

Bourdieu in Contention and Deliberation: Response to Lamont and Lizardo

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This essay responds to Lamont's (2011) article "How Has Bourdieu Been Good to Think With? The Case of the United States," and Lizardo's (2011) essay "The Three Phases of Bourdieu's U.S. Reception," both of which appear in this issue.

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In reading Michèle Lamont's thoughtful account of the reception of Bourdieu in the United States, followed by Omar Lizardo's spirited response, I am struck both by the generational difference in perspective, and by the Bourdieu that both of them missed. I would locate myself generationally midway between Lamont and Lizardo, partially overlapping in my theoretical and methodological interests with both. Bourdieu was absolutely critical to my own intellectual coming of age. To echo Lamont, I was both for him and against him, but brought this argument to a field of inquiry that is neglected by both of these accounts, that of contentious politics, political deliberation, and other kinds of transformative social action. In this response, I would like to outline some ways in which a critical dialogue with Bourdieu has influenced these research areas, as well as ways in which I hope to see the dialogue carried forward in the future.

I first encountered Bourdieu in 1992 as a second-year graduate student at the Graduate Faculty of the New School for Social Research. I took an anthropology class in which we read *Outline of a Theory of Practice* and *Distinction* in direct dialogue with Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks*, focusing on the proximity of Gramsci's ideas of hegemony, passive revolution, and war of position with Bourdieu's concepts of habitus, doxa, and symbolic violence. I found the *Outline* in particular a thrilling read, and met weekly with a couple of fellow sociology graduate students to wrestle with the material. The *Outline* was bristling with the obsessive excitement of a powerful mind figuring out its

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ideas, and to this day I prefer it to the much more systematic (and plodding) *Logic of a Theory of Practice*.

Our particular reading of Bourdieu must be understood in the context of the intellectual debates during that period at the New School, which was caught up in fierce divisions between normatively inclined critical theorists influenced by the Frankfurt School and empirically oriented historical scholars of states, revolutions, and social movements. As students, we were implicated in these arguments by our choices of classes and advisors, but we also found the normative/realist divide increasingly tiresome and problematic. Our Gramsci-inspired reading of Bourdieu gave us a way to bridge this divide while challenging both sides; we critiqued the idealism of the Habermasians while prodding the historical realists to take culture and symbolic power into account. I recall intensive debates in Charles Tilly's workshop on the role of identities and meaning in political contention, a debate that contributed to Tilly's own "cultural turn" in the mid-to-late 1990s (Mische, 2011).

And yet despite our fascination, many of us were cranky about Bourdieu in the mid-1990s. As a theorist of symbolic domination and social reproduction, he was unparalleled; and yet our empirical preoccupation was with political resistance and historical change. We were studying processes of state making, revolution, social movements, democratic transitions, and institutional reforms. How could Bourdieu help us there? His ideas seemed too static, too focused on social reproduction, insufficiently attentive to the possibility of challenge and resistance from below. In Gramsci's terms, we were not only interested in war of position, but also in those formative moments in which counterhegemonic resistance erupted into war of maneuver. As Mustafa Emirbayer and I argued in a 1998 paper (also influenced by pragmatist and phenomenological thought), Bourdieu was path-breaking in his understanding of the habitual and the practical-evaluative dimensions of action, but limited in his understanding of the capacity of people to imagine alternatives and reformulate trajectories of action, limiting future projections to narrowly constrained "expectations" in preexisting fields of action.

Nevertheless, Bourdieu's ideas seeped into the deep structure of our thinking. As young culturally inclined scholars of political process, we were unhappy with the overly rationalistic and resource-oriented accounts that dominated U.S. scholarship on social movements prior to 1990s. We cheered as emerging voices such as Taylor and Whitter (1992), Polletta (1994), Bernstein (1997), and others challenged the interest/identity dichotomy, with echoes of Bourdieu's attack on the divide between objectivism and subjectivism ringing in our ears. The free-rider problem that so vexed the previous generation of social movement analysts seemed to evaporate when we took into account interpretive and symbolic processes. While Bourdieu may not have been the only or even primary reference in these debates, the core notion of taken-for-granted cultural schemas (sometimes conceptualized as "collective action frames") and their strategic deployment in contentious fields became central to emerging ideas about the role of culture in movements. Tilly's

concept of “repertoire of contention” likewise highlighted the habitual, taken-for-granted, slow-changing nature of forms of resistance considered appropriate to particular actors and contexts. Although these usages do not map precisely onto Bourdieu’s ideas of habitus and field, and there are important points of difference and tension, the family resemblance and slippage in usage among young scholars has been both unavoidable and theoretically generative.

Of course, Tilly himself did not acknowledge influence by or even direct dialogue with Bourdieu, despite the fact that (as he noted while scolding us for our mispronunciation of Bourdieu’s name), “Pierre is a friend of mine!” In a recent article, Emirbayer (2010) has noted some of the deep similarities between Tilly and Bourdieu: their strong historicist sensibility, their analytic attention to modern states and classes, their avoidance of the notion of civil society, their focus on political conflict, their emphasis on concrete everyday practices, their methodological ecumenism, and their passionate commitment to relational thinking. At the same time, he notes important differences, particularly in their conception of relational sociology, but also in method, substance, and moral-practical approach. Bourdieu’s field theory focuses on objective relations between positions in social space, as determined by varying combinations of types of capital, which do not presuppose any direct interaction between occupants of those positions; in contrast, Tilly was interested in concrete interactions (or “transactions”) between social entities—persons, groups, states, social sites—drawing on network-analytic conceptions of social relationships, as encapsulated in semantic grammars and contentious performances (Tilly, 1997, 2008). Moreover, they differed in their relative attention to subjective understanding, in their valuation of Durkheim, in their emphasis on social mechanisms in explanation, and in their normative stance on public sociology.

Still, for many of us it was useful to think with both of them together. Emblematic in this regard is the work of Javier Auyero (2000, 2003), who develops Tilly’s focus on relational mechanisms in his analysis of clientelism and antiausterity protests, while also building on Bourdieu’s concepts of symbolic violence, schemas of perception, and embodied practice. Other students of Tilly from that period who engage deeply with Bourdieu (often via comparative-historical and institutionalist analysis) include Chad Goldberg, Victoria Johnson, John Krinsky, and Mimi Sheller. Although they take their work in a variety of directions (focusing, respectively, on citizenship and welfare rights, cultural entrepreneurship, workfare protest, and transnational mobilities), they all combine attention to classification struggles and symbolic and material domination with a focus on the transformative potential of political contention. Perhaps not incidentally, all of them participated (along with me) in the lively workshop on theory and culture that Mustafa Emirbayer convened at the New School in the mid-1990s. We also developed our work in dialogue with a more senior cohort of emerging scholars—including Karen Cerulo, Elisabeth Clemens, Nina Eliasoph, Michele Lamont, Paul Lichterman, Francesca Polletta, Margaret Somers, Lyn Spillman, Marc

Steinberg, Robin Wagner-Pacifici, and others—whose work on political culture and communication, discursive fields, political symbolism, symbolic boundaries, and organizational innovation contributed to a rich (albeit sometimes critical) debate with Bourdieu's ideas.

Additional emerging areas of dialogue with Bourdieu, not mentioned by either Lamont or Lizardo, include the recent neopragmatist revival and the relatively new critical focus on the relationship between public deliberation and inequality. For example, Emirbayer and Schneiderhan (forthcoming) have explored affinities between the work of Bourdieu and Dewey, including a joint skepticism about theoretical foundationalism, an emphasis on practical action and experiential learning, and a view of "habits" as active and propulsive. The comparison can be summed up, a bit simplistically, as "Bourdieu = Dewey + power – democracy," although they also note the democratizing ethos underlying Bourdieu's work, as well as Dewey's (relatively unelaborated) concern with the stultifying effects of social class, traditionalism, and dominant institutions on human intelligence and creativity. Most scholars in the deliberative democracy tradition have drawn more strongly on Dewey and Habermas than on Bourdieu and Gramsci, contributing to a tendency toward idealization of the democratic potential of deliberative forums. However, a cohort of younger scholars who have grown up on both perspectives are attempting to place theories of democratic deliberation in critical dialogue with theories of inequality and symbolic power, an effort clearly in evidence at a 2010 workshop at New York University on "Democratizing Inequalities," organized by Caroline Lee, Michael McQuarrie, and Edward Walker.

Finally, I agree with Lizardo that cognitive sociology is one of the promising emerging areas of critical dialogue with Bourdieu's ideas. However, I would like to highlight one aspect of cognition that he neglects—the study of future projections and their role in transformative social action (Mische, 2009). A concern with expectations and aspirations has been central to Bourdieu's theory since his early work on education, as has a Husserl-inspired fascination with the phenomenology of time and its impact on practical strategies of action. This focus on temporality, tactical improvisation, reflexivity, and symbolic struggles in fact makes Bourdieu's theory much less static than many of us initially feared, particularly as developed in his later work. In recent articles, Stephen Vaisey (2009, 2010) has focused on the durability and taken-for-granted nature of the aspirational schemas underlying our action, drawing explicit links between Bourdieu's ideas and theories of dual processing and automatic cognition. A number of other scholars have engaged directly with Bourdieu while developing theories of future aspirations and life choices (Fosse and Gross, forthcoming; Young, 2004).

Still, there remains a problematic tendency in much of this work to reduce most aspirations to expectations or values that are taken for granted and adapted to a field of action, perhaps with a bit of resistance and reformulation around the edges. This minimizes the often critical moments in which we, to use Dewey's phrase from *Human Nature and Conduct* (1922:197), "stop

and think,” that is, exercise deliberative cognition (what Dewey calls “intelligence”) to grapple with the rocky shoals on which our propulsive habits of action often founder. Although both Dewey and Bourdieu highlight the role of self-reflection in loosening the constraints of reified practices and habits of thought, for Bourdieu this often amounts to establishing critical distance and a degree of wiggle room in relation to one’s own taken-for-granted dispositions. Only under rare circumstances does it amount to the potential to reframe fields or redirect individual or institutional trajectories. Bourdieu usefully reminds us that such redirection is in fact very hard to do, and it is always done in relation to accumulations of capital in particular fields. Yet while such constraints are real and powerful, he gives us relatively few tools for understanding field emergence and transformation, which arguably hinges on the intersection and overlay of multiple fields (Clemens and Cook, 1999; Mische, 2008). Such changes are not just about transposition of schemas, but also about creative recombination, in both accidental and purposeful ways, as institutional and historical analysts such as Paul DiMaggio, Woody Powell, Elisabeth Clemens, David Stark, John Padgett, and others have shown us.

Moreover, I also wonder whether Bourdieu’s deep grounding in Saussurian semiotics (in contrast to the dialogic, action-oriented, or narrative semiotics of Bakhtin, Peirce, or Ricouer) has limited his insight into the diverse ways we imaginatively project the future. A synchronic focus on binary oppositions takes us only so far in understanding the ways we spin stories and scenarios about the future, which necessarily requires a diachronic understanding of how we construct time forward and backward through narrative. Such narratives employ existing genres and templates, at the same time as they grapple with problems, uncertainties, and risk. Recent work by Robin Wagner-Pacifici (2000), Karen Cerulo (2006), and David Gibson (2012) highlights the institutional and interactional contexts of future-oriented deliberation and decision making, particularly in relation to moments of crisis. While these researchers (along with many cognitive psychologists and behavioral economists) note that we often get the future wrong, still our narrative construction of the future affects the practical actions we take in anticipation and preparation, to good or ill effect.

Such anticipations, Bourdieu rightly reminds us, are heavily influenced by our access to cultural and material resources, which constrain our capacity to imagine alternative possibilities. Yet Bourdieu’s focus on classificatory schemas may not provide the narrative flexibility necessary to understand how, as Dewey and Schutz argue, our experimental engagement with the future affects our reflections, deliberations, and choices. At best, such schemas are only part of the story. I would argue that a productive dialogue between cognitive sociology and Bourdieusian theory is possible (and coming); however, to build on Lamont’s point, I would like to see it engage more fully with both the phenomenological and pragmatist strands of Bourdieu’s work, perhaps taking them further than he himself was willing to go.

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