

ON PIERRE BOURDIEU

PART 4: SYMBOLIC CAPITAL

Bourdieu uses the concept of capital in some ways that are familiar, for example, social capital, cultural capital, and economic capital. Other usages are less familiar. First, according to David Swartz in *Culture and Power: The Sociology of Pierre Bourdieu*, the word capital means something like money which is both a medium of exchange and a store of value. It also means power, in two senses: the ability to exert influence on one or more people; and something like electric power, a source of energy.

Second, Bourdieu uses the term “symbolic power”, for me an unfamiliar concept. This idea is tangled up with the Marxism Bourdieu absorbed as a student, which is centered around materialism. Bourdieu thinks that human society has both a materialist and symbolic dimensions. Ch. 4, page 65 et seq.; p. 74. Religion is an example of a symbolic dimension. It’s a human-made structure that enables people to grasp part of their world. Other symbolic systems mentioned by Swartz are language, art, myth, and science.

Bourdieu says that the various forms of capital can be exchanged for each other. For example, economic capital can be exchanged for social capital, as when David Koch gives a pot of money to NPR and reaps kudos from liberals.

The various forms of capital are all the result of labor. Cultural capital is the result of learning and training, for example. Social capital arises from the give and take of aid and service among social groups, often over a long period of time. Symbolic power is also the result of labor. For example, rich people can hire people to generate symbolic power for them. Swartz writes:

Bourdieu ...[proposes] a theory of intellectuals that emphasizes the

specific symbolic interests that shape cultural production. Bourdieu assigns a particularly important—though not exclusive—role to the arenas of symbolic specialization and their representatives in developing the material out of which the symbolic dimension of class struggle is carved. He conceptualizes these arenas as social-cultural markets or fields of force in which specialists struggle over definitions of what is to be considered as legitimate modes of expression. P. 84.

According to Swartz, Bourdieu claims that symbolic systems simultaneously perform three functions: cognition, communication, and social differentiation. P. 82-3. First, they provide a structure for understanding the world. Second, they form the communal understandings that enable people to communicate with each other. Third, they act as instruments of domination by providing a structure that categorizes humans and organizes those categories into hierarchies of social value.

Bourdieu thinks that symbolic systems work by establishing a group of paired oppositions, and placing people into one or the other. As an example, Swartz quotes Bourdieu as follows:

All agents in a given social formation share a set of basic perceptual schemes, which receive the beginnings of objectification in the pairs of antagonistic adjectives commonly used to classify and qualify persons or objects in the most varied areas of practice. The network of oppositions between high (sublime, elevated, pure) and low (vulgar, low, modest), spiritual and material, fine (refined, elegant) and coarse (heavy, fat, crude, brutal), light (subtle, lively, sharp, adroit) and heavy (slow, thick, blunt, laborious, clumsy), free and forced, broad and narrow, or, in another

dimension, between unique (rare, different, distinguished, exclusive, novel) and common (ordinary, banal, commonplace, trivial, routine), brilliant (intelligent) and dull (obscure, grey, mediocre), is the matrix of all the commonplaces which find such ready acceptance because behind them lies the whole social order. P. 84-5.

Because everyone in a given society uses the same symbolic systems these categories seem natural and just, and people mostly can figure out where they stand on each axis of differentiation. To the extent that people actually accept the axes and their positions on them, they are conditioned to accept their place.

Bourdieu thinks that these differentiating paired oppositions are arbitrary in the sense that they do not reflect social reality. That raises some interesting points. Why do we think some books are better than others? Why is a Harlequin romance novel better or worse than *Pride and Prejudice*? There are differences in tone and skill, but there are a number of correspondence. One answer is that liking Jane Austen is a cultural marker, and so is liking Harlequin romances. One is high, the other low; one is unique, the other common.

On the other hand, the language of science is ponderous and heavy, and that is considered good. Scientific writing would be useless in political persuasion, as Frank Luntz has proven. No one would read either Austen or Harlequin romances if they were written in scientific language.

In other words, these distinctions are probably not arbitrary in the sense of random, but are instead assigned roles that cement social differentiation. Whether or not they are arbitrary, they are powerful tools for asserting dominance. Swartz writes:

Bourdieu understands ideology, or “symbolic violence,” as the capacity to impose the means for comprehending and adapting to the social world by representing economic and political power in disguised, taken-for-granted forms. Symbolic systems exercise symbolic power “only through the complicity of those who do not want to know that they are subject to it or even that they themselves exercise it. In using the term “symbolic violence” Bourdieu stresses how the dominated accept as legitimate their own condition of domination. P. 89; cites omitted.

Bourdieu says that the exercise of power, including economic power, requires justification; it must be seen as legitimate or it will eventually fail. Symbolic capital provides that justification. It’s hard to imagine that economic power can be delegitimized, but of course it can. We just have to work at it.