

Why Bourdieu? Five responses to Toril Moi's question

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Abstract. This paper presents five responses to Toril Moi's question of why study Pierre Bourdieu, dividing them into responses which suppose that Bourdieu's originality is negligible and responses which do not.

The French theorist of society Pierre Bourdieu is an influential figure in English sociology departments, especially his treatments of education and inequality. From the 1980s onwards, article after article has appeared on Bourdieu, as well as a sizeable secondary literature of books. But the feminist theorist Toril Moi raises the question of why anyone would study Bourdieu at all:

Bourdieu's general theories of the reproduction of cultural and social power are not per se radically new and original. Many of his most cherished themes have also been studied by others. To some, his general theory of power may seem less original than that of a Marx or a Foucault... (1991: 1019)

I cannot say for sure why Bourdieu is compulsory reading in sociology departments, but I think it is an interesting question. I shall offer some speculative explanations, which I believe are of value for this as a philosophy of science topic. These explanations concern "intellectual" reasons for studying Bourdieu, rather than, for example, because although he has little new to say, he makes "us" feel safe. We can divide these speculations into two kinds: ones that grant that Bourdieu's originality in terms of new ideas is negligible¹ and ones which do not grant this.

¹ The division is slightly artificial. The first explanation I have placed under the heading of "negligible

Negligible originality. *1. A synthesis of commonplaces.* There are sayings which convey obstacles to success within a field, such as, “It’s who you know, not what you know” and “Dress the part.” These two example sayings are different. The former emphasizes social network as the key, whereas the latter emphasizes clothing style and suggests the importance of other stylistic factors, such as conversational style and writing style. (The latter saying is probably out of fashion in wider circles – “Dress the part: don’t use this saying!”) According to this synthesis explanation, Bourdieu’s contribution is to bring together these common sayings, rather than having them all separate and even at war with each other. He does this by identifying different kinds of capital and their significance in different fields. It is natural for us to think of capital as economic capital (financial resources and property: money or what can be quickly converted into money); Bourdieu also adds the terms “social capital” (whom one knows, one’s network of connections) and “cultural capital” (stylistic know-how, such as to do with dress, conversation, writing) and symbolic capital (official symbols of status, such as being a football captain, or having a diploma from a high ranking university).²

2. Better formulations. Bourdieu gives a better formulation of certain views. For example, imagine an artist who wants to sell their paintings. You might express the opinion that they need to know how to interact with other artists and with people who organize exhibitions. You say, “If they adopt a certain style of interaction, then they can become successful; otherwise not – it is not just about how good their

originality” is not so negligible. Bourdieu has a good idea for integrating certain proverbial explanations into a single framework, even if one suspects abuse of the word “capital.”

² These are very preliminary introductions to the terms. I have borrowed from a recent article by philosopher Lucy McDonald, but she (strangely) omits symbolic capital, which strikes me as too large an omission. I sometimes wonder whether some relations would improve if I had a different status, while my network of people and my style of interaction and wealth all remained the same. I doubt it – there are itches which some people would struggle not to scratch – but Bourdieu is helpful for framing the question. I should say that I benefitted from a presentation of his ideas in class, by a French student.

paintings are.” A certain style: is that strictly true? It seems that there are quite a lot of accepted styles in this field, even if some styles are out of range. Bourdieu’s value, according to this explanation, is that, by means of his strained language, he captures some common intuitions more precisely.

3. *That’s the point!* This third explanation says that there is nothing original in Bourdieu in terms of content (others have said all these things), but there is in terms of style – some memorable jargon, for example – and that is the point. For Bourdieu, the person who really knows how to “navigate” their way in a field does not need to make amazing new contributions³ in order to become successful. They know how that field works – perhaps their parents and grandparents worked within it – so they know how to achieve success without having to do miracles, metaphorically speaking.⁴ By adding pieces of jargon where others would not, Bourdieu achieves success. His way of achieving success coheres with his overall theory of inequality, which says that amazing moves are not necessary, given appropriate dispositions, and places a large emphasis on stylistic know-how.

Non-negligible originality. The explanations below, which credit Bourdieu with more than negligible originality, are not exhaustive. I shall overlook the contribution Moi focuses on and also an official explanation (Wacquant 1998: 346-347).

4. *Problem-solving.* Bourdieu emphasizes how having certain behavioural dispositions which are not transparently important for a field makes a decisive difference, such as styles of interaction and writing. And he emphasizes how, in

³ There is an assumption here that coming up with some memorable jargon is not an amazing feat, which I shall not contest. Usually I think it would be ranked below devising a new valuable concept.

⁴ A friend of mine once told me, regarding a certain comedian on television, “This man needs an excellent joke each time,” and he took that as evidence of lack of experience in that field. The comedian was using a very forceful method: “This is so good, you have to acknowledge it.” I am not sure what to say about my friend’s perspective, because I often like a good consistency level.

various professions, it is easier to acquire suitable dispositions if one comes from certain social classes. For example, a person from a working class background with an ability to contribute to an academic humanities field is more likely to struggle with achieving these stylistic qualities, and to come across as excessively blunt, rude, and angry.⁵ But there is an obvious worry about this way of theorizing inequality, especially given that Bourdieu is French. Taking our painter example from earlier, what does one make of the so-called naïve painter who becomes successful and is embraced by the art world, for example Henri Rousseau? One way of explaining why Bourdieu is studied is that he actually deals with this kind of problem for his theory, whereas someone else of a similar outlook does not (2001: 1811). He engages in some problem-solving for that person. If he did not, he would largely be ignored. There is an important difference between a familiar approach which does not address problems and one which does.⁶

5. *Inequality beyond rules.* Bourdieu emerged as a theoretician in the 1960s within an environment in which analyses of rule systems dominated. Now it is plausible that rules play an important part in explaining inequality. “Why are there so few people from historically discriminated group X in that field? They do not grasp various unwritten rules, such as what would be a faux pas there.” But if that is the explanation, it seems one can just identify these unwritten rules and some talented ambitious determined people will follow them, such as don’t put your elbows on the table while eating. What Bourdieu emphasizes is styles of communicating and interacting which cannot be specified in terms of rules (manifesting such a style is either not a matter of rule-following or not a matter of following articulable rules –

⁵ I cannot endorse this generalization at present, because I lived on a council estate in Manchester and observed a variety of temperaments, and also one encounters some faux working class types.

⁶ I am not exactly sure how Bourdieu deals with the problem of the naïve painter, although I have read him respond to it (2001: 1811). My guess is that within the French intellectual system, he scraped a pass on this, and that helped him become a larger figure.

Bourdieu seems to prefer the former option⁷). Before a seminar, a postgraduate student and a professor interact. Here is a helpful description of what is going on in a pleasant interaction:

Bourdieu's basic perception is that social agents do not behave like puppets on strings, as they tend to in conventional structural models, nor yet are they free spirits. They are, he says, more like jazz musicians, who enter a session equipped with a body of practical techniques for playing their instruments and an agreed format for collectively improvising on a theme, but who produce music which cannot be anticipated in advance, even by themselves... (Gell 1992: 272)

If an historically discriminated group “produces” talented determined ambitious students but is faced with persistent inequality, then this explanation looks more promising than ones which focus on systems of rules that can be stated. (I am not yet convinced by Bourdieu's style-focused explanation, but it is understandable to turn to it when faced with persistent inequality.)

By the way, the focus on things somewhat like rules but which cannot be verbally specified⁸ is perhaps of value for a theoretical project of Bourdieu's: achieving a non-reductive sociology. What is that? At the very least, it involves not representing a society, or social system, as merely self-interested individuals consciously calculating what is best for achieving their ends – it involves avoiding this kind of “methodological individualism.” If one focuses on specifiable rules, this is helpful for reduction because one can represent an individual as calculating not to

⁷ My presentation is on the crude side. There may be some rules which are necessary but not sufficient for realizing the style and which are consciously followed (see Bouveresse 1999: 49).

⁸ The notion of being verbally specifiable can be subject to more fine-grained analyses. So is one allowed demonstratives or not? “You do it like that!” I am influenced here by the Gareth Evans-John McDowell debate on colour shades (see McDowell 1994).

break a certain rule, owing to the cost for their ambitions. Bourdieu's shift away from specifiable rules is perhaps of interest to sociologists for at least two reasons then: as a way of better explaining persistent inequality and also as part of an attempt to achieve a non-reductive sociology.

Appendix

In the explanation labelled "4," I characterized Bourdieu as having the same outlook as some others, or roughly the same, but addressing some problems for that outlook. I wonder whether members of the intelligentsia of certain countries merely provide skillful formulations of someone else's way of thinking and whether that is even their job. In sociology and political philosophy and economics, etc., there is a demand that is thereby met: "We would like a contemporary formulation of so-and-so's point of view." The formulator does not actually believe that view. In Britain one does not tend to do this job by system-building, but in France and Germany one does: "This is actually my wife's point of view formulated as a system," with wife possibly used metaphorically (albeit still very "sexistly") – a male could be cast in the wife role or a large body of the population.⁹ The continental master,¹⁰ often characterized as undemocratic, is sometimes actually a servant.

By the way, in some cases one might do this by means of action. I shall offer what I hope is a fictional illustration. "Why should we not invade that country? It looks invadeable. Of course I don't think it's a good idea, but my wife does and it's just easier to invade than explain." Liberal democracy requires a greater than average

⁹ I am not against the practice. Systems of respectability, which scare some people into not asking certain questions or voicing certain opinions, may also be pushing them to higher levels in research; but with them often comes a need for someone else to risk looking a fool and utter what is not said.

¹⁰ They often strike me as around the level of C.D. Broad, who gives some of his energies to addressing the kind of questions I have in mind. The systems have greater emotional impact on some audiences; I am not convinced makers of systems are always better philosophers.

will to explain, I think.

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