

SYMBOLIC VIOLENCE IN NEOLIBERALISM

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This post describes the term symbolic violence as used by Pierre Bourdieu 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." This means that some people have the ability to impose their own preferred ideology on the rest of us. We can think of ideology as a discourse or as a structure like myth or religion. This all seems abstract, so I'll try to put it in terms of our own society by looking at the rise to dominance of neoliberalism.

By the 1960s working people as a group had achieved a measure of power in the economy. Most white men could find decent jobs with benefits and live a decent middle class life, and some women and people of color could too. And the arc of justice seemed to be bending towards the latter two groups.

But it all ebbed away, as neoliberalism rose to dominance. In Bourdieu's terms, neoliberalism is a symbolic structure. Like myth or religion, it offers a way to comprehend society, the way the economy works, and one's place in society. It is a denied structure, in that most of the people who are guided by it do not even admit it exists, or that there is any other way to understand society. Because it is a denied structure, both the dominant and the dominated accept its premises and its results without question.

Symbolic systems do not spring into existence. They are the result of a great deal of work by people Bourdieu calls cultural producers. This group includes artists, writers, teachers, and journalists, according to David Swartz in *Culture and Power: The Sociology of Pierre Bourdieu*, p. 94. It also includes experts in various fields, such as economists and lawyers. The first neoliberal producers organized the Mont Pelerin Society in 1947, led by Friedrich Hayek, an Austrian economist whose terror of socialism and Keynesianism was the driving force. Over the next years, money flowed to the Society and more importantly to its members to fund research and publicity for "free-market" ideas and to the institutions at which they worked. Members used their fund-raising prowess to expand the groups of scholars working out the implications of their free-market ideas and making them more palatable.

In Bourdieu's terms, these efforts constitute symbolic work, work done to elaborate a symbolic structure. These specialists accumulate economic capital in the form of wages and salaries, and income from books and speeches and otherwise. In Bourdieu's terms that constitutes an interest. But it is not the only interest driving them.

Bourdieu says besides economic capital people struggle for social and cultural capital in their fields of work. For the economists, that comes in the form of recognition in the field, maybe the John Bates Clark medal, or a good slot at a meeting of the American Economic Association, or publication in a respected journal, or an interesting short-term position at the Fed. This conflict takes place in the field of economics, which has its own informal rules about how the work is to be done and the definition of acceptable areas of discussion and research.

In order to engage in that struggle, young economists must learn the rules of struggle, and learn the specific practices and skills considered necessary to participate. That

includes college-level math and statistics, techniques of data-gathering and analysis, and a good understanding of the personalities in their training environment. Over time, aspiring economists develop a personal habitus that helps them succeed. This habitus interacts with the various obstacles and structures in the economic field, and that produces the actions they take, such as the specific research projects and the papers they write and the donors they suck up to. In this way, young economists accumulate the cultural and social capital they need to thrive in their field. Then they can use that capital to accumulate economic capital.

As economics became math-oriented and more controlled by theories of human nature as pleasure-optimizing and pain-avoiding calculating machines, more young economists became inculcated with its practices, and their evolving habitus enabled them to win struggles for cultural and social capital in the economic field. They took over as the initial generation died out. Neoliberal economists became the dominant group. Most politicians followed their lead. Hard-core neoliberal economists sound like Paul Ryan; while many others followed softer lines like "market-based solutions". The relatively few economists who totally rejected neoliberalism were ignored in the profession and among politicians. And this is central to symbolic violence: the ability to control the bounds of acceptable discussion. Swartz, p. 89.

Rich people, then, did not create the neoliberal structure, a form of symbolic capital. That was the work done by a group Bourdieu calls cultural producers, which includes the economists, other teachers, journalists and PR people, writers, politicians, and journalists. The rich supported those people and encouraged the institutions in which they work through donations, their institutional positions, and in other ways. The rich benefit from their support because the neoliberal symbolic structure rewards them directly and indirectly.

But the best part is that both the cultural producers and the beneficiaries have deniability. Neither group has to take any responsibility for their actions; neither can be held accountable for the damage done by their theories. For example, the economists say they are just following the logic of their field and pursuing knowledge. Journalists say they are repeating what everybody knows. The rich say they are just following the course laid out by the intellectuals and geniuses at great universities and think tanks.

This article in Jacobin is a field study of neoliberal teaching. The anonymous writer joined a job club in Austin for unemployed middle-aged tech workers.

Each week, guest speakers shower the jobless not just with interview advice, but with a fully formed ideology that radically individualizes and normalizes their experience. Every Friday, speakers help douse what could be a tinderbox of collective resistance with a rhetorical fire extinguisher.

But what good is individual resistance? These people need decent jobs, and they can't find them. Hostility and resentment aren't going to help them. They are stuck in the neoliberal structure and have no way out, at least in the short term. The system demands acceptance as the price of a life.

Bourdieu uses the term "symbolic violence", but this is actual psychic violence. It calls for a radical change in the nature of the person, changes that make one less of an agent in one's life and more of a tool for others. Only the dominant have true agency in the neoliberal structure.