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Bourdieu, 'Habitus', and Educational Research: is it all worth the candle?

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ABSTRACT *A recent critique of educational research published by the Office of Standards in Education has declared, largely on the basis of research reported in this journal, that Bourdieu—and particularly the concept of habitus—appears to have little to offer educational research. This proposition is considered in a critical evaluation of the origin of habitus in Bourdieu's work and its ability to fulfil its theoretical functions. It is concluded that there is no serious alternative but for those whose task it is to provide scientific accounts of social processes to engage with the concepts of disciplined thought—including that of Bourdieu.*

Introduction

Tooley & Darby (1998) are not the first, and will probably not be the last, to have reached the conclusion that Bourdieu's approach to sociology—and particularly the concept of habitus—has little to offer educational research. They may well be the first to have declared this view in the context of an 'executive summary', writing off not only Bourdieu, but Foucault and Lyotard into the bargain; but that is another matter. In fact, as Tooley and Darby acknowledge, they are not so much concerned with Bourdieu as with the value of his concepts for educational research, and their critique is directed specifically at Reay's (1995) work on habitus in the classroom, which is treated as a representative case of studies marred by the uncritical adulation of some 'great thinker'. I am prepared to take as read the institutional and political context of Tooley and Darby's critique, which in any case is better addressed by someone actually engaged in educational research in the British system, and will deal only with their dismissal of the concept of habitus based on a reading of Reay's article. There will be no need to provide a summary account of Reay's work, difficult to do in any event, and it is reasonable to assume that readers of this journal, and more particularly of this article, will be familiar with it. Nor is it my purpose to defend Reay's specific arguments, but only to criticise Tooley and Darby's view that the substantive weaknesses they identify, some of which may be objectively present, are due to an 'uncritical adulation' of Bourdieu and, more generally, to demonstrate the worthlessness of their approach as a means to reach their

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substantive conclusion. On the basis of Reay's account of habitus, which could not have been extensive in the context of her empirical work and which, as they note, frankly acknowledges ambiguities in the concept, Tooley and Darby include her study as an instance of the poor-quality educational research they believe to be caused by the willingness of many academics to attach themselves to the coat-tails of some major theorist. That charge is unsubstantiated and, in so far as it is taken to support the conclusion that social theorists like Bourdieu have little to offer educational research, cannot be substantiated on such grounds. Tooley and Darby are particularly scathing of Reay's discovery of habitus as a method. She was actually engaged in ethnographic research (in primary school classrooms), something many of us had done long before we had ever heard of the concept of habitus, and in the ordinary sense of the word, that is the method she used. It is odd to propose habitus as a method, to say the least, and the statement requires some interpretation. Tooley and Darby have not the slightest interest in working through what Reay might possibly mean, and as it is obvious—and not only to these authors—that neither the field observations she reports nor the commentary she provides rest in any necessary sense on the concept of habitus, her critics are content to leave it at that. Nevertheless, there are issues here that sociologists of education might be disposed to take more seriously, for our concepts and research ought to be robust enough to withstand even unfriendly criticism, and this is, after all, a somewhat exploratory conception of habitus.

In the context, then, of observational practice from the very site of educational transmission, the classroom, Reay offers a summary theoretical review of the principal areas of reference covered by Bourdieu's concept. Habitus is recognised as an embodiment of structure, a conception that enables Bourdieu to transcend the dichotomy of objectivism and subjectivism, in that it provides people with a sense of the 'feel for the game'. Habitus also provides the grounds for agency, within a limited arena of choice, and thus a theoretical escape from structuralist determinism. Habitus, moreover, enables individual trajectories to be studied, for habitus has a history and discloses the traces of its origins in practice. In this wide conception, habitus thus unites the past and the present for, while being the product of early experience, it is subject to the transformations brought about by subsequent experiences. And with all this, habitus, Reay argues, is also a method. It is not surprising that those who prefer their concepts to refer to one adequately-defined feature of the world—a well-grounded preference—should find such a broad and 'indeterminate' concept difficult to accept. Bourdieu's intellectual style has some dubious characteristics, among them his well-known dislike of definitions, which makes a critical approach to his work all the more necessary if anything worthwhile is to be gained. These claims for habitus should be examined and the discussion that follows will be concerned to do that. The excursion will take us deep into the intellectual history of the concept before returning, it is hoped with the benefits that intelligent travel should bring, to the substantive issues at stake for the way we do educational research.

Does Habitus Mediate Between Structure and Agency?

One of the declared functions of habitus is to mediate between structure and agency. 'Structure' is one of the many concepts Bourdieu is reluctant to define, and anyone who attempts to discover consistency in his usage will be disappointed, but at the most fundamental level, Bourdieu's concept of structure reveals its heritage. Bourdieu is no more a structuralist than he is a marxist: but he is just as much a structuralist as a marxist. Structuralism attempted to analyse the cultural productions of societies, their

kinship relations, mythological beliefs, culinary practices, and so on, by identifying the forms that lay behind their generation. One could model cultures as a complex, but ordered, set of principles that work like a code to express the central meanings of the community and to regulate its most important social practices. Lévi-Strauss (1978) and those who adopted his approach to social behaviour sought to reveal the homologies between different social and linguistic features, which could be taken as evidence of a code or grammar, regulating the whole order of life within that society. Lévi-Strauss thought this form of analysis could explain marital selection, governed by rules not necessarily available to those most intimately concerned, but was quite unable to suggest a mechanism by which specific social rules, as opposed to a general and universal structure of the unconscious, could be treated as built-in to the individual. This is exactly what the concept of habitus is intended to provide. Habitus is conceived as a generative schema in which the forms of elemental social structures come, through the process of socialisation, to be embodied in individuals, with the result that people necessarily act in such a way that the underlying structures are reproduced and given effect.

Bourdieu's habitus may be understood as a system of schemes of perception and discrimination embodied as dispositions reflecting the entire history of the group and acquired through the formative experiences of childhood. The structural code of the culture is inscribed as the habitus and generates the production of social practice. Social practice may then be analysed to reveal the nature of the habitus through the relations of homology observed between the various elements that constitute the unity of the culture. This is a faculty theory of socialisation within a structuralist theory of culture. The fundamental theoretical role of habitus is to provide the mediation Lévi-Strauss so transparently failed to provide between structure and agency, and to this end, Bourdieu has de-universalised, and culturally particularised, these active embodied forms. In this respect, Bourdieu may be regarded as a sociological Kantian. Whereas Lévi-Strauss left obscure the question of the causal effectiveness of cultural structures, Bourdieu with the concept of habitus has provided a generative mechanism of structured social practice. His breakthrough, if such it is, has been to name the culturally structured and embodied forms of classification, perception and discrimination, and to give the faculty so named a central role in the explanation of social practice.

There have been many reactions to this theory. Jenkins (1992) sees in it a tight, structuralist, determinism: objective social structures generate a habitus so structured; this habitus generates practices which necessarily reflect that objective social structure; and so the objective social structure at the beginning of this circle is reproduced. Bourdieu & Wacquant (1992) do not accept this characterisation, least of all from Jenkins, to the extent that Bourdieu frequently denies that the linkages are as firm as this model depicts, but he does not attempt to formulate rules that can be used to decide in what circumstances they may be strengthened or weakened. Jenkins, in any event, accepts that the concept of habitus with a mediating function between structure and agency is coherent within the terms of Bourdieu's theory. LiPuma (1993, p. 24) will not concede even that much:

Although habitus appears at first glance to be a bridge between the social and the psychological, the system and the agents, it cannot make the connection because the relationship of individual agency to social classification is not developed.

LiPuma argues that Bourdieu provides no account of why the internalisation of the habitus is relative, in the sense that it is apparent to everyone that not all of those brought up in the same class or family adopt the same practices and, moreover, that he

presupposes, but does not offer, a theory of the interrelationship between culture and capital, which is to say that those with the same financial resources do not necessarily behave in the same way, and the theory does not explain why. In other words, the relationship between individual agency to social classification is not developed, but simply assumed.

Do these objections have substance? According to Bourdieu, practices are generated by a certain habitus (this is a matter of definition) and, therefore, all practices give evidence of the structures of the habitus that generate them, and it follows that the methodological problem for a researcher working with the concept of habitus is to analyse social practices in such a way that the principles of the generative habitus are disclosed. This must be what Reay means when she writes of using habitus as a method. What we really want is a method by which such principles, as cultural categories of thought, might be recognised and expressed in an appropriate concept, but that, of course, as the problem of concept formation and the understanding of action, brings us right to the heart of one the most significant debates in sociological theory.

LiPuma, whose criticism is still under consideration, suggests that individual agency and 'social classification', i.e. class position, is not developed in Bourdieu's theory. Now, Bourdieu actually has two theories of reproduction through habitus: there is what might be called the *specific habitus* model, used in studies of actual class practices, and there is the *general habitus* model, used to support the so-called statistical mode of reproduction argument. In the first model, as practices are generated by a specific habitus, there must be, if the trajectories of people within a class are in some respect not the same, more than one identifiable habitus within a class. If 5% of working-class children succeed in the educational system, then a habitus which makes that possible will be present in working-class culture. This is actually the position most consistent with the overall theory—and that most useful to ethnographic researchers. In the second model, Bourdieu constructs a 'statistical mode' of class reproduction in which, by some profoundly inexplicable mechanism, those brought up within the class are supposed to have internalised a habitus with the objective chances of that class built in to it. This is the *homme moyen* concept of class habitus and it provides Bourdieu with a pseudo-statistical argument for the reproduction of a class as a whole, with no reference to what happens to particular individuals, which is then regarded as just a matter of chance. In other words, in this model, all working-class school students share a generalised class habitus giving them a one in 20 chance of reaching university, or whatever it might be, and there can be no explanation of why this rather than that individual is included among the successful (or for that matter among the non-successful) or why that is so, because the explanation is of group access not individual access. This argument is ill-conceived, but its statistical form was not invented by Bourdieu, and he finds it too tempting to resist. It is probably this position that LiPuma objects to—and with good reason.

What could be done to develop the connection between agency and social classification? This must surely be a matter of investigating the specific habitus of the groups in whose practice one has an interest—'habitus as a method', perhaps. The difficulty here is just a general one: ethnography is a skill rather more akin to a literary technique than to many other areas of scientific enquiry. Just about anyone can compile a table of responses to a questionnaire and provide a descriptive commentary on it, but one really cannot say the same about the distribution of the skills necessary to generate the detailed narratives of ethnographic research. Bourdieu, given 'great thinker' status by Tooley and Darby, is not primarily interested in theory, he says as much himself, and it is actually his substantive work, for example, in *Distinction* (Bourdieu, 1986) and in *La*

Misère du Monde (Bourdieu, 1993a), that forces one to recognise his real status—one that makes Tooley and Darby's inverted commas an embarrassment. At the same time, if his presentation of the theory is riddled with contradictions, ellipses, and evasions, as it is, there is nothing to be gained, and much to be lost, by defending the indefensible: borrowing this Emperor's clothes can leave one looking very naked (Grenfell & James, 1998).

Habitus and Habits: an historical review

What can be made of the idea that habitus provides a 'middle ground', a form of 'soft determinism', in which the oppositions of objectivism and subjectivism are transcended? What is it worth to say that people have a 'feel for the game' and are able to make choices within the limits of what is made possible by the habitus? What is offered by 'habitus' that is not already provided by the ordinary concept of 'habit'? Tooley and Darby, making the most of their role, put this question in the context of Reay's paper, but addressed to everyone who has worked with the concept. To trace in this paper the history of 'habit' in sociological theory, through Pierce (1950) James (1976), Dewey (1983), Mead (1934), Garfinkel (1967) and Berger & Luckmann (1966), a tradition linked to European phenomenology via Schutz (1972), although fascinating in itself, would be too great a task (Carmic, 1986). What theories of habit lack when contrasted with 'habitus' theories—or with Bernstein's (1995) theory of 'codes' (notwithstanding Harker & May (1993), who attempt to make differences out of distinctions)—is the recognition that sociological explanations of events and processes require a concept of culture that allows the 'principle that regulates the act' to be abstracted as the generative mechanism of practice. The meaning of this remark, if it seems obscure, will soon become apparent. It is convenient to begin with Bourdieu's (1993b, p. 86) own response to the question:

Why did I revive that old word? Because with the notion of *habitus* you can refer to something that is close to what is suggested by the idea of habit, while differing from it in one important respect. The *habitus*, as the word implies, is that which one has acquired, but which has become durably incorporated in the body in the form of permanent dispositions. So the term constantly reminds us that it refers to something historical, linked to individual history, and that it belongs to a genetic mode of thought, as opposed to essentialist modes of thought (like the notion of competence which is part of the Chomskian lexis). Moreover, by *habitus* the Scholastics also meant something like a property, a *capital*. And, indeed, the *habitus* is a capital, but one which, because it is embodied, appears innate.

This is as lucid an account as anyone could expect. One might well think that habits are also 'durably incorporated'—the string of works referenced earlier will stand as evidence of that—but their character in this respect is not necessarily a formal element of the definition of habit, and Bourdieu's technical term is a constant reminder that we *are* to think in this way. Habits have a history, too, in that they are acquired, but for Bourdieu, 'history' refers to the specific practices of social groups, particularly classes, and thus points to the need for historically informed ethnographic studies in order to look for these origins. In this respect, moreover, our dispositions to act have an individual, as well as a social, line of development; they are genetic, in the Piagetian sense, rather than built-in, and given, like Chomsky's innate generative grammar. Finally, Bourdieu points to the way in which the medieval Church fathers constructed habitus as a property, something

people *possessed*, and this is very much how the concept operates in his own theory. It is here that the central distinction between the concepts of 'habit' and 'habitus' in sociological theory is to be found: habitus is necessarily linked to the idea that every act, or every cultural act, is regulated by a distinct principle (and in Bourdieu's thought, principles of practice always retain their structuralist connotations), whereas habit is not.

As Bourdieu has brought the matter into the open, it may not be irrelevant to examine this old history of habitus. There are sociologists who have not made a close study of ancient and medieval philosophy. The word derives from *habere*, to have, which was the Latin translation given to the Greek *hexis*. What people had, in the context of this discourse, was a disposition to act; hence in the *Metaphysics*, *Book Delta* (Hope, 1960, p. 113): 'A "habitude", or "state of being" means (i) an active habit or "having", a kind of action or motion on the part of a "haver" to what is "had", for, between a doer and his deed there is the doing'. A habit, according to Aristotle, is produced by similar acts and inclines to similar acts. Fundamentally, the argument is that we possess the potentiality or capacity to act in species appropriate ways by virtue of being in a state or possessing a disposition by virtue of which we are enabled to act in such ways. Aristotle (Ackrill, 1973) argued that we become strong or brave, for example, by doing the things that make us strong or brave and, having gained, as a result of our willed actions, such a state or disposition, we are then more readily able to act with strength or courage. It follows that one who has performed a brave act must have acquired the necessary disposition to act in that way. Aristotle was actually not interested in causal accounts of this sort, he was rather concerned with the development of character and its relationship to moral behaviour. He did not argue, emptily, that the acts of a brave individual were caused by the disposition to be brave, but that acts of bravery were chosen, and could only be chosen, by one able to act in such a way. And to be able to act in such a way is to be in the necessary state, or to possess the necessary disposition, so to act. When Aristotle refers to bodies of knowledge, to science, for example, as habits, his argument is exactly similar. One who has trained as a scientist possesses the necessary disposition to act in a scientific way. It is crucial, however, that the purpose of Aristotle's account is not misunderstood. Any attempt to explain the practices of the scientific community, for example, by the structures of the scientific disposition would be misguided. Moreover, were such dispositional 'explanations' to be contrasted with chosen (or willed) actions, the error would only be compounded: Aristotle does not oppose habitual actions to willed actions.

Medieval theories of habit are recognisable developments of Aristotle's philosophical groundwork and have had little direct influence on social theory. Ockham, for example, treats acquired habits as the efficient cause of acts. Although habits are not identical with bodily dispositions, which Ockham regards as physical qualities preceding any act, he maintains that all habits are conserved in the soul through the requisite dispositions of the body and are the source of most kinds of knowledge including concept formation. Habits are laid down by past acts of knowing and incline the intellect to further acts of knowing. Ockham readily accepts (Leff, 1975, p. 492) that '(t)he only evident reason for the existence of habits is through experience of their acts': no one sees faith or charity as such, for example, but from the belief or love they elicit, one may infer the presence in the soul of those states or habits. Aquinas' theory of habit has the same general form. Every habit is a disposition, and Aquinas (Pegis, 1945, p. 372) thus understands habit as 'that whereby we act when we will'. The concept became very broad: Aquinas thought of qualities like heat and cold, and also of perfected sciences and virtues, as habits, states, or dispositions in this sense. And, between such dispositions or states and one who

possesses them, there is a relationship, a *having* as Aristotle said, and in this respect, Aquinas argues that habit should be recognised as a principle of operation. Habit is a 'disposition in a subject which is potentially either to form or to operation' (*ibid.*, p. 325), and in this sense, our actions proceed from habits. Science, for example, which Aristotle understands as the habit of conclusions reached by reason, is created by acts of reason and one who has mastered the principles of this science may, through willed action, carry out the work of a scientist.

Despite their archaism—and Thomism is, of course, the official philosophy of the Catholic church—it is still useful to be aware of these complex theories of habit. They are not theories of cultural determinism: their construction allows no suggestion that habits of thought present any obstacle to human freedom of action. This should go without saying in the case of Aquinas, for free will is an essential component of Christian theology, and Ockham (Leff, 1975, p. 353) was also clear that 'the efficient cause of practice in the strictest sense is always a choice made by the will'. The medieval philosophers were more concerned with the psychology than with the sociology of action and, of course, made no links to a formal method of cultural study. But the connection with Bourdieu's concept of habitus lies in the way these philosophers tied together the universal categories of things and the active mental faculties by which things were apprehended. The intellectual link is very close. There is a direct line of descent, too, because Panofsky (1957), in a study that strongly influenced the development of Bourdieu's thought (he actually translated it into French), drew attention to the Scholastic concept in a discussion of the habitus as the product of a specific form of education.

Panofsky sought to explain the parallels he observed between the architectural form of the Gothic cathedrals and the systematic form of medieval philosophical argument. It seemed that a single but elaborate principle of *clarification* informed the Scholastic's approach to philosophical argument and that this principle became a mental habit so pervasive and powerful that its character was visibly impressed on the design of the new ecclesiastical architecture. Panofsky writes, quoting a line from Aquinas:

In contrast to a mere parallelism, the connection which I have in mind is a genuine cause-and-effect relation; but in contrast to an individual influence, this cause-and-effect relation comes about by diffusion rather than by the spreading of what may be called for want of a better term, a mental habit—reducing this overworked cliché to its precise Scholastic sense as a 'principle that regulates the act', *principium importans ordinem ad actum*. Such mental habits are at work in all and every civilisation. (*ibid.*, pp. 20–21).

Bourdieu discusses Panofsky's account of how the fundamental principle of Scholastic thought was disseminated by the educational function of the Church and comments:

As a 'habit-forming' force the school provides those who have undergone its direct or indirect influence not so much with particular and particularised schemes of thought as with that general disposition which engenders particular schemes, which may then be applied in different domains of thought and action, a disposition that one could call the cultivated habitus. (1971, p. 184)

Panofsky himself does not translate 'mental habit' as habitus; indeed, perhaps for good reason, he never uses the word, and in choosing to do so Bourdieu invites a direct comparison between his concept and that developed by the medieval philosophers. Such a comparison quickly reveals that Bourdieu has borrowed the term to name his own sociological concept given a similar function. Panofsky accounts for the homologous

relationship between Scholasticism and Gothic architecture in terms of a complex principle which he elaborates in considerable detail. As Bourdieu notes, Panofsky does not appeal to vague notions such as ‘the spirit of the age’ which explain nothing, but investigates specific instances of the fundamental principle of clarification in the form of Scholastic argument and the form of the medieval cathedrals. The parallelism is caused by a carefully specified ‘mental habit’ or ‘principle that regulates the act’.

When Bourdieu first discusses the ‘cultivated’ habitus of the contemporary French school system, he elaborates the principles as a ‘fondness for abstraction’, a ‘cult of brilliance’, ‘verbal prowess’, ‘literary-mindedness’ and such like, but increasingly habitus gains a presence in his text in which it floats free of the elaborated principles it refers to. As soon as Bourdieu began to speak of ‘the habitus’, he left Panofsky and Aquinas behind. When the editors of an introduction to Bourdieu (Harker *et al.*, 1990, p. 10) assert that ‘one’s place and one’s habitus form the basis of friendship, love and other personal relationships’, they employ the term ‘habitus’ in a sense Aquinas would not have recognised. Panofsky was interested in the character of the principle of habits, but Bourdieu found, in the concept of the principle that regulates the act—habitus—a device with remarkable theoretical properties. Of course, Bourdieu’s concern with the principles of classification is all the more understandable because the concept is cognate with the schemes of social regulation that structuralists dedicated themselves to revealing as the cultural codes that determined social practice.

Collective Conscience and Categorisation

Tooley and Darby generously exclude Durkheim, thanks to the scholarship of Davies (1994), from their shortlist of French thinkers who seem, on the evidence they review, to have little to contribute to the educational enterprise. And yet, many of Durkheim’s concepts, the ‘collective consciousness’, for example, are no less problematic than any of Bourdieu’s. One would be hard put, indeed, to relate that notion to classroom practice—at least in the restricted sense Tooley and Darby give to practice at any site. What is more—in this context it must count as an irony of sorts—in *The Rules of Sociological Method*, Durkheim (1964) reached a position very close to the concept of habitus:

The collective habit exists not only in the immanent state in the successive acts which they determine, but, by a privilege of which we find no example in the biological realm, they are permanently expressed for all in a formula which is repeated from mouth to mouth, which is transmitted by education, and is fixed even in writing. Such is the origin and nature of legal and moral rules, aphorisms and popular sayings, articles of truth in which religious or political sects considered their beliefs, codes of taste erected by literary schools etc.

This is quoted by Gane (1992, p. 69) in a review of the area well worth reading. What has Bourdieu done but embody this collective habit in the individual? A move, in fact, that had already been hinted at by Mauss and actually achieved by Merleau-Ponty.

Durkheim & Mauss (1963), setting themselves to apprehend modes of classification within traditional societies, argued that the relations of homology, sometimes to be observed between systems of classification, reflect the fact that the cultural classification of things is modelled on the classification system developed by a society to structure the order of its social life. Natural systems of classification are thus structured by the social order and, consequently, a distinctive underlying pattern to the forms of thought

prevalent within a society is produced. These principles of classification structure the various different elements of cultural practice including social mythology. Because society is constructed as a unity, and imposes that unity of form on things, it is appropriate, Durkheim and Mauss conclude, for sociology to treat society as a unified entity and to seek to analyse the underlying regulative principles of the 'conscience collective'. The theoretical relationship between the regulative structure of forms of classification and human agency is left obscure in Durkheim and Mauss, and has been the subject of much discussion. Needham, in his introduction to this collection (Durkheim & Mauss, 1963), concludes that their argument identifies the system of collective representations with the faculty of mind, or system of cognitive capacities, which generate social practice. In any case, the significance of this tradition of thought on Bourdieu cannot be ignored by anyone genuinely interested in understanding the concept of habitus.

It is in Mauss (1979) that we find an immediate precursor of Bourdieu's concept of habitus. Mauss probably took the concept of habitus, or rather the term, directly from Aristotelian scholarship, but he was strongly influenced by post-Darwinian biology (his social morphology was constructed on the then prevalent distinction between morphology, the material structure of an organism, and physiology, the nature of its functioning), and was certainly aware of its biological usage to describe the typical form realised by an organism in its environment. But if Mauss seems to have been responsible for reintroducing the Latin word *habitus*, with its Aristotelian connotations, into French social theory, his comments are relatively brief, and the concept has no central place in his substantive studies. Mauss was struck by the power of socialisation, including formal education, to impose social forms not only on thought, but on the physical behaviour of the body. Even digging, he observed, was a learned bodily technique so culturally specific that when French and English troops were exchanged at the front during World War I, their spades had to be changed with them. The troops could not use each other's foreign implements efficiently. In this way, Mauss gave a specific social dimension to what he called *bodily habitus*. He wanted to emphasise by this usage how habits were acquired through socialisation, not merely by a psychological faculty for imitation, but often, and more interestingly for social theory, through deliberate social training. But as he introduced habitus for this purpose, Mauss, who was familiar with Aristotle and the Scholastics, was careful to insist—a warning ignored by Bourdieu—that it should not be taken to designate the objective faculty habit had become in medieval philosophy. His concern was not to resurrect a faculty theory of socialisation, which he thought inappropriate, but to focus on the way bodily habits are powerfully formed by education and training, and so vary between societies.

Merleau-Ponty, engaged like Schutz in working through the implications for social theory of Husserl's phenomenology, should be credited with insisting on the 'embodiment of forms of classification' as habits. For Husserl, the pre-objective, pre-reflective habits of the body and mind are taken as constituting the self, and it is from the self and its constructions that phenomenology begins its analysis. Following traditional usage, Husserl (1960) employs 'habitus' to refer to a meaning constituted in lived experience and retained by the organism: such meanings he calls 'possessions in the form of a habitus', and they are to be understood as states of being which make action possible. Husserl argues that our habitual attitude to the world, the attitude of the concrete individual subject, is limited (although it is precisely this life-world experience which is the object of phenomenological analysis), and that beyond this must be recognised a personality of a higher order, a social unity corresponding to the world of culture. As a phenomenologist, and existentialist of sorts, Merleau-Ponty was no structuralist, but as

a friend of Lévi-Strauss and as an intellectual living with structuralism, he could scarcely avoid giving the ideas some attention. In a central discussion of these issues, he concedes that:

There thus appears at the base of social systems a formal structure (one is tempted to say an unconscious thought), an anticipation of the human mind, as if our science were already completed in events, and the human order of culture a second order of nature dominated by other invariants. (Merleau-Ponty, 1974, pp. 115–116)

Speaking of the cultural system, the systems of knowledge, art, myth, ritual, and so on, Merleau-Ponty recognises the sense it makes to say of people that, '[r]ather than their having got it, it has, if we may put it this way, "got them"' (*ibid.*, p. 114). But, he remarks, even if such structures exist, it is not for them that men, society, and history exist. Moreover, against the indifference of structuralism, he insists that:

The surprising logical operations attested to by the formal structures of societies must certainly be effected by the populations which live these kinship systems. (*ibid.*, p. 116)

There must, he thinks, be a lived equivalent of the overarching cultural code or structure, 'we live in the unity of one single life all the systems our culture is composed of', he remarks (*ibid.*, p. 116). Students of culture must, therefore, seek to acquire not the abstract universal code of a strictly objective method, but a sort of lateral universal through an analysis based on ethnological experience of the culture of the other. It is necessary to test one's self through others and others through one's self, and thus to construct a general system of reference in which the points of view of nature and the civilised human being can find a place. Merleau-Ponty rejected historical or cultural determinism for it is, after all, a central doctrine of existentialist thought, which this branch of phenomenology produced, that humans are free to choose their actions. There may, it is true, be circumstances in which it stretches good sense to speak of choice. A weekly wage earner, a day labourer, or the tenant of a poor farm, whose situations and style of living makes the idea of choice hardly realistic. It is enough for such individuals, he says, that they are born into the world and experience their lives as full of difficulties and constraint. Nevertheless, the possibility of change, even revolutionary change involving class consciousness and collective action, may come about in and through their lives as their social space and social horizons are transformed through new experiences.

Conclusion

All this can be detected in Bourdieu's sociology. Indeed, it is in this context that Robbins (1991), one of the most informed and astute of all commentators in this area, has identified Bourdieu as a thoroughgoing phenomenologist'. The fundamental aim of Bourdieu's *culturalism* is to disclose the structure of principles from which agents' produce regulated practices, for that structure of principles determines the objective character of culture itself. The habitus is thus a system of durable dispositions inculcated by objective structural conditions, but since it is embodied, the habitus develops a history and generates its practices, for some period of time, even after the original material conditions which gave rise to it have disappeared. The internalised principles of the habitus are the principles which structure the culture. In this sense, habitus is internalised structure and the physical embodiment of objective structure. As with two sides of a coin, the habitus is organised by principles of the structure, in some way that could be represented as a

code, and practices are organised by these so structured principles of the habitus. We may thus say that, as a result of their socialisation, members of a social group come to acquire a set of dispositions which reflect the central structural elements (political instability, kinship rules, and so on) of their society, and therefore behave in ways which necessarily reproduce those structural elements, although in a modified form. One understands these ideas—whether they can be applied in the sense that Tooley and Darby seem to think Reay is trying to apply them is a nice question. In her own studies, Reay is struggling to *get at* these collective habits, which have their origin in class cultures, and attempting to express them in an appropriate concept. What principles of action can be detected in the practices of the children and teachers she observed in the classroom? An informed reader can, in fact, obtain a sense of what is happening at that level, and if the argument is not always convincing, one also has a sense of that. Being informed here means knowing something about what is involved in recognising the schemes of classification that lie behind all socially derived structures of action, for without that knowledge—which Tooley and Darby show no signs of possessing—it is impossible to understand what Reay is even attempting to do.

What does the sociology of education, considered as educational research, offer to teachers? It offers explanations. Our core concern must be with the causes of social differences in access to education. What is the contribution of family resources, of income, educational knowledge, and social connections? What have teachers' expectations and the differentiated practices they generate to do with success and failure at school? Is there anything in the theory of socio-linguistics and cognitive style? What of the correspondence theory between the system of economic production and the system of educational production? Do working-class children really get working-class jobs through the celebration of their own cultural values? These explanations have taken up most of our time—it has not been wasted time—as we have sought to understand how educational inequality is generated and social inequality is to that extent perpetuated. It seems to me that there is, among those who work in the educational system, in all countries where this work has been carried out, a deeper and truer appreciation than once existed, say 20 or 30 years ago, which is within my memory (Nash, 1973, 1999), of the several causes of social differences in educational attainment, and this is useful knowledge to all those dedicated to the struggle for equal access to education. This is educational research—Tooley and Darby do not argue otherwise (they have a category for it)—and doubtless it could be improved, but their implicit advice to researchers and those who fund their studies, to ignore theoretical developments in the discipline of sociology, is unlikely to bring about that improvement.

As for Bourdieu: is it all worth the candle? If it takes the best part of a decade to make sense of the core concepts of Bourdieu's theory only to find that one has no more ability to understand the world than one did before, then perhaps not. Yet the struggle to work with Bourdieu's concepts (and perhaps with Foucault's or even with Lyotard's), is worthwhile, just because to do so forces one to think. Without concepts—the tools of thought—we will not make much progress. No doubt we could send these concepts, 'habitus', 'cultural capital', 'symbolic violence', and the whole bagful, back where they came from, and we would be the poorer for it. In the end, although one rather enjoys the fun of seeing one or two people deemed worthy of a rebuke, it is a transitory amusement, and Tooley and Darby have nothing of substance to offer to the critique of educational research. That sort of 'critique' is all too easy. Perhaps their case is that it should not be—but there has to be a place for 'thinking aloud', and responding to such work in an unsympathetic and uninformed frame of mind is without point. The

conversation we have on these matters is a long one and if it moves ahead, two steps forward and one step backwards, then so be it. Reay can defend her own work, but there was a point I noted that Tooley and Darby missed, she says of one girl:

I heard her read at length every day that I went into school. Her reading age went up by leaps and bounds—over two years in the nine months I spent at Oak Park ... (Reay, 1995, p. 366)

That seems to have been a worthwhile thing to have done: the practical implications of the observation should be evident—and one might think especially so to organic intellectuals of the Office of Standards in Education.

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