

Pierre Bourdieu and Cultural Theory

Critical Investigations



Bridget Fowler

PIERRE BOURDIEU AND CULTURAL THEORY

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SAGE Publications
London • Thousand Oaks • New Delhi

ISBN 0-8039-7625-9 (hbk)

ISBN 0-8039-7626-7 (pbk)

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First published 1997

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SAGE Publications Ltd
1 Oliver's Yard
55 City Road
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SAGE Publications Inc
2455 Teller Road
Thousand Oaks
California 91320

SAGE Publications India Pvt Ltd
B-42 Panchsheel Enclave
PO Box 4109
New Delhi 110 017

British Library Cataloguing in Publication data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Printed digitally and bound in Great Britain by
Lightning Source UK Ltd., Milton Keynes, Bedfordshire

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Acknowledgements

I should like to acknowledge the encouragement of Pierre Bourdieu and to express the hope that I have not distorted his views. A huge debt is owed to David Frisby, whose learning and patience have been greatly appreciated. Richard Jenkins and Mike Featherstone also read the entire manuscript and made wise suggestions for improvement, while Terry Lovell's support convinced me once more that the project was worthwhile. I have been sustained by conversations with Lindy Barbour, Esperança Bielsa, Harvie Ferguson, Barbara Littlewood, Paddy Lyons, Kirsten and Scott Meikle, Mick Scott, Paul Stirton, Stephen Thomson and Hillel Ticktin. Robert Rojek has been a most tolerant and approachable editor and Carol Woodward generously helped with French translation problems. Lastly, I have been both heartened and stimulated intellectually by my family. To all of these, my thanks.

INTRODUCTION

Situating Pierre Bourdieu

In the Anglo-American world, there have been two moments of Pierre Bourdieu, the first in response to the English translation of *Reproduction* in 1977 and the second at the time of *Distinction*, also in translation, in 1984.¹ Thus although there has been recent acceptance of his importance in the fields of education, consumption and leisure, there has been no sustained analysis of his cultural theory nor any attempt to analyse works such as *Les Règles de l'art* (1992) in the light of all his other works. This book will therefore examine his sociology of culture, with especial reference to his analysis of literature and painting. My contention is that Bourdieu's approach is the most comprehensive and sophisticated available at present and that it is more profoundly antagonistic to idealist thought than is the work of poststructuralists such as Derrida and Foucault. Bourdieu has developed an impressive new synthesis of classical social theory in the light of late capitalism. He offers a welcome relief to anyone suffering from post-Lacanian excess on the issue of the subject.

Bourdieu's personal trajectory is well known from the small number of other critical works on him that have appeared (Harker et al., 1990; Jenkins, 1992; Robbins, 1991). I will summarise briefly. The son of a postman in a village in the South-West Pyrenees area of Béarn, in France, Bourdieu is very like his late contemporary, Raymond Williams, in being from the marchlands of a metropolitan country, that is to say, in a peasant area within a late capitalist society. In these juxtaposed worlds, he has himself experienced some of the contrasts between pre-capitalist and capitalist life that he writes about in his works. This class and spatial marginality was enhanced by experience of the bitter confrontation between coloniser and colonised in his period in the French Army. Here he managed to secure the time and, more bizarrely, the *entrée* to start the conversion from philosophy student to ethnographer: one mark of his radicalism in the war being the inclusion of revolutionary songs at the end of *The Algerians*. After field-work in Algeria, he returned to France, undertaking work for his doctorate (*agrégation*) at the University of Lille. He refused to take this partly because of the pedestrian type of knowledge on offer and partly due to the hegemony of Stalinism. However, he became a university teacher at Lille, where a number of his first studies of local cultural life were undertaken, along with his early studies of school and university students. From there he progressed to the

École des Hautes Études in Paris, where he has had a major effect on the nature of research in sociology, not least by the breadth and imagination of his own work. Since 1981 he has been Professor at the Collège de France, perhaps the most consecrated position within French sociology (Jenkins, 1992: chap. 1; Robbins, 1991: Intro.). *Distinction* has become a popular work in France, with over 100,000 copies sold, while Bourdieu has increased his accessibility with lengthy television interviews.

Bourdieu's sociology has been labelled, with only a little exaggeration, 'not only the best, but . . . the only game in town' (Lash, 1993: 193). In my view, this is because he has combined elements of structuralism with approaches less hostile to the transformative potential of human beings. By these means, he attempts to gather in again the lost harvest of structuralist promise. What he has repudiated is 'the prison-house of thought' (Hall, 1986: 532) in which recent forms of social theorising have been artificially polarised into extremes. Bourdieu has often recited a litany of positions to be transcended – subjectivism versus objectivism; quixoticism versus 'fixism'; idealism versus determinism; existentialism versus structuralism – all dichotomies which resemble that between structuralism and culturalism in British cultural studies. Going beyond structuralism he has proposed the notion of men and women as agents, not merely because they are determined in their relations to production, but because they are elements of a structure which exists in and through signifying practices (see, for example, *Language and Symbolic Power* (1991), where it is proposed that such practices are the stakes in struggles over meaning, and *The Logic of Practice* (1990a: 15)). These are the classifications or representations of the world through which meanings are possible and which are embedded in each individual through the doxic or taken-for-granted ways of living which socialisation confers. Bourdieu does not use the Althusserian term 'imaginary' conditions of existence, but he does write of the principle of vision and division which organises the world for each agent and, as in Durkheim and Mauss's *Primitive Classification* (1963), these are enfolded in the habitus as a form of 'doxic knowledge'. The reproduction of the dominant class, as well as extended forms of social structure, occurs through these principles, located within a historical framework (see especially the chapter entitled 'The Historical Genesis of the Pure Aesthetic' (Bourdieu, 1993a: 254–66)).

But the active side of sensuous human practice, which culturalism draws on, is also renewed in Bourdieu. Hence his important conception of improvisation and strategy, explained by recourse to jazz playing or to the quarter-back's feel for when he should take the ball and scramble. Such divisions of labour, which signifying practices instil through the rules of combination and opposition, are never smooth and unproblematic. The mistake of structuralism was to see events through observers' rather than the natives' eyes. This enhanced the expectations of rule-following and underestimated the degree of creative disorder from which advantages might be derived (as in the process of stretching conceptions of genealogical units, so that parallel cousin rules of marriage might be said to govern them). This

was the reason for Bourdieu's original break with structuralism – he refers to it as 'French flu' – and the source of his appeal to subjective understanding: that is, to the Goffmanesque world of games, strategy and the disjunctures of back- and front-stage. Hence his demand for an end to the 'repression' of Durkheim through the 'softened, sweetened, euphemised' forms of the Durkheimian heritage (Bourdieu et al., 1985: 89). Retaining a concept of rupture and transformation, he has progressively returned in recent years to a radicalised idea of anomie, that is, to a discrepancy between expectations and experience with its potentially politicising effects. Thus while he hangs on to the structuralist notion of the political unconscious, which is acquired with the habitus, he also possesses an understanding of practice in the sense of 'experience', which is by no means merely a passive effect of taken-for-granted ('doxic') knowledge (see, for example, the recent work on the Front National militant or the scientist (1993b)).²

I shall argue that this concept of practice is immensely fertile. It avoids the dilemmas of necessity and choice that have bedevilled sociology and Marxism. It allows us to understand how social imperatives prompt individual position-taking in a manner which, avoiding a mechanistic model of determined action, appeals to an order based on 'feeling'. Principles of classification are described as being laid down within us, rather as an old house exerts its pleasurable order from an accumulation of things, and in distinction to the pristine purity of the interior designer.³ Bourdieu's practice thus operates on the same principle as works of art themselves, that is to say, that they unify a multiplicity of discrete objects (Loesberg, 1993: 1037–8),⁴ harmonising imperatives based on biological needs with social imperatives. Further, although practice is actually experienced as 'unwilled necessity', it is neither the consequence of mere mechanical reproduction nor the working out of the seed of inspiration. In an unrecognised act of understated subversion, Bourdieu has made artists' action the model for all normal skilled practices accomplished in everyday life:

The coherence without apparent intention and the unity without an immediate, visible, unifying principle of all the cultural realities that are informed by a quasi-natural logic (is this not what makes the 'eternal charm of Greek art' that Marx refers to?) are the product of the age-old application of the same schemes of action and perception, which, never having been constituted as explicit principles, can only produce an unwilled necessity which is therefore necessarily imperfect but also a little miraculous and very close in this respect to a work of art. (1990a: 13)

But what marks out Bourdieu's work most clearly is his very full conception of class and of culture as a response to class experience. He must think both how the dominant linguistic classifications create a common world for all classes and how these are distinctively inflected for the subordinate class with its closer experience of material urgencies. It is this which he discusses vividly with Darnton in relation to a violent demonstration of apprentices' disaffection in 1762:

Darnton: [T]he workers who manipulated the common code were able to mock their bourgeois superiors without the latter grasping this.

Bourdieu: It seems that this differential use of common codes, along with all sorts of strategic and complex games made possible by the juxtaposition of understood and misunderstood parts, is a product itself of differentiated worlds. (Bourdieu et al., 1985: 92)

This is an extraordinarily difficult project. Bourdieu has been criticised for portraying an oversimplified working-class culture, so constrained by the 'taste for necessity' that other principles of choice have been neglected (Frow, 1987: 71; Shiach, 1993: 214). Grignon and Passeron, in particular, have developed his problematic by undertaking a 'double reading in which culture can be seen as at once ideological and autonomous', using the example of consuming food (1989: 73).

Bourdieu has himself begun to undertake such a project in regard to gender. It is clear that an elaborate set of gender meanings has actively sustained working-class lack of choice. Because 'the idea of masculinity has one of its last refuges in the identity of the dominated classes' (1993c: 4), male *bourgeois* consumption can be repudiated as effeminate. In other words, there must be an immensely subtle negotiation of the sign so that its inflection fits with the experience of life (as in the conception of Voloshinov's multi-accentuated linguistic sign or Bakhtin's popular culture as 'gay laughter'⁵). But it is extraordinarily difficult to combine smoothly both the Durkheimian tradition of representations and the Marxist tradition of class ethos, especially with Bourdieu's insistence that popular language only acquires a counter-hegemonic freedom in the highly limited areas of pub and prisons.⁶ Bourdieu has consistently underemphasised working-class freedom (versus constraint) and the culturally creative energies that can come from underneath, as opposed to the many permutations of psychological domination. In this respect, Bourdieu might be contrasted with Walt Whitman in nineteenth-century America, who saw popular slang as the active yeast fermenting in the dough of language and insisted that linguistic development had its bases from both broad and low (1969: 103–4). Similarly Medvedev and Bakhtin were keen to stress the *centrifugal* nature of the novel ('the novel is uncanonical by nature'), which was, they said, generated from beneath and renewed by popular energies (1978: xxi), an insight quite foreign to Bourdieu's conception of the best-selling novel. In contrast to both these, Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* attributes much more causal force to the action of the dominant class. His is a self-conscious anti-populism which stresses the power of great families, great schools and even great buildings in an endless form of symbolic violence. But it possesses a fatalistic consequence, particularly acute in depicting the subordinate class, whose *habitus* is simultaneously defensive and the product of a colonised sense of inferiority. Although Bourdieu's theory is preferable to individualistic versions of rational action theory, and although it is too harsh to say of Bourdieu (Jenkins, 1992: 97) that there is *no* strategising in his conception of strategy, these difficulties weaken his sociology of culture.⁷

Bourdieu's emphasis on symbolic domination confers on him a tragic wisdom. But apart from his studies in decolonisation, he has never undertaken the sort of protracted discussion of *transformation* – in the form of long revolutions or slave rebellions – that distinguishes the work of, say, Barrington Moore. Bourdieu is at his best exposing the pretensions to change by unveiling a whole 'highbrow' culture which is dedicated to a purely rhetorical militancy or revealing the hijacking of revolutionary terms for the purposes of distinction (1980a). But the absence of any analysis of structural transformation is a gap in his work.

There are other difficulties with Bourdieu's project (although some alleged problems reveal more about the deficiencies of the critics than of Bourdieu). It could be said that all these issues stem from the *relative devaluation of the subjective moment* in Bourdieu's theory, in order to reveal the tragedy of institutions which is played out behind characters' backs. There is a Sophoclean arbitrariness producing the fate of reproduction that we are condemned to bear in this conception of class and gender. It has been attenuated in very recent years by allusions to the rejection of 'destiny', but in terms that draw upon the register of radical theories of anomie rather than classical Marxist images of the ranked masses of the Left. Thus I wish to raise a range of issues dealing with the alleged over-determinism of Bourdieu, which cluster around the problematic diagnosis of contradiction and conflict in his work.

Calhoun has raised the difficulty of characterising Bourdieu's work as an inheritance from Marx, in that although it clearly lays bare inequality, it fails to characterise adequately the difference between capitalist and pre-capitalist societies (1993: 68–9). In fact Bourdieu does go some way toward this by identifying the difference between the market and a good-faith economy, or, again, between *impersonal* power based on exams and education as against *personal* power acquired by family networks, rifles and honour. However, Calhoun is on firmer ground in arguing that there is an inadequate theory of contradiction in Bourdieu. Now, his critics have failed to understand that contradictions are often masked by being presented as natural differences, so that, for Bourdieu, paternalism is the paradigmatic magical form of enchantment of inequalities (1990b: 10). Furthermore, Bourdieu has presented contradictions as perceived social antagonisms in his recent work (for example, 1989), but, save for Wacquant, this has gone unnoticed (Wacquant, 1993a: 240). In particular, he has developed a theory of anomic experience which has many of the qualities of 'class conflict' elsewhere, as in his account of the resentment of unpromoted staff faced with the rapidly increased student body in Parisian universities (1988a); his comments on 'school sickness'; and his exploration of violent, frequently racialised confrontations (1993b). Despite this, he has been taken to task for failing to compare economic capital and its accounting practices with other types of impersonal power (Calhoun, 1993: 68; Garnham, 1993: 185–7).

This point is well made. I believe that Bourdieu's work does, however, derive from what might be called the 'peculiarities of the French' –

especially the relative strength in French history of a 'state nobility'. This meritocratically selected group of higher civil servants and professionals was the target of Bourdieu's critical intervention in the public sector strikes of 1995-6, when he claimed that it was their interests that the Juppé government voiced. Consequently, an immense gulf separated them from the people, despite their professing to know 'where lay the happiness of the people, against their will' (*Le Monde*, 14.12.95).

Bourdieu's recent work has identified the contradiction between the state nobility and the industrial or finance capitalist fraction, especially in terms of the fate of their different styles of education, the hierarchical position of different educational institutions according to the relative power of each fraction within it and the antagonisms between them expressed as absolute oppositions of taste (1989, 1994b).⁸ Moreover, nobody who has read his books since 1988 can miss the struggle for survival and open conflict that he depicts both at an individual, departmental and faculty level, within the academic world and within the cultural field more broadly (1988a, 1992). But part of his pathos undoubtedly lies in the truth to which he bears witness, that conflicts of social interests are frequently detectable only through the costs of individuals' adaptations, as in the case of the large number of peasant inheritors. Their economic plight he shows as simultaneously expressed and masked through a clumsy 'unattractiveness' and a consequent vulnerability to celibacy (1990a).

There is, further, confusion about the philosophical status of Bourdieu's *reflexive* sociology or 'constructivist structuralism' (1994a: 122). Bourdieu has argued for three stages of analysis: first, the objective exposure of invisible (objective) determining relations, of which the agent is often unaware; secondly, the retrieval of subjective perceptions or experience, including a focus on the active making of collective groups such as classes; and, thirdly, a second-order historical construction of the spaces from which perceptions and perspectives derive (1994a: 130). This is only possible if the sociologist breaks with naivety by monitoring his/her social understanding, not just in relation to the interests known to be linked to class, gender and ethnicity, but in relation to relative deprivation within a field (political, sporting, artistic, etc.).

Some sociologists have argued that Bourdieu's ultimate position is that of perspectivism (Lash, 1993), others, that it is realism (Wacquant, 1993b). The second is, in my view, more persuasive. But it should be said from the outset that, in explaining these sources of confusion, Bourdieu's heuristic principle of 'bending the stick the other way' should never be underestimated. It is this which requires grasping his work as a whole rather than any small part of it.

This applies particularly to reflexivity itself. As Bourdieu's sociological focus has extended to the heart of the academic institution, it has been progressively concerned to provide a reflexive discipline.⁹ In his study of the division between types of capital and types of intellectual, Bourdieu has

provided us with new insights into the Nietzschean world of *ressentiment* or compensatory rationalisations of bad fortune, as well as the Mannheimian contrast between ideology and utopia. He has refused, however, the easy opt-out which led Mannheim to exonerate intellectuals from being themselves distorted in the positions they adopt over academic and social struggles. Yet ultimately, he believes that there are some saving graces which can rescue us from the irrationalism to which such relativism appears to lead. These do not permit sociologists to go back to their 'regal positions', but they do permit the knowledge of *ressentiment* to become a discipline of self-investigation that allows the sociologist – and indeed any social agent – to interrogate him- or herself as to his or her own envious distortions and rationalisations of interest. In this way the knowledge of the social world might be put to new uses, not excluding a rational utopianism (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 212, 254).

Other objections have been made to Bourdieu. He has been held to exhibit an 'individualism of . . . world-view', possessing no conceptualisation of a social group and dissolving mind into a mere function of the body (Jenkins, 1992: 93). In the light of his emphasis on the (political) 'unconscious' and its historically changing collective outcomes, this is an odd claim, which has been too seduced by one dimension of Bourdieu's idea of strategic agency. He has been criticised for producing in *Distinction* a work of 'cultural voyeurism' (Robbins, 1991: 129). He has been condemned for his 'labyrinthine theory of practice' which is 'a machine for the suppression of history' (Jenkins, 1992: 97). These are strange views that I don't think can be sustained by an exhaustive assessment, especially of both early and very recent work. They gain their impact in part from the genuine difficulty of synthesising all Bourdieu's different projects.¹⁰

There are certain key areas of Bourdieu's cultural theory which have provoked problems that should be taken more seriously. Although there have been two single-authored books on Bourdieu so far, and important essays, especially by Lash, Garnham, Lipuma and Calhoun (see Calhoun et al., 1993; Crowther, 1994; Moi, 1991; Wilson, 1988), Bourdieu has not yet had the depth of attention he deserves in the field of sociology of culture. Admittedly, there has been a critical reception of Bourdieu's work in the narrower compass of studies of the school, which it is outside the scope of this volume to consider (Bernstein, 1975: 161, 176–7; Bredo and Fineberg, 1979; Halsey et al., 1980: 141–6; MacDonald, 1979/80). But within the broader sphere of cultural theory, his subversive approach to legitimate aesthetics has not been properly understood. In particular, Bourdieu's attempt to retrieve classical Marxism from routinised banalisation has involved an attack on literature and art as ideologies and it is the logic of this attack which his critics have often failed to grasp.

Indeed, recent commentators on Bourdieu, in my view, have entirely misunderstood his meaning. Thus, despite my great admiration for Jameson, I cannot follow him when he sees *Distinction* merely as a study in

conspicuous consumption (1991: 131). This dismissive judgement is unexpected since Jameson, like Bourdieu, also uses the combined approaches of Marx and Durkheim and has a comparable interest in the changing place of modernism in relation to power. I should mention also Roger Huss, whose *Times Literary Supplement* review of Bourdieu's cultural theory succeeds only in caricaturing Bourdieu when it describes him as a 'modest aristocrat' engaging in a '*kulturkampf*' against the cultural resentment of the masses (1993: 11). Lastly, Garnham and Williams have made some illuminating comments on Bourdieu's implicit valorisation of a popular aesthetic in *Distinction*. Yet they have misunderstood his view that the techniques for the decipherment of canonised works might be broadly diffused, rather than class possessions (1986).

In the chapters that follow I aim to remedy these deficiencies. I intend to do so by two routes. First, I shall provide a hermeneutic interpretation of Bourdieu's writing insofar as it is relevant to theories of culture. Here I shall argue that Bourdieu has indeed rescued cultural production from simplistic social theory which viewed the artist in reductive and passive terms:

I had to take back from idealism the active side which the materialist tradition, notably with the theory of reception, had abandoned to it. (1987a: 14)

This statement will be explored in terms of Bourdieu's unmasking of various ideologies of cultural creativity and reception, which together constitute areas of magical 'belief' in contemporary societies. Secondly, I shall address through a number of substantive issues the lacunae in his thought or the areas that suffer at present from an over-schematic presentation. By these means I hope to stimulate further research following in the wake of Bourdieu, whose project is conceived as an important renewal of a rich tradition.

Bourdieu's more recent work (1993b) differs from practices he has developed in the past to restore to the subordinate class or subaltern group the same importance and complexity of motivation that is attributed to canonised authors or the political élite. There are therefore unexplained methodological shifts over precisely how to 'democratise the hermeneutic' (1993b: 923). In part, Bourdieu's cultural theory has used methods that depend on interpretative analyses of texts, biographical materials, etc., as well as innovative content analyses of essay comments or *agrégation* reports to shed light on the binary classifications deployed by academic or critic. But the questionnaire which he once used has now been excluded – even demonised – as the crass instrument of the domination of the masses. In the absence of any auto-criticism of his earlier work, this is confusing, especially since an early work like *The Love of Art* cloaked its thin and patchy data on the subjective experience of art with an imposing array of mathematicised analyses of people's behaviour in galleries (Bourdieu and Darbel, with Schnapper (1991 (1968))). However, from the point of view of the sociology of culture, three main problems exist: descriptive status in relation to relevant comparisons, conception of the canon and the controversy over popular art.

(1) Comparative studies

While *Distinction* in particular has been praised as a rich ethnography of contemporary France (Brubaker, 1985), the scope and meaning of its assessment of the role of cultural capital in late capitalism have been questioned (Giddens, 1986). In fact, even the textual meaning of *Distinction* itself is fundamentally contested. Thus Robbins, who emphasises that Bourdieu's sociology 'is a concerted attempt to rescue and to celebrate the authenticity of the behaviour of ordinary people' (1991: 4), has argued that *Distinction* is a 'politically dysfunctional work' (1991: 129) that can only accentuate the divergence of tastes it describes. Garnham, on the other hand, has read *Distinction* as 'the revenge of the French rural working class' (1993: 181), deciphering its main thrust as a defence of popular culture (see Fowler, 1991: 215–16). The national limitations in Bourdieu's findings have been emphasised recently in a fascinating comparison of the contrasting class ethos of the French and North American upper middle class by Lamont (1992). She has stressed the divergence of views about the salience of the aesthetic (or high culture) relative to either moral values or economic success, by contrasting both a Parisian sample with a provincial Clermont-Ferrand bourgeois group, and two groups from New York and Indianapolis. She identifies certain key differences between France and America, especially the smaller class fraction dependent on economic profits in France, the greater French central government expenditure as a proportion of gross domestic product (45 per cent versus 26 per cent), the more significant proportion employed by the State in France (31 per cent versus 16 per cent) and the more centralised French educational system, with its smaller educated élite (1992: 144). Such differences, she argues, have resulted in greater inequality of wealth in France, fewer chances of social mobility, less ethnic diversity – and also in less stress on money as a form of social closure than on differences based on cultural distinction. In her view, inequalities of knowledge have been overemphasised by Bourdieu:

Indeed in France, cultural barriers are only slightly more important than other types of boundaries and they predominate only in Paris and not in Clermont; even if Bourdieu is not concerned with the American case, it is useful to stress again that many [upper-middle-class] Americans do not show signs of cultural goodwill, do not acknowledge the legitimacy of high culture and the importance [of] knowledge about it. (1992: 186)

She concludes that Bourdieu's sociology has not been *sufficiently* reflexive in examining the distinctiveness of its own perspective, that of Parisian intellectuals or cultural and social specialists.

But is this so? An alternative explanation of Bourdieu's rationale is that he wants to emphasise precisely the differences between the metropolis and even large towns in the periphery and that Paris has a typical significance for him as the location of the most extreme examples of the ideology of 'natural' intellectual gifts and the legitimate mode of consumption (1993a: 37). Thus a comparative study might not refute Bourdieu but would confirm

the very trajectories and strategies that are at stake when he writes of the control over space and time that the Parisian haute bourgeoisie possesses. Be that as it may, it is clearly important to explain these divergencies (of gender as well as national and regional origin) and to unravel their meaning. The reception research used in my earlier study (1991) of women readers in the peripheral location of Scotland confirms the extent of cultural stratification. But, like the work of Lamont (1992), it questions the degree to which aesthetic formalism, or the absolute primacy of style, is apparent, even for those fractions, such as the higher professions, that are rich in cultural capital. These issues are taken up in chapter 7.

(2) The canon

Bourdieu has criticised the essentialist view of art by showing that its proponents stress the universality and timeless qualities of works of art while simultaneously excluding as valid sources of aesthetic pleasure both the charm offered by the objects of popular pleasures and the purely cerebral playfulness of the court. Hence what Bourdieu himself christens his 'vulgar' critique (1984: 485) shows how the economy of symbolic goods offers scarce resources (the taste for consecrated art) to serve as the basis for a strategy of distinction. Such a strategy must favour the dominant class because of the built-in class specificity of Kant's speciously universal judgements. Bourdieu has been taken to task for this, both on the (Kantian) ground that *analytical* arguments about the judgement of art are not affected by *empirically existing* differences in taste (Giddens, 1986) and on the ground that art, on this view, cannot be distinguished by its intrinsic value but only by its magical aura or 'fetish' character in social action. Such a view would detract from artists' historical importance in resisting the demands of the culture industries (Bürger, 1984: 24). Both these arguments have *some* force. Bürger is certainly right that the canon has been at least in part constituted by the work of dissident artists. Yet he has failed to understand Bourdieu's assessment of fetishism, which is founded on a similar critique to his own of art's status as a 'sacred island' in a bourgeois society. Nevertheless, I think there is a tension between Bourdieu's views of artistic goods as *fetishes* and his view that artists are *prophets* (1992). I shall argue that there are grounds for applying the concept of prophet with more substantive social referents than Bourdieu does and that consequently the approach to artists adopted in his writings has paid too little attention to their motives and subjective meanings. I shall suggest that the process he describes as the artistic internalisation of the high/low divide by artists fails to assess adequately the historical differences in the groups of avant-garde artists. My approach in chapter 5 specifically takes up his case-study of Manet and Impressionism as an avant-garde movement, which, I shall argue, Bourdieu misleadingly associates solely with a turn to formalism.

(3) The problem of popular art

Finally, it has not escaped critical attention that Bourdieu has excluded any popular art from his category of canon or consecrated culture (Shusterman, 1992: 172; 1993: 155), even though it is not clear why this should be. Bourdieu regards the emergence of modernism as a period when the possession of culture was axiomatically equated with the monopoly of an élite minority. Except for a few folk fossils, the masses have been literally culturally dispossessed, a process which ranks at the very least for him with the stripping of peasants of their land and which we can now perhaps hardly recall with its full terror. The attempt to produce a few claims to the title of 'working-class art' is to make the mistake of falling into pastoral mode, that is, of confusing intellectuals' accounts of the people with the people's own view of themselves.

This book will explore the limitations of such a position. It will question whether the ironic interpretation of early capitalist aesthetic discourses has not caused Bourdieu to erect a historical construction of canonical closure which is too complete and too impermeable. It will suggest further that the restricted spatial arena of Bourdieu's studies has blinded him to the existence of authorship within the popular art-forms that a concept of rediscovery can bring back to our gaze. The analysis of middlebrow and popular writers contained in chapter 6 suggests new perspectives on this problem.

I shall suggest that these are areas where a reassessment of cultures of resistance would be appropriate, and that this cannot be done without an examination of the gendering of genres. I shall look especially at the obstacles for women in acquiring recognition within avant-garde movements, and the emergence of women writers with considerable cultural capital in the middlebrow sphere, especially in the inter-war period. It is proposed that their works continued to make an impact on what has been called – following Felski (1989) – the feminist counter-public sphere. Arguing that some of the insights of Bourdieu's *Photography* could provide the basis for a fertile approach to working-class and peasant art, I take up some of the best-selling genres he has neglected. I shall also question Bourdieu's view that in capitalist modernity there is no popular art, a position which has been ably criticised by Shusterman (1992: 192). I shall assess this in the light of British Chartist novels, working-class industrial writing and other more recent popular literature. This will suggest that literature has a variety of roles for popular readers which Bourdieu's contrast between the formalism of the aesthetic attitude and the glitz of the naive gaze has neglected. Bourdieu's reception theory denies neither that writers and artists are autonomous nor that they are capable of 'singular achievements', but it does deny that culture is now an instrument of social change. It will be contended that he has underemphasised the potential for art and literature both to be critical and to imagine new alternatives.

Notes

1. *Reproduction* (written with Passeron) appeared in French in 1970; the edition used is the second English one (1990). Similarly *Distinction* was first published in 1979.

2. For this reason I cannot agree with Jenkins when he claims that 'his theory becomes a machine for suppressing history, banishing it with an eternal ethnographic present' (1992: 97).

3. This seems to me rather similar to Gramsci's notion of action in accordance with common sense, in which he defines the latter as deploying fragments of old philosophy and popular maxims.

4. Loesberg (1993) has emphasised the degree to which the habitus itself has been delineated in terms which have drawn on Kant's theory of art as purposiveness without purpose. However, he has omitted the fact that such aesthetic elements are translated by Bourdieu into a theory of social regulation which owes its origin to Durkheim.

5. Bakhtin is, of course, invoked by Bourdieu himself in relation to popular culture (1984: 491).

6. This point has been made by Codd (1990: 135); it is also raised in Garnham and Williams' critique of the quietist aspect of his thought (1986).

7. I should clarify that I do not regard Giddens' structuration theory as any more successful in this respect, despite its similar moves to Bourdieu. It should be noted that although all the assumptions of mechanical Marxism have been eliminated, Bourdieu still regards a constructive and reflexive social science as a renewed source of rational transformation, and believes that its conclusions should be disseminated through the media.

8. Frow makes several important points about Bourdieu's earlier weaknesses in addressing the over-determined character of intellectuals' views, but he is surely wrong to believe that there is a difficulty in converting economic capital into cultural capital, as Bourdieu claims takes place (Frow, 1987: 59).

9. In this respect, he shares a general conception of the sociological craft with C. Wright Mills and Alvin Gouldner, while also stressing, like Habermas, that the process of participant observation serves to enhance sociologists' own reflective self-consciousness (Habermas, 1988: 92-3).

10. It is only necessary to note Bourdieu's essay 'The Historical Genesis of the Pure Aesthetic' in *The Field of Cultural Production* (1993a: 254-66) and all his early work on Algeria to realise the oddity of this claim.

PART I

INTERPRETATIVE STUDIES

1

SITUATING BOURDIEU: CULTURAL THEORY AND SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

It is only possible to grasp Bourdieu's work on art and cultural reception if we understand the comparative analysis on which his whole work pivots. His childhood in the peasant area of Béarn and his time as an anthropologist in Kabylia (Algeria) shaped his analysis of the transition from pre-capitalist to capitalist forms and of the distinctive patterns of domination associated with modernity. My aim here is to start with Bourdieu's early studies in Algeria to show what historical preconditions are necessary for specialised and autonomous cultural fields to emerge. I shall then introduce, via his major works, the theoretical areas in which he has made decisive interventions. My main claim is that he has superseded various problems that have perennially plagued sociology as a critical social theory and that, at the present moment, this is the most original and cogent modelling of the social world that we have.

The Kabylia World

Bourdieu's early work on ethnography already shows unusual scope and an innovative departure from the authorised and mechanistic materialism of 'Histmat' or Stalinist historical materialism (1961, 1963, 1964 (Bourdieu and Sayad), 1966a). These books explore the breakdown of the equilibrium between artisan towns and the peasant countryside, following on the emergence of both the class society and the ideology of race instituted by colonialism. Although Bourdieu is not listed as one of the intellectuals who signed the Manifesto of the 121, he wrote in the midst of the Algerian War and may well have contributed to the events which led to resistance to service in the French Army (Alverman, 1960: 46; Anon., 1960: 196–7). In drawing on traditions normally insulated from each other, Bourdieu's approach bears the traces of the profound influence not just of Durkheim but

also of Weber. Even more decisive are the marks of the famous Vol. I, Part 8 of *Capital*, especially where Marx deals with the importance of colonialism for increasing proletarianisation.

Bourdieu points out that traditional tribal Algerian societies such as the peasant Kabylia compensated for their weak mastery of nature by elaborate and detailed social organisation:

By a sort of phenomenon of compensation, to the imperfection of techniques there is a corresponding exaggerated perfection of the social order – as if the precariousness of its adjustment to the natural environment was counterbalanced by the excellence of the social organisation. (1961: 6)

This is also evident in the artisan and merchant towns, where a leisurely daily period within the public sphere developed – at least for men – ‘the art and culture of social relations’ (1961: 62). By such statements, Bourdieu reveals that the colonialist or Orientalist discourse is subverted within his writing. Thus he stresses the democracy of Kabylia tribal organisation and the logic of social honour or symbolic capital which takes the place of the accumulation of economic capital in the Kabylia life-cycle. In general, his ethnographic analysis effectively undercuts any facile belief in the ‘barbarism’ of the Islamicised Algerians.

However, Bourdieu sometimes verges on the indiscriminating nostalgia that is implicit in some representatives of *négritude*. I refer in this context to his discussion of gender divisions, where he seems to me to ‘bend the stick too far in the other direction’ by stressing the multiple forms of *de facto* power available traditionally to women, despite their condition of male tutelage (1964: 187). He claims, for example, that although the position of the women of the Shawia tribe was one of extreme subordination, they possessed countervailing influence deriving from their extraordinary gender solidarity. Those who had been widowed or repudiated by their husbands could resist extreme patriarchal controls by judicious resort to the magical rhetoric of the evil eye. Less contentiously, he states that it is not traditional custom but recent urbanisation and rural displacement that has led to the imposition of the veil and the segregation of women within the house (1964: 131–2). Yet he also acknowledges the ceaseless labour of the Kabylia women he lived amongst and their disappearance from all public life as soon as they marry. Even if the effects of uprooting have massively constrained such women’s everyday lives, Bourdieu’s conclusions suggest a fraught and uneasy stance towards the traditional division of labour at this point. His perspective is better grounded in the evidence of a marked level of legally monopolised male power rather than of the existence of extensive freedoms for women.

Algerian traditional society did not lack endogenous change. The Mozabite tribe in the desert cities, whose predestination beliefs and ascetic rigour Bourdieu compares to Weber’s Puritan dissenters, are the main protagonists of this drama of capitalist entrepreneurial activity and industry. However, Mozabite modernity did not serve – like the icy waters of egoism in the West – to drown the heavenly chorus. Rather, the profane centre of