bourdieu's Theory of Linguistic Exchange: Realistic Description or Exclusionary Prescription?***

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Simon Susen's founding assumption is that there is a fundamental opposition between Bourdieu's theory of linguistic exchange and Habermas's notion of an 'ideal speech situation'. This is a perfectly reasonable assumption from which to work. As Susen himself demonstrates, it reflects Bourdieu's own comments regarding the allegedly idealistic nature of Habermas's theory of communicative action. Moreover, with the possible exception of William Outhwaite, Susen's interlocutors accept the validity of this assumption, before then going on to take issue with his analyses in different ways and to varying degrees. Inasmuch as I have anything useful to add to these debates, I thought it might be worthwhile reminding Susen and his interlocutors of a moment in Bourdieu's work where he qualifies his criticisms of Habermas's 'ideal speech situation' to the point of acknowledging the potential validity of the Habermasian approach, albeit in very particular circumstances.

By focusing on this moment in Bourdieu's work, I also hope to bring attention to one aspect of his thinking that seems to have been largely overlooked by Susen and his interlocutors, namely that Bourdieu's theory of linguistic exchange is not simply a *description* of the presumed reality of the social inequalities structuring all such exchanges, it also results in a series of *prescriptions* regarding the kinds of agent who are hence considered sufficiently qualified to contribute to the elaboration of truths of universal or scientific value. In elucidating this point, I will doubtless reveal how very sympathetic I am to Susen's critical analyses of Bourdieu's theory of linguistic exchange. His article seems to me to constitute a lucid, detailed, and wholly fair assessment of Bourdieu's work. His responses to his different critics seem convincing. There is only one substantive point on which I disagree with Susen and this is his claim that Bourdieu's 'insistence on the *scientificity* and *objectivity* of reflexive sociology is not easily reconcilable with his emphasis upon the intrinsic *partiality* and *normativity* of all claims to epistemic validity' (Susen 2013, 224, original emphasis). As I will demonstrate, Bourdieu provides a clear account of how this apparent paradox can be resolved. Whether that account is judged coherent or convincing is, of course, another matter.

**Bourdieu's 'Ideal Speech Situation'**

It is certainly the case that, for Bourdieu, Habermas's theory of communicative action remains excessively idealistic, at least as far as the immense majority of everyday linguistic exchanges is concerned. However, in *Science of Science and Reflexivity*, Bourdieu identifies one specific situation in which 'Habermas's argument is true' and a kind of ideal speech situation might be created in which 'the force of the best argument would win out' (Bourdieu 2004, 82). The specific situation Bourdieu identifies here is that of a relatively autonomous intellectual field, whose autonomy ensures that the ideas elaborated within it are not subordinated to the purely 'temporal' demands of fashion, of political expediency, or of immediate economic gain. Within such autonomous fields of intellectual endeavour, then, the ideas of a mathematician will be judged only by a community of suitably qualified fellow mathematicians, of a historian by other historians,

a physicist by other physicists, a sociologist by other sociologists, and so on. What this means, according to Bourdieu, is that mathematicians, historians, physicists, or sociologists will only be able to pursue their own *particular* interests in accumulating the forms of capital on offer in their respective intellectual fields by respecting those *universal* criteria of scientific truth or validity upheld by the community of their academic peers. This is what Bourdieu terms the ‘corporatism of the universal’ and it represents his attempt to reconcile what Susen identifies as the contradiction between the pursuit of partial interests, on the one hand, and the promotion of universal truths, on the other.

What this means, in Bourdieu’s terms, is that only those agents occupying relatively privileged positions in society are considered qualified to articulate potentially universal truths. To participate in a relatively autonomous intellectual field demands an ability to stand at a distance from the realm of immediate economic necessity, to adopt a leisurely, contemplative distance on the world, the *skholè*, that is the preserve of the relatively wealthy. As Bourdieu openly acknowledges in *Pascalian Meditations*, his theory of a ‘corporatism of the universal’ is fundamentally ambiguous in that it restricts the capacity to articulate universal truths to agents located in social fields to which access is both privileged and exclusive: ‘If the universal advances, it is because there exist social microcosms which, despite their intrinsic ambiguity, linked to their enclosure in the privilege and the satisfied egotism of a separation by status, are the sites of struggles in which the universal is at stake...’ (Bourdieu 2000,123).

### **From Description to Prescription to Policing**

Now Bridgett Fowler is, of course, quite correct when she states that the whole force of Bourdieu’s sociology, at least of the level of his conscious intentions, was directed at registering such inequalities in order to protest against their injustice and challenge their continued existence (Fowler 2013). Hence, in his later work particularly, Bourdieu’s insistence on the need to ‘generalize the conditions of access to the universal, in order that more and more people fulfil the necessary conditions for appropriating the universal for themselves’ (Bourdieu 1998, 66). However, this is only one part of the story. For, inasmuch as Bourdieu wrote at a time, as he saw it, prior to the wholesale generalisation of the conditions of access to the universal, his analyses of the linguistic, cultural, and intellectual dispossession of the dominated social classes were not merely a matter of the realistic *description* of a regrettable state of affairs, as his defenders would have it. These analyses also involved his making a series of *prescriptions* regarding precisely which social agents must therefore be judged, *a priori* and by definition, incapable of articulating truths of universal value and hence illegitimate interlopers in those privileged, exclusive fields of autonomous intellectual enquiry. This, in turn, led Bourdieu to seek to police the boundaries between the intellectual field and its outside in rather stark terms. I shall offer just four examples of this tendency in Bourdieu, presenting each case in rather telegraphic form.

### **Regarding *An Invitation to a Reflexive Sociology***

My first example derives from *An Invitation to a Reflexive Sociology*, from a passage in which Bourdieu reminds us of the need for any scientific sociology to take full account of the ‘practical knowledge’ of the social game possessed by ordinary agents if it is not to lapse into objectivism. He immediately adds the following, revealing qualification: ‘If one must objectivize the schemata of practical sense, this is not in order to prove that sociology can only offer one point of view on the world among many, neither more nor less scientific than any other, but to *wrench scientific reason from the embrace of practical reason*, to prevent the latter from contaminating the former ...’ (Bourdieu 1992, 247).

### **Regarding *Science of Science and Reflexivity***

This striking metaphor of *contamination* bears witness to Bourdieu’s perceived need to police the borders of scientific sociology by ensuring that ideas elaborated by those deemed unqualified to participate in the exclusive field of sociology should not be allowed to threaten the scientific objectivity of that discipline. ‘Practical knowledge’ must therefore be included within the ambit of a scientific sociology but only once it has been suitably objectified by the sociologist. In its original or primary form it risks *contaminating* that realm of universal truth. This metaphor of contamination recurs in *Science of Science and Reflexivity*, in a passage in which Bourdieu discusses the difficulty of sociology imposing its claim to a ‘monopoly of truth’ about the social world in the face of ‘among other things, a contamination of the scientific order by the principles of the political order and of democracy’ (Bourdieu 2004, 73).

### **Regarding *On Television and Journalism***

Bourdieu expresses this same sentiment in rather more demotic terms in *On Television and Journalism*, where he again bemoans sociology’s difficulties in imposing its autonomy and hence its monopoly of truth given that ‘malheureusement tout le monde s’en mêle’ (Bourdieu 1996, 71). The published English translation gives ‘unfortunately, everyone wants to get in on the act’ for this phrase, significantly toning down the strength of the original French (Bourdieu 1998, 61). For ‘se mêler de’ in French has the clear connotation of interfering in something that is none of one’s concern, of illegitimately mixing in matters that are none of one’s business, as in the common exclamation ‘De quoi tu te mêles!’, which might be translated as ‘Mind your own business!’ or ‘Keep your nose out!’ Ordinary agents, it seems, have no business interfering in the concerns of sociologists. Sociology must be protected from ‘contamination’ by democracy.

### **Regarding *The Weight of the World***

A concrete example of where such extraordinary claims can lead is offered by a passage in *The Weight of the World*. Here Bourdieu recounts his interview with a French student of mixed European and North African heritage, who cites her sense of divided ethnic identity as an explanation for her alienation from the institutions of French higher education. This case is cited by Bourdieu as exemplifying the dangers of ‘false

objectification' posed by certain individuals, dangers that justify his decision not to include the full text of his interview with this young woman in the main body of *The Weight of the World*, alongside all the other interviews. The research subjects who feature in those other interviews all limit themselves to articulating their own 'practical' knowledge or understanding of their situations, leaving it to the sociologist to raise such practical knowledge to the level of social scientific truth, through a work of sociological objectification. The problem posed by the young woman is that her university education has given her the impression that she possesses the conceptual instruments necessary to objectify her own situation, unaided by any sociologist. For Bourdieu, this is a mistaken impression; her pretension to objectify her own situation is an illegitimate one. She is, after all, only a student and a student of literature to boot (*quelle horreur!*). Hence Bourdieu dismisses her account, in rather contemptuous terms, as a 'false, collusive objectification, a half-baked and therefore doubly mystificatory demystification'. The student's literary studies, he argues, have given her the tools to construct an apparently coherent narrative of her situation. Yet, for Bourdieu, these are the wrong tools since they exclude 'de facto any investigation of the objective facts of her trajectory other than those which enter into the project of self-portraiture as she conceives it' (Bourdieu 1999, 615-17). A little education, it seems, is a dangerous thing for Bourdieu.

It is important to stress that Bourdieu's dismissal of this young woman's testimony does not take the form of a reasoned critique that draws on the findings of his own sociological studies to demonstrate where she has gone wrong. He provides no evidence in support of his claim either that her mixed ethnicity is not the issue or that other 'objective facts' are more significant. He does not need to provide any such evidence since his dismissal of her point of view rests not on questioning the intrinsic merit or rationality of her words but rather on pointing to the social position she occupies, a position that is assumed to render those words, by definition, illegitimate.

### **Policing Sociology**

From a supposedly realistic *description* of the structural inequalities inherent to any linguistic exchange, Bourdieu thus moves to making a series of *prescriptions* regarding precisely which individuals can, by dint of their socio-professional status, be considered capable of articulating ideas of potentially universal sociological validity. This, in turn, leads him to seek to *police* the field of sociology against those individuals whose social position means that any claims they might make to such validity are, by definition, illegitimate and whose words hence threaten to 'contaminate' that realm of universal truths. Only through such policing operations can sociology hope to secure its 'monopoly of truth' about the social world in circumstances where 'malheureusement, tout le monde s'en mêle'. There is, of course, a word for this situation in which every citizen believes they have an equal right to interfere in and pronounce upon the social world. That word is *democracy*. Little wonder, then, that Bourdieu should express his concern at the risks for sociology of a 'contamination of the scientific order by the principles of the political order and of democracy'.

So, whilst there is absolutely no reason to doubt the sincerity of Bourdieu's stated desire to deepen democracy by 'generalizing the conditions of access to the universal', we

should never forget that, until those conditions *were* generalized, he reserved the right to prescribe the necessary qualifications for access to the universal and hence to police that realm against possible ‘contamination’. This is the necessary consequence of his insistence that to assume a capacity for rational argumentation amongst members of the ‘dominated classes’ is to ignore the extent of their linguistic and cultural dispossession.

### **Bourdieu’s Realism?**

A number of Susen’s interlocutors seek to defend Bourdieu against criticism by reference to the supposed realism of his account of the structural inequalities that sadly but inevitably determine all linguistic exchanges. I would argue that we cannot defend Bourdieu’s account of the linguistic dispossession of the dominated classes on the grounds of that account’s alleged realism, unless we also take full account of the prescriptivism this involves. It follows from this that we would need to treat with extreme caution the kind of rhetorical move employed by David Inglis, when he opposes Bourdieu’s alleged realism to the idealism of those ‘liberals’ and ‘left-liberals’ who place a naïve, unquestioned faith in the inherent creativity of ordinary agents, their capacity for rational thoughts and actions that might transcend their straightened material circumstances (Inglis 2013).

Since Inglis seems keen to wag a sententious finger at these hopelessly naïve leftists and liberals for failing to reflect on the assumptions behind their interpretative frameworks, let me apply the same gesture to his intervention. Since at least the democratic revolutions of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, reactionaries and counter-revolutionaries of all stripes have never failed to lament that, alas and through no fault of their own, the ‘lower orders’ will never be capable of the rational, free agency that would justify the granting of universal suffrage – only naïve leftist idealists, with no grasp of the regrettable realities of class and status, could believe otherwise. Sociology’s close historical entanglement with counter-revolutionary thought might give us all pause for thought lest we be tempted to engage in renewed versions of such false solicitude.

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