

Is Bourdieu's Theory Too Deterministic?

By Bridget Fowler

Marc Joly's book engages a vigorous debate with Jean-Louis Fabiani's critical reading of Bourdieu's theoretical legacy. Both authors seem to disagree on the precise boundaries of Bourdieu's determinism and the space he leaves to liberty, resistance and reflexivity.

Reviewed: Marc Joly, *Pour Bourdieu*, Paris, CNRS Editions, 2018, 413 p.

In 2001, Pierre Bourdieu attended a Colloque at Cerisy-la-Salle in his honour¹ at which I was lucky enough to be present. What was unexpected was that – with the memorable exception of Tassadit Yacine - the conference gathered together only his foreign researchers. This was due to Bourdieu's embattled status within France.

Restoring Bourdieu

This embattled stance continues to be evident in Joly's most recent work. His book is welcome for many reasons, not least for its sustained engagement with Jean-

¹ The colloque was held at Centre International de Cerisy (France), 12-19 July 2001. The co-organisers subsequently edited Jacques Dubois, Pascal Durand, Yves Winkin (eds.), *Le symbolique et le social: La réception internationale de la pensée de Pierre Bourdieu*, Liège : Presses Universitaires de Liège, 2015 [2005].

Louis Fabiani's *Pierre Bourdieu: Un structuralisme héroïque* (2016). Fabiani, supervised formally by Bourdieu, has since expressed his profound disillusionment with the alleged 'hybris' of his 'thesis-father's' sociological approach. If *Un structuralisme héroïque* ends with the regret that he will never again be able to joke with his former teacher, he also submits Bourdieu's sociological oeuvre to a critique all the more devastating because it is undeniably well-informed. Fabiani reiterates many now-familiar critical tropes whilst advancing new grounds for negative appraisal. The task, therefore, that Joly has set himself in the light of this is a timely and important investigation: for he aims at nothing other than the reaffirmation of Bourdieu's advances, described by both Louis Pinto and Pascale Casanova as a 'symbolic revolution' in sociology.

Joly's *Pour Bourdieu* carries out this task persuasively and with a certain bravura. His lengthy rebuttal of the attacks made on Bourdieu by Fabiani – and, more briefly, by Luc Boltanski, Bruno Karsenti, Cyril Lemieux and Jean-Claude Passeron – is underpinned by his own work on the 19th Century scientific revolution and on Elias. It is also enhanced by additional new resources. He draws freshly on archival analysis relating to the Centre de Sociologie Européenne (directed by Aron, then Bourdieu) and from Bourdieu's correspondence and lesser-known interviews.

Joly strikingly succeeds in restoring Bourdieu to a preeminent place in post-World War II social science as the outstanding heir to sociology's most consecrated figures. He responds to many of Fabiani's key criticisms with clarity and methodological force. In particular, he challenges his antagonist's most prominent denigratory allegation: that Bourdieu was an unrepentant structuralist. Here Joly rightly argues that while Bourdieu acknowledged a period as a 'blissful structuralist' when he was working on 'the Kabylean house', he fundamentally revised that allegiance in his magisterial and creative *Le Sens Pratique* (1980). For Bourdieu, the 'sovereign gaze' of Levi-Straussian structuralism did not simply disregard the subjective meanings of social actors, it was based on a profound displacement of historical analysis. Unequivocally rejecting this, Bourdieu characterised his distinctive approach as a *genetic* constructivism (Joly 121). He retained certain elements of structuralism, such as an interest in the homologies between mental structures and social structures, but these affinities are examined within a diachronic or historical focus.

Joly addresses Fabiani's highly damaging claim that Bourdieu's 'habitus' – those socialised dispositions prompting practice – is really nothing more than a

magical 'black box', lacking all explanatory force. Joly lucidly expresses the value of this concept for rigorous scientific deployment. But he perhaps does not always address sufficiently Fabiani's more detailed charges, either on this or on Bourdieu's other leading conceptual instruments. For example, Fabiani asserts that Bourdieu realised that a second concept, sometimes linked to that of habitus: 'amor fati' – or agents' love of their fate – was not always appropriate; hence the sociologist later innovated with the notion of 'habitus clivé', not infrequently the attribute of those 'miraculous survivors' in the educational system, who moved from one social class to another, or indeed, of those thinkers experiencing a change in disciplinary field. Fabiani rightly notes that this allowed Bourdieu to explore further the sense of being ill at ease or marginalised. It thus represented an advance on his earlier focus which had been chiefly on the pre-reflexive, doxic 'complicity' of the habitus with the social world. The question posed by Fabiani and unaddressed by Joly is whether, in saving his concept in this way, Bourdieu does not therefore make his theory less falsifiable.

This is a legitimate concern and one that Bourdieusians must confront by further specifying their use of habitus in different contexts. It is not, however, a mortal blow. For Bourdieu had earlier written, from his Algerian writings onwards, about changes in structural conditions that undermined the traditional peasant habitus, amounting to what he calls 'the end of a world' for those attuned to an earlier social order. Indeed, the Don Quixote-like leitmotif of a poignant disjuncture between expectations founded on an anachronistic mode of production and the harsh reality of recent experience runs throughout his work. It is one of the enduring features of historical change, from the colonial urban displacement of impoverished ex-peasants, to the dashed hopes of first generation university graduates whose devalued degrees failed to open up the graduate work they had anticipated.

This is captured in his synthesizing works such as *Méditations Pascaliennes* (1997) where Bourdieu draws together theoretically his insights into the social suffering caused both by material deprivation and by symbolic violence, utilising fully the notions of 'décalage' and 'habitus clivé'. Now Fabiani rightly emphasizes the greater part played by reflexivity in *Méditations Pascaliennes* and other late works. We should *not* concede that this therefore renders Bourdieu's main use of habitus suspect or illegitimate, but we should accept that a closer analysis is necessary of when it is appropriate to use the notion of 'habitus clivé'. We need to understand with a much finer sieve the various modalities of habitus between prereflexive resigned (but cheerful) accommodation and more reflexive, bitter resignation or even resistance.

Further, Bourdieu aimed initially to generate a general theory of fields: for Fabiani, a 'forme d'hybris sociologique' but for Joly an important advance beyond Lewin's field theory. Under Fabiani's disenchanted scrutiny, Bourdieu merely appears to vacillate between seeing fields such as art and literature as historically-produced and seeing them as universal. He selects in particular Bourdieu's important example of the French literary field, seen as relatively autonomous only from the mid-19th Century. Certain structural changes at that time, such as the greater role of the market and the greater rate of literacy, were for him the prerequisite for the emergence of the autonomous literary subfield, which protected forms of writing otherwise endangered by the pursuit of exchange-value for its own sake. Yet – as Fabiani remarks critically (32-34, 62-63) – Alain Viala has shown that even as early as the 17th Century, *certain* elements of the literary field were present, such as the struggle to be consecrated as a writer, if not their later autonomy. Clearly, this requires greater refinement of the historical thesis – but not – in my view – its abandonment. Despite Joly's able general defence of Bourdieu, he occasionally disappoints by neglecting – as here - detailed responses to Fabiani's damaging charges.

Bourdieu's relationship to philosophy

One of the most intractable issues is the vexed question of Bourdieu's relationship to philosophy. As everyone knows, Bourdieu was initially trained at the ENS in philosophy and only later turned first to anthropology and then to sociology. Fabiani contends, controversially, that in turning to sociology, Bourdieu merely treated it as 'philosophy by other means' (I have to say, a vague and undefined accusation in his hands). Yet repudiating this, Joly arguably twists the stick too far in the other direction. He is of course right that when Bourdieu refers, counter-intuitively, to his 'fieldwork in philosophy' he is referring to philosophy *used as a resource for sociology* (*Choses Dites*); Bourdieu may even have alluded on one occasion to a 'hatred for philosophy'. Yet, pace Joly, it is very apparent that whilst Bourdieu's sociological conclusions certainly derive from theories grounded on data – ethnographic and quantitative - these theoretical conjectures are often *reinforced* by the reflections of philosophers. Fabiani (p 95) is right to remind us that Bourdieu not infrequently cites Leibniz on the force of the habitus ('nous sommes empiriques dans les trois quarts de nos actions'). It might be added that Bourdieu also invokes Hobbes, Pascal on the socialisation that creates "customs of the heart", Merleau-Ponty on hexis or "techniques of the body", Sartre (satirically) on *Being and Nothingness*, Austen on

performativity, Husserl on time, Wittgenstein on rules, etc. The singularity of this resort to philosophy for a sociologist is attested to by his Collège de France colleague, the philosopher Jacques Bouveresse, who also comments on Bourdieu's unorthodox choice of authors, from both the Anglo-Saxon *and* the Continental philosophical traditions. Rather than seeing this as giving up on sociology's scientific aspirations or even playing on both registers at once (Joly), we should see Bourdieu as fruitfully *deepening* the connotations of his sociological concepts by these means.

Bourdieu always invoked 'active agency' in his critique of structural functionalism, but he resisted those sociological approaches (such as Touraine's) which relied too much on liberty. This is in many ways the crux of the dispute and Joly is right that Bourdieu continued to stress the *objective social determinants* of practice – material and symbolic. The late work, *Méditations Pascaliennes*, elucidate this, for here Bourdieu states that despite such diverse social determinants, his theory had always preserved space for a certain liberty and resistance, albeit not very great. Indeed, this is perhaps what prompted Joly to write that this last great work exposes sharply the background idea of humanity inherent in Bourdieu's sociology (p 55).

Fabiani refers, without any precise citation, to the 'extraordinary pages' of *Méditations Pascaliennes* where Bourdieu proposes an unexpected elaboration of his theoretical stance, presumably those emphasizing the 'margin for liberty', including resistance. But the implications for him are unclear. Joly, for his part, refers to Bourdieu's stress on improvisation in the light of experience and *décalage* (*Le Sens Pratique*) as well as the newly-published Cours, *Sociologie Générale*, both of which illuminate his own interpretation.

The precise boundaries of Bourdieu's determinism still need greater elucidation. Joly could have pointed to a passage which makes this point somewhat clearer and which reveals that – far from Pareto's pessimism about eternal elite reproduction – Bourdieu countered it with the Enlightenment tradition in which science facilitates a *feasible* emancipation:

Comme la sociologie donne une connaissance des déterminismes et, donc, la possibilité d'une liberté par rapport aux déterminismes, écrire de la sociologie [...] c'est travailler à diffuser, à universaliser la possibilité d'une liberté. (Bourdieu, *Sociologie Générale* I, 455)

Bourdieu's 'sentimental' sociology

Finally, Fabiani claims that in his last ten years Bourdieu abandoned the rigorous disenchantment which was the hallmark of his earlier studies. Instead, he apparently adopts a re-enchanting 'sentimental' sociology, interspersed with purely ideological attacks. To Fabiani's derision, Bourdieu and his team in his ethnographic investigations of *La Misère du Monde* find widespread 'souffrance' amongst their respondents, understood not in the limited sense of material poverty but in the wider sense of 'miseries of position' such as the case of 'burnt out' youth workers or even the local magistrate. But Joly is right to question this dismissive critique. Not only does Fabiani ignore significant late works of Bourdieu, like his *La révolution conservatrice dans l'édition* (1999) but Fabiani seems to offer instead neither analysis nor periodisation of neoliberalism. Yet such "misère" is attested to in numerous studies of the neoliberal period of financialisation and the contraction of the welfare state since the mid-1970s, not just by Bourdieu.

Such alleged 'sentimentalism' extends to Bourdieu's book acknowledging masculine domination where the sociologist includes a postscript on love. For Fabiani, this typological depiction of "pure love" represents a thoroughgoing abdication from rigorous sociological demystification. Yet the Bourdieu text hardly springs from an overblown Romanticism:

L' "amour pur", cet art pour l'art de l'amour, est une invention historique relativement récente [...]. Il ne se rencontre sans doute que *très rarement dans sa forme la plus accomplie* et [...] *il est intrinsèquement fragile* [...] *sans cesse menacé par la crise qui suscite le retour du calcul égoïste ou le simple effet du routinisation.*' (Bourdieu, *La Domination Masculine*, 118, my emphasis)

Joly's sustained defence of Bourdieu does indeed offer ample testimony to the epistemological vigilance over method which Bourdieu used throughout so as to separate studies such as *Homo Academicus* and *La Distinction* from mere opinion (admittedly, occasionally only weakly displayed, as in *Sur la Télévision*). In these days of "fake news" accusations - which arguably owe certain intellectual origins to the relativist postmodernism he abhorred - this is all the more important. Joly is therefore right to end his book not just on this methodological rigour but also on Bourdieu's distinctive emphasis on a collective effort towards a 'réflexivité réformatrice' (2001) within social science, particularly as a counter to the distortions of careerism and the scholastic illusion.

Published in booksandideas.com, 21 September 2018.