

HABITUS AND MISRECOGNITION

James Cunningham

Ontario Institute for Studies in Education

I feel that Dr. John Scahill's appropriation of the habitus -- an appropriation designed to provide a theoretical grounding for the AESA report on the value of SFE (Social Foundations of Education) to teacher preparation -- is one of which Pierre Bourdieu would not approve. This is so, especially if the corresponding promotion of teacher professionalism, advocated by Dr. Scahill, has, as its end, the elimination of dominance by a particular ideology or social group, both over meaning and decision making by teachers, and over their subsequent treatment of students. For, I will argue, Dr. Scahill has failed to take into account the implications of the conservative nature of the habitus, and its responsibility for the systematic "misrecognition" by agents of the nature of the "fields" or institutions within which they work.¹

Bourdieu understands all institutions to be sites of a struggle for domination.² It is the habitus that allows agents to adapt to this struggle, to rationalize the harm they do if they are successful, and to accept the harm done to them if they are not, by causing them to misrecognize the struggle as something rooted in atemporal or natural truth, value, or necessity -- characteristics which they then attribute to the dominant structures of interpretation and evaluation within the institution. So, even in the face of sincere efforts at change, this misrecognition subtly guarantees the cooperation of agents in the maintenance of dominant structures of interpretation and evaluation within the institution.

Two instances of the tenacity with which habitus ensures the reproduction of dominant structures, while creating the illusion that it is doing something quite different, come from Bourdieu's examination of innovations within the French universities in the late sixties. He argues that, because of misrecognition, innovations that consciously aimed at changing the academy to meet the demands presented by radical social change ended up having the effect of preserving the very structures of domination within the academy that were threatened by those social changes. Many of the supposedly "liberal" innovations were, in reality, a result of *resentment* by the students and families of the dominant classes, and actually worked to effect a restoration of their privileged access to the academy in an era when previously excluded classes were clambering for entry.³ Likewise, Bourdieu's work shows that, during the same era, categories for evaluating students seeking academic careers -- categories purported to measure universally acceptable standards of excellence -- actually allowed faculty to recognize and reward candidates from social backgrounds similar to their own.⁴

Now, Bourdieu admits that habitus can be transformed, allowing agents to challenge the dominant structures of a field, but transformation requires a reflexive critique, or critique turned upon oneself.⁵ Reflexive critique sees through the purportedly atemporal and universal validity of the procedural, evaluative, and interpretative categories which govern an agent's field and allows the agent to discover the true nature of these categories as "symbolic capital."⁶ As symbolic capital, a field's categories of understanding are tools of dominance suited to certain historical situations and tailored to the needs and abilities of agents from certain social spaces, these being the social spaces that produce agents who will dominate within that field. It is the recognition of symbolic capital within

their field, and of how much of it they possess, that allows agents to stop cooperating in their own domination and in the domination of others.

Had Bourdieu read the same AESA report that both Dr. Scahill and I have read, he would observe, I think, that what the AESA proposes is more likely to reproduce an experience homologous to that of the French universities, than it is to open the way for a challenge to the structures of dominance within North American education. He would conclude that, in order to guarantee the reproduction of an academic system in which they are sanctioned theorists, SFE faculty are investing a great deal of capital in multiculturalism. True, the AESA report declares that teachers have a "right and responsibility"⁷ to examine the sources and motives behind their meaning and decision making within the classroom -- in other words, to engage in reflexive critique. And, to this end, the report calls on the need for SFE faculty to develop and teach courses that will sensitize teachers to the effects of "conflicting ideological perspectives on meaning making."⁸ But there is no caveat calling for the critical examination of motives behind educational innovations involving an ideologically heterogenous perspective, no examination of these innovations as "symbolic capital." SFE faculty, as theorists, developers of curriculum and instructors, are not called upon to examine their own motives -- an emancipatory "instrument of vigilance."⁹ And this is odd, especially since the AESA's proposals, if effected, will result in ensuring the reproduction of the position of SFE faculty as sanctioned theorists within the educational field. For the AESA report maintains that SFE faculty are necessary to achieve the desired teacher preparation in this field.¹⁰

Precisely because it is couched, both in the report and in Dr. Scahill's paper, in universalizing and culturally neutral terminology such as "professionalism"¹¹ and "better"¹² teaching, Bourdieu would assume that the rationale for the proposed teacher preparation must be an act of misrecognition: one that masks the actual nature of the proposed curriculum as capital in the struggle for dominance within the educational field. For Bourdieu, the rationale would mask the reality that, in common with all candidates for entry into all fields, student teachers are being evaluated on their virtuosity at playing -- or their "feel for"¹³ -- a game; in this particular case, the game is the "sensitivity to ideological heteronomy game," one that, in reality, has to do exclusively with the struggle of power. Virtuosity or "feel" would be measured in accordance with the expectations determined by the habitus of evaluating instructors, expectations arising from the social background in which their habitus were formed but which they misrecognize as the embodiment of universally valid standards and so "transmut[e] social truth into academic truth."¹⁴ A major expectation will inevitably be that student teachers demonstrate that they take the game seriously. After all, we do not want anyone who is going to pay only lip service to multiculturalism in schools now, do we? For Bourdieu, this is not habitus transformation. This is a case merely of the educational field reproducing itself by ensuring that it has a population of teachers, theorists, and instructors who will, because they all misrecognize their field in the same way, cooperate with each other in maintaining its governing structures and the views of a dominant social space, even in the face of changing demands from a society that is increasingly multicultural in nature.

But what about Dr. Scahill's extrapolation from Bourdieu of the notions that 1) sympathy between different habitus can lead to greater cooperation, and that 2) the school is a locale for the transformation of the habitus, transformations through which sympathy between habitus could be achieved? From these notions Scahill builds his claim that professionalism would be enhanced, I suppose with a corresponding breakdown in patterns of cultural dominance in teacher and student meaning making, if teacher and student habitus were better matched. The matching would result from teacher education by virtue of which teachers' habitus would be broadened to include a greater sympathy with the habitus of students.

I think that the first notion comes from a simple misreading of a passage that Dr. Scahill has quoted from Bourdieu. When Bourdieu says that "the affinities of the habitus experienced as sympathy and antipathy are the basis of all forms of cooperation,"¹⁵ he is not referring to cooperation between agents with differing habitus but to agents with the same. In other words, Bourdieu is saying merely

that people with the same habitus have a basis for cooperation in the fact that their likes and dislikes are the same. And Bourdieu shows that this is what he means when he says, "If you want to found a political movement or even an association, you will have a better chance if you bring people together from the same sector of space."¹⁶ By "sector or space" he is referring to the social space within which habitus is formed. It seems to me that, when Bourdieu advocates habitus transformation, he does so more on the grounds that it will lead to a end of misrecognition than that it will harmonize previously different habitus.

The second notion, which I find to be of more interest, being that a field, such as a school, can alter the habitus of agents, is indeed one that Bourdieu recognizes to be true. However, I am convinced that it would be wrong to try to extrapolate, from anything that Bourdieu ever wrote, that he advocates such a role for institutions, and especially schools, as a means of breaking down patterns of dominance. Bourdieu seems to me to hold that, in truth, institutions that actually alter the habitus of agents are the most repressive, and their structures of dominance the most totalizing. Fields such as education are naturally arenas of struggle. In this struggle, agents accommodate as far as their habitus allow to the structures governing the fields. If their habitus is ill suited to the task then they are eliminated from the field altogether. But, holds Bourdieu, some fields are unnatural in that their demands upon agents are totalitarian. These fields will not allow agents to be eliminated from participation by virtue of incompatible habitus. Simply put, they will not let the agents go, and, instead, "demand everything without conditions and concessions and...in...extreme forms -- barracks, prisons, concentration camps -- ha[ve] the physical and symbolic means of restructuring earlier habitus...."¹⁷ Bourdieu holds that this is the condition of the *apparatchik*,¹⁸ who is in perfect sympathy with everyone in the institution because he has been reduced to a perfect sympathy with the institution itself.

For Bourdieu, structures of dominance are not challenged through the achievement of perfect fits. Challenge comes from the intensification and demystification of struggle, so that agents come to see the fields for what they are and refuse to cooperate in their reproduction. The beliefs of free agents are important in Bourdieu's thinking and it is workings of the habitus that allow agents both free complicity in and free rejection of the reproduction of dominant structures.¹⁹ But, in order for agents to reject structures of domination they must break through the veils of misrecognition and recognize fields for what they are -- struggles for power.

¹ P. Bourdieu, "Men and machine," *Advances in Social Theory and Methodology: Toward an Integration of Micro and Macro Sociologies*, ed. K. Knorr-Cetina and A.V. Cicourel (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981), 306-7.

² P. Bourdieu, *In Other Words: Essays Towards a Reflexive Sociology*, trans. Matthew Adamson (Stanford: Stanford University Press), 111.

³ Bourdieu, *In Other Words*, 43-6.

⁴ P. Bourdieu, *Homo Academicus*, trans. P. Collier (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988), 194-227.

⁵ Bourdieu, *In Other Words*, 24-5, 27, 116.

⁶ Bourdieu, *In Other Words*, 111-2.

⁷ AESA draft position paper, 8.

⁸ AESA draft position paper, 2.

⁹ Bourdieu, *In Other Words*, 27.

¹⁰ AESA draft position paper, 7-8.

¹¹ J. Scahill, "Meaning Construction and Habitus," in *Philosophy of Education 1993*, ed. Audrey Thompson (Urbana, Ill: Philosophy of Education Society, 1994).

¹² AESA draft position paper, 5.

¹³ Bourdieu, *In Other Words*, 63.

¹⁴ Bourdieu, *Homo Academicus*, 207.

¹⁵ Bourdieu, *In Other Words*, 128.

¹⁶ Bourdieu, *In Other Words*, 129.

¹⁷ Bourdieu, "Men and machine," 313.

¹⁸ Bourdieu, "Men and machine," 314.

¹⁹ Bourdieu, *Homo Academicus*, 207.

©1996-2004 PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION SOCIETY
ALL RIGHTS RESERVED