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Book Review

Michael Burawoy and Karl Von Holdt (2012) *Conversations with Bourdieu – The Johannesburg Moment*, Johannesburg: University of the Witwatersrand Press. ISBN: 978-1-86814-540-9.

A Dialogue Deferred or a Dialogue Produced?

REVIEWED BY *Ari Sitas, University of Cape Town*

The book, like the lectures it was based on, has generated a lot of excitement and discussion. It involves a 'conversation' between Pierre Bourdieu's work and a range of vital social theorists (Karl Marx, Antonio Gramsci, Franz Fanon, Paolo Frere, Simone de Beauvoir, C. Wright Mills) orchestrated by Michael Burawoy. It involves a critical 'conversation' with Bourdieu the theorist as such and finally, a 'conversation' between the two authors on Bourdieuan themes.

The first conversations are masterfully done by Michael Burawoy, not only because Bourdieu paid little and only elliptical attention to other sociologists or critical thinkers, (p.13) 'largely silencing the giants upon whose shoulders he was perched' but because the clarity of exposition of the relationship between what Bourdieu says and what he imputes others to be saying is drawn into sharp relief. Such a dialogue allows the author to also draw out what is very useful and enduring for contemporary sociological dilemmas. These contrasts will be a pleasure in designing sociological curricula.

The second and more critical conversation between Burawoy's and Bourdieu's work is to be found in Chapter 8, 'Homo Ludens Vs Homo Habitus' where Burawoy's reflections started with the workplace studies that produced a text like *Manufacturing Consent* and continued in *The Politics of Production*. There the similarities between the two are clearly outlined but also the key differences (p.187) in their understanding of the conditions of shop-floor subjugation.

Burawoy notes how his important attempt to explicate worker compliance on the shop floor during his stint as a machinist in Chicago was echoed in Bourdieu's accounts of the experience of labour in capitalist society. This is a fascinating coincidence as Buroway's Gramscian account of how exploitation is both obscured and secured in modern industrial life and how workers participate in this by 'making out' by playing games, has been a central text for industrial sociology.

On this, Burawoy admits some surprise of how close their work is: 'how had Bourdieu arrived at a seemingly identical formulation to my own? How could I be using the language of hegemony and consent to describe what indeed, looked more like symbolic domination and misrecognition' (p.177)? For Bourdieu compliance was and is achieved 'through misrecognition rooted in the individual's habitus...Symbolic domination through

misrecognition rests on the bodily inculcation of social structure and the formation of a deep, unconscious habitus' (p. 189).

Burawoy's critique of Bourdieu hinges on the latter's projection of 'misrecognition' as a universal condition, whereas for the former, it is socially produced and historically contingent (p. 177). This led Burawoy to a re-examination of his prior work, and how mystification endured or evaporated. 'What my research suggests', concludes Burawoy 'is that there is more to hegemony...than consent'. Here capitalist society's ability to achieve a level of mystification of workers' experience of exploitation and state socialism's inability to do so explicates 'why hegemony is so effective in advanced capitalism and so precarious in state socialism' (p.197). A corollary to this is how hegemony was also impossible in South Africa, as Von Holdt's work demonstrates: domination was achieved through an apartheid-hinged racial form of domination without hegemony and how this has manufactured dissent and militancy.

There is a surprising silence in this chapter on Bourdieu's and his student's *Weight of the World* – where the voices of those who have been made vulnerable by capitalism's assault on labour security and welfare in the West emerges starkly. The work is praised and shown to be against Bourdieu's theorization of symbolic domination (p.166-7) but its absence in chapter 8 is remarkable. It would have forced a further take on contingency – is this situation of precariousness not part of 'advanced capitalism'? Is the ideal-type of mystification only where and when the broader society guarantees a perception of socio-economic security? Is the ideal-type of advanced capitalism the Chicago of the 1960s and the 1970s?

The third and more challenging and difficult side of the book is the North and South conversations between Michael Burawoy and Karl Von Holdt. The latter uses the discussion introduced by Burawoy to reflect on South African contemporary issues. The themes of real and symbolic violence, of gender and class domination and Bourdieu's concepts with a special emphasis on the habitus are explored in some detail through vivid examples. Although Burawoy argues that (p.214), 'Karl's approach is to critically engage Marxism and Bourdieu on the terrain in South Africa' and that he does it with aplomb, it does not adequately address what the nature of the conversation is or ought to be.

Let me explain: Von Holdt concurs that Bourdieu's analysis is 'fine-tuned to the intimacies of domination and subordination – to the way they are inscribed in bodies, language and psyches'. But he demands a different theorization that instead of social orders and consent, the South African experience is one of mutinous 'counter-orders' (p.25).

There are two possible takes on his challenging work, he tells us: to focus on the mechanisms of order and the concepts he finds it necessary to elaborate to explore this – field, habitus, classification, cultural capital, symbolic domination and symbolic violence – if we are to think about 'the limits of order' (p.26) or conversely to argue 'that Bourdieu's concepts are rendered useless in our social reality, that they flutter about like moths caught in strong sunlight, out of their element, pointing to the need for other concepts' (p.27). Von Holdt navigates admirably between the two.

Overall, the book provides a very daring way of doing theory between and betwixt national experiences. Yet there are certain aspects of the book that need challenging.

Michael Burawoy has been one of the most generous commentators on the achievements of South African sociology. His praise of the work done in South Africa as exemplary public sociology has come at a price, as it might become complicit in avoiding any theoretical effort from South Africa that does not fit into that enticing category. Here, to a South African reader, this is so glaring that it borders on discomfort. There is not one sentence attributed to a South African or African theorist in any of the theoretical conversations orchestrated by Burawoy between Bourdieu and others. This is particularly surprising on Gramsci, Fanon, de Beauvoir and Frere, where both scholarship and theory in the South has been abundant from Aijaz Ahmad to Mahmood Mamdani and in South Africa abundant since the late 1960s. Perhaps here Burawoy is being polite but it would be good to know whether any such scholarship was or is of any standing.

Since Burawoy is fond of the expression traveling theory (p.210ff) it is important to say that whereas everything seems to travel South with some ease, nothing seems to have traveled North. I do not think that that was the intention of the book but once again the margin remains the margin. So the salutary effort of bringing these fascinating thinkers into the canon of Sociology precludes and/or avoids dialogue.

There is also a significant literature on Bourdieu in South Africa. Even though his influence was marginal in the 1970s-1990s, there were serious debates about it. His appreciation only gained in volume and presence since the 2000s. There were reasons for the reluctance of South Africans to use Bourdieu and these are critical for any conversation or dialogue.

The first manuscript-length texts that were read with some interest in the late 1970s were his and Jean-Claude Passeron's *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture* (1977) and *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (1977). But there were significant prior and indirect 'visitations' before: the first such visits were through a growing radical British sociology of education.[1]

Progressive academics in faculties of education launched in 1979 the very important tradition of holding what they called the Kenton conferences. During the second conference at Wilgerspruit near Johannesburg in 1980, there was the first actual usage of Bourdieu in a paper presented by Robert Muir (see Morrow, ed. 1980) where he used the terms 'habitus' and 'symbolic violence'. It elicited a strong response by Mary Crewe, which took in a Marxian way both Muir and Bourdieu to task for their 'culturalist' accounts: 'It is not enough to say that what goes on in schools is simply symbolic violence via vetting by the habitus: the economic interpenetrates too insistently for that' (1980: 74).

In short, the initial response to his work came through progressive circles of Educational Philosophers and Sociologists who were looking for a mix of structure and agency in their attempts to decipher the Apartheid education system and the causes of the Soweto insurrection of 1976 (Kane-Berman 1978, Hirson 1979). That the growing insurrection started from the classrooms of Soweto and spread throughout the township schools of the country called for dedicated analysis and exposition.

The second reading occurred through social historians who were trying to follow up on the positive references Bourdieu received in Edward Thompson's (1978/1995) emphases on working-class cultural formation and his polemics against Althusserian

Marxism. Whereas the education-based reading of his work proved productive, the social history dimension was short-lived as most scholars found too many echoes in his text of the structuralism and the reproduction-linked arguments they were trying to avoid.[2]

Furthermore, one the main reasons for his late absorption into South Africa scholarship was that, even for scholars who would have been sympathetic to his work, serious empirical and theoretical work developed in Sociology, Social History and African Studies with very little conversation with or acknowledgement by mainstream European sociology. Since the 1970s scholars in South Africa were not ready to collapse agency into some structural scaffolding, and had been developing their own idiosyncratic ways of explicating social action, especially as action was plentiful within a militant black working-class and the country's subaltern black youth. Such work – and mine was a little instance of such a work (Sitas 1985A, 1985B, 1989, 1990, 1992, 1996) – focused on cultural formation, on survival strategies, on dissonant and alterity-imbued praxis, using a different conceptual matrix.

By the time Bourdieu's important work on cultural capital and the habitus was well-translated, read and understood such theorisation had progressed and was very influential in the formulation of hypotheses by South African labour studies scholars and proponents of a 'historiography from below'. (For an overview of the former see the work of Eddie Webster [2004] who is the only one acknowledged in passing in the book, of the latter see Bozzoli, Belinda and Delius, Peter [1990].) Such sociological work whose exemplars were amongst others, Belinda Bozzoli (see for example the 2004 volume) with her dramaturgical work on a world of township insurrection, Dunbar Moodie (1994) on mine worker cultural formations and resistance, Debby Bonnin (1988) on Zulu working-class forms of consciousness and action and Karl Von Holdt's (2003) very own work on liminal formations through the post-apartheid 'triple transition' can be brought into conversation with Bourdieu. But as any scholar would appreciate, this critical conversation has to go in both directions. But it rarely does.

So, a challenging book has been produced, a fascinating theorist has been made lucid and an ambitious promise for a dialogue has been printed. It is time it started in earnest. Burawoy contends (p.211) that 'to transcend the dominance of the North is a Sisyphean task, so we must avoid illusory solutions, the substitution of dream for reality'. This is rather underwhelming, what we do write in South Africa also has a reason and a need to be read, not as a supplement but as scholarship.

The most enjoyable aspect about of the book is the life it breathes into the theorist's work. Bourdieu's entry in the curriculum in South Africa was rather 'orthodox': as each department introduced modern sociological theory as a module to be taught, Bourdieu appeared as a serious contemporary thinker. What helped were a number of publications that described his main concepts in a very user-friendly way. (See Jenkins 1992; Fowler 1997; Swartz 1997; Webb, Schirato, Danaher 2002; Reed-Danahay 2005; Grenfell 2008). What the book achieves is to make the connection between Bourdieu's theory and lived experience which takes it beyond the mere mention that his work was introduced as straddling the Marxian and the Weberian traditions. Whereas at the beginning of 2000 the main point of symbolic tension against structuralism was provided

by the everyday sociology of an Erving Goffman, Bourdieu's work is by now mainframed and juxtaposed to feminist and queer theory ethnographers and critical race theorists. The book allows Bourdieu to move out of that straitjacket.

NOTES

1. As one doyen of Education Studies in South Africa Jo Muller confided it was through two encounters. The first was in 1971/2, the essay of Bourdieu's included in Michael Young's edited volume on *Knowledge and Control*. As this book was aiming to put together fascinating new directions in the Sociology of Education, it became quite a serious resource for local scholars. (Discussion with Jo Muller in early April 2012.) This was followed by the study guides for the Open University – through articles by Roger Dale and Madeleine Arnott (see Demaine, ed. 1981) proved memorable. So by the late 1970s, by the time, that is, that the first two full manuscripts were made available, Bourdieu was being referred to in the English language Universities of South Africa, but as Muller also added, was not really used in research or writing. The first thesis using Bourdieu was, according to another Education specialist, Prof. Ian Scott, by Alan Morris in 1985.

2. During the late 1970s, the climate was 'anti-Bourdeuean'. In terms of French scholarship the borrowings were slanted towards the humanism of Jean Paul Sartre, Andre Gorz and Franz Fanon and the anti-humanism of Louis Althusser and Nicos Poulantzas. Since influential radical thinkers were tipping towards the latter in trying to understand the Apartheid State, much of the discussion centered on modes of production and hegemonic power-blocs. Even in my own work, the priority was to understand the insurgent movements of the day, so Alain Touraine's work (1981) on group self-analysis in social movements in works like *The Voice and the Eye*, was a safer bet than the terse prose of the abovementioned books.

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