11 2007

Practical Theories?

Ruth Sonderegger

Translated by Aileen Derieg

> "The chief defect of all hitherto existing materialism [...] is that the thing,
> reality, sensuousness, is conceived only in the form of the *object or of contemplation*,
> but not as *sensuous human activity, practice."*
> *(Karl Marx, 1st Thesis on Feuerbach)*

In reference to Bourdieu's theory of praxis, the question that always seemed to me to be both the most interesting and the most difficult is whether Bourdieu is not only a theorist of praxis, but also a practician of theory. Or to phrase it in the terms of Marx' Theses on Feuerbach, the first of which Bourdieu placed above his Outline of a Theory of Practice[1] as a motto: does Bourdieu's theory only analyze and interpret, or does it also change something? The following considerations center around this question. In conclusion, I want to propose a few conjectures about why the Bourdieu theory-praxis complex ultimately refers to aesthetic strategies that specifically do not occur where he makes art fields – for instance, the field of literature, photography or of the museum – the object of sociological research.

Theory of Praxis

What is so special about praxis theories? Are they not the most obvious, especially for a social scientist? Particularly in the social sciences and humanities, it is not at all self-evident to analyze human activity on the basis of everyday practices and the concomitant sens pratique, which has entered into the German-speaking discussion – easily misunderstood – as "social sense".[2] According to the thesis of the praxis theory, with this sens pratique we can even precisely navigate and participate where it is impossible to explicate or even defend the rules of a praxis. If we follow this thesis, then the categories of action and the actor that are so fundamental and apparently inconspicuous are shaken. These categories specifically impute an intentionality that has become taken for granted as the measure of the conscious and the known. In light of this measure, all other agency must be assessed as pre- or subconscious.

Bourdieu already protests against this at the terminological level by consistently using the word "agent" rather than "actor" or "subject", which indicates those taking action, who are always also delegates taking action on behalf of others. We need only recall how long actions were analyzed by sociology and philosophy as being instrumentally rational or guided by explicit norms[3], in order to understand what a radical step that was. By localizing the foundation of intentional action in socialized habits of thinking, wanting, moving and sensing, Bourdieu turns the relationships around: intentional action is based on regulated behavior, to which we have no knowing access, although we are virtually physically familiar with the norms that are established or passed on in this way – or to be more precise: we live and are these norms. At the same time, following Bourdieu, questioning individual possibilities of choice does not mean that everything is left up to chance or that the age of purposelessness has come, which is especially invoked in the art context.

The central terms of Bourdieu's philosophy of praxis, "field" and "habitus"[4], provide an ingenious instrument to be able to analyze human action as being neither random nor absolutely determined even where agents neither choose the rules nor are able to justify them.

The thoroughly bodily rules stored in the sens pratique are hard to criticize, because they cannot be named without taking a great distance. And if they may be seized and explicated, they present themselves in the appearance of the natural and legitimate. The way it is, appears to be good. This insight is found in the philosophical theory of praxis in a trusting view and in a cultural pessimism view. It is no wonder that half of the praxis philosophers – Wittgenstein is their most prominent representative – became quietist and, in the course of defending the fundamental position of familiar modes of action against rationalist understandings of action, came to the conclusion that the familiar way is the right way. Heidegger, on the other hand, who represents the second fraction, claims that the human being is by definition a fallen being of the masses, imitating others, never able to escape the sphere of man; in other words, a kind of original sin theory adapted to praxis theory.

Praxis of Theory I

Bourdieu is only marginally interested in the triviality that the human being is a creature of habit, which Wittgenstein and Heidegger had placed in the center, and without condescendingly looking down on the creatures thus described. For Bourdieu, in its generality this triviality is only the starting point for investigating very specific normalized rules. Instead of saying what belongs to human action as such, Bourdieu reconstructs normed habits specific to groups and classes, thus calling attention to three points: it is much more important than the all-too-human fact that habits structure us, to find out which different social norms there are in one and the same field, what the factors are that

determine the boundaries between these different social behaviors, and which have the greatest impact and why. This is, for instance, the result of the museum study by Bourdieu and Darbel[5], that the family environment is much more important than school in the question of who goes to the museum as an adult; yet influences from school are more lasting than educational programs on the part of the museums; that the accessibility of museums in Poland functions differently than in the Netherlands or in France. In other words, from the beginning Bourdieu was interested in the factors that lead to different normalities in one and the same social field and in the power relations between these different normalities. At the same time, the fact that Bourdieu investigated certain fields of praxis and not others is like a judgment: specifically that explicating the game rules is necessary in these places, because the appearance of being natural has settled itself here obstinately and with structural violence.

This is also a first answer to the question of the extent to which Bourdieu's praxis theory intervenes in the practices he analyzes and is thus also a praxis of theory. It is one thing to refer to certain practices as an illustration of theoretical insights and then present examples that are as spectacular as possible or even completely detached[6], to make an all too general point of the philosophy of praxis more entertaining. It is something completely different, though, if one wants to find out, like Bourdieu, for whom it is a rule to take part in a guided tour in a museum, and who disdains these kinds of events as a service for proletarians and those ignorant of art. Yet it is not only the case that Bourdieu is not interested in the fundamental difference between explicit knowledge and implicit rules, between know how and know that. Self-reflexive as no other praxis theorist, he also considered the class-specific way of dealing with this difference. Hence, his Pascalian Meditations[7] are devoted to the genesis of scholastic reason. The latter was always more perfectly specialized in the explication of know how, in

transforming know how into know that, and additionally ensured that this special ability, increasingly contemptuous of the world, presupposing leisure and economic independence, was furnished with a great deal of cultural and symbolic capital.

Praxis of Theory II

The praxis theory is not without its problems, even if one seeks to practice it site-specifically, or more precisely field-specifically and in keeping with power theory in Bourdieu's manner, instead of leaving it in the realm of the generally human. Inherent to the theory of the unknowingly mastered rules is not only the danger of quietism, but also of an elitist, structuralist ideology critique. This kind of ideology critique encroaches, when reason that has become sociologically or anthropologically scholastic purports to be able to say everything about the rules of those who blindly act according to them; and when, on top of that, this reason evinces no interest in intervening in this blindness, but stoically looks down on it. This problem is not unfamiliar to Bourdieu either, who had reason to take leave of his initial structuralism in favor of a praxeology that has to do with mediating the participant perspective with the observer perspective.

Bourdieu did not arrive at this result purely out of the goodness of his heart, but rather because he was self-critical enough to see which dimensions of practices he could not explain with a structuralist program that was too narrow.[8] Structuralist observer sociology, which seeks to cancel out the participant perspective entirely, is too little sensitive to the strategic use of given rules in relation to a situation; it also forgets that its academic standpoint of breaking with the participant perspective is also only a standpoint. Bourdieu reacts to this with the demand to break with the break.[9] With this, he turns against the elite position of the social scientist who wants to construct rules that the actors have no

conscious idea of. The social scientist magician, who is able to decipher secret laws of action, is superseded by the self-reflexive sociologist. She/he takes responsibility for their own being embedded in both the everyday and the theoretical practices of analyzing. And she/he afterward endeavors to negotiate between the first step of breaking with the social world and the limitations of her/his inevitable participation.

The question, however, is whether Bourdieu ever found a satisfactory solution for negotiating the two so very different perspectives, that of the participant and that of the observer, of distance and engagement. For to begin with, it appears that either the sociologist must become a distanceless participant, or that the reflection on the observer perspective only doubles it. Either would respectively obliterate the other perspective. [10] *And this would mean that with the self-reflexive objectification of sociological distancing, anything like engagement would be just as little achieved as with the – no matter how enlightened the intention – explicated hidden pattern of agency. Yet even with this kind of enlightenment enlightened about itself, the structures that are revealed are still not changed, and most of all, no attempt has been made to provide those analyzed with tools to make this insight utilizable for themselves. It is one thing to say with Proust, quoted by Bourdieu, that "arms and legs are full of hidden imperatives"*[11]*. It is an entirely different question, which rules are to be expelled from the arms and legs and where they might be made to dance.*

Praxis of Theory III

This difference between engagement and enlightenment can be explained[12] *with the explicating or critical way of dealing with the amateur photography of the petit bourgeois and proletarian photo albums by Bourdieu on the one hand*[13] *and by the photographer Jo Spence*[14] *on the other. Bourdieu analyzes the album photos to*

reconstruct social rules of the lower class, which would hardly be mentioned in a sociological interview. His procedure turns those analyzed into actors and experts and presents a defense of amateur photography as an art moyen at the same time. In comparison, Spence goes a step further. In the investigation of her own family album, she shows that visual constructions can be more revealing than those verbally articulated, where implicit social rules are involved. To this extent she is in accordance with Bourdieu as an anthropologist of the visual. In addition, however, and logically continuing her research of working class photography, she undertakes the attempt to critique the function and aesthetics of amateur photography using the concrete example of her own family album, and to invent new album rules. In this respect, she leaves Bourdieu far behind.

In The Weight of the World[15], however, and in several later (interview) statements, Bourdieu at least enters into the proximity of engaged analysis practices like Spence's. The Weight of the World is more than just the publication of interview material, such as that which exists and could just as well have been published for Bourdieu's earlier studies. This interview material, published in a prominent position and in an unusual amount, and especially because of the serial composition without a conclusion (which brings me to aesthetic rhetorical strategies of social research), it has a practical, namely utilizable, added value. It has this value for those interviewed, because the conversations devote an unusual amount of attention to them, specifically so that no inexistent hopes, desires and alternatives become manifest, where one tends to see only patronized, passivized and, if possible, spectacular misery. For the interviewees, in many cases the interviews obviously also have the character of a self-explanation and self-presentation. Specifically where the conversations become symmetrical in the sense that the interviewees (learn to) take over the questioning and sometimes even the distanced sociological view, it leads to a new appraisal of one's own problems as

being not so entirely one's own. These kinds of self-experiences are not (only) disillusioning in the sense of an elitist ideology critique, but rather – on the contrary – sometimes even liberating. It is not my intention to gloss over the problems of The Weight of the World in this way – especially not in terms of the selection of people to be interviewed and the lack of background information about their social context, which sometimes results in a peculiar auratization of the individual[16].

This brings me to the use value for the readers. Unlike the usefulness for those interviewed, which is primarily due to Bourdieu's reflection and critique of existing interview methods, the readers profit from the aesthetic qualities of representation. Whereas for the interviewees, the experiences and desires of their neighbors or the social constellation they belong to are only sporadically addressed, for the readers of the book this open totality, which can neither be reduced to a statistical average nor understood as an argument for singular experience, is foregrounded. The strange totality is due to both the way the conversation is conducted and – even more so – to the serial composition of the interviews. In comparison with other studies by Bourdieu, this means that the (undoubtedly illuminating) statements and prognoses about the probability of which desires and interests one will have in a certain social location, are augmented in Weight of the World by the enactment of old, yet still topical ideology critical question of when one's desires are really one's own, and whether they can be distinguished from compulsions.

It is probably not a coincidence that Bourdieu was working on his book about Flaubert[17] and the interviews for The Weight of the World at the same time. And it is certainly even less of a coincidence that Bourdieu referred more and more frequently at this time to the French society novel, Karl Kraus, Thomas Bernhard and Elfriede Jelinek[18]. Whereas with Kraus, Bernhard and Jelinek he highlighted techniques of

irony and humor and regretted that he had not been able to achieve something similar in sociology, with the French novels he emphasized their power of analysis and insight into social structures. Again and again, he stressed Flaubert's dictum, which was especially important for social science, that in art the commonplace, the banal, the mediocre and the insignificant should be taken as seriously as that which is acknowledged in distinction and dignity. It is in this literary strategy, which is not only an argument for the break with the participant perspective, but also at least as much the opposite, that distance and engagement meet in such a way that is hardly – if at all – possible in the conventional kinds of publications of sociological investigations: Flaubert's strategy leaves equally as much space for each individual case and depotentiates it in its uniqueness, especially in combination with the serialization technique. This appears to me to be the compositional principle of the interview project on the Weight of the World. It is obvious, however, that visual strategies play no role in this. Although Bourdieu may be an anthropologist or sociologist of the visual, his analyses and engagements do not work with the visual. Neither did Bourdieu ever use his own photos from the time in Algeria (1955-1960) in a way analogous to the Weight of the World, i.e. in a montage, nor did he focus on other visual strategies of analysis or even engagement later. An inkling of what a visual interview composition in the Flaubert-Bourdieu sense could look like, is suggested, in my opinion, by Kultug Ataman's "Küba".[19]

"Küba"

The video installation "Küba" is comprised of forty television sets on stands assembled in a room, each with an armchair in front of it. On the monitors, in the simultaneity of a confusion of voices, forty inhabitants of the Istanbul neighborhood of "Küba" are heard, whereby

the spatial arrangement of the monitors only makes it possible to really follow one interview at a time. The interviews marginally revolve repeatedly around the question of what defines "Küba" – and keywords are mentioned, such as Kurdish community, being politically leftist or communist, Cuba, a staunch social cohesion never experienced elsewhere, petty crime, permanent violence internally and even stronger from outside. Ultimately, however, all of this proves to be secondary in comparison with the question of how the individuals cope with their lives that are endangered on all sides. What is repeated in the stories of these lives is an oppressive violence – between the sexes, the generations, but most of all between the inside and the outside of this urban district – with a simultaneous and paradoxical insistence on Küba as the epitome of home and solidarity. An image emerges of a social periphery, which the great majority of Turkish society, to which the Küba portrait complexly says no, wants nothing to do with – except in the form of police intervention.

Similarly to The Weight of the World, "Küba" differs from sociological surveys on issues of social dissatisfaction, initially in that no conclusions are drawn, no generalizations or prognoses are made. The length and extensiveness of the published interviews, which assume the form of monologue stories due to the restraint of the interviewer – in both "Küba" and in The Weight of the World – also marks a difference from the conventional formats of social research. Yet the installation character of "Küba" adds something crucial to the linear reading experience that The Weight of the World requires: the permanent acoustic and spatial presence of all those interviewed. In this way, the social context is always present and de-auratizes the existentialism of the individual stories, which are not without problems particularly in Bourdieu's study.

A Different (View of) Art

Bourdieu not only inspired artists, but was also at least as much inspired by artistic strategies, although rarely in visual or spatial aspects. In light of his excessive photographing at the beginning of his work as a social scientist in Algeria, this is just as surprising as in light of his thoughts on social spatiality. Yet I find it even more surprising that for a long time Bourdieu was interested in art mainly as stakes and currency on the playing field of power.[20] On the other hand, he paid no attention to the enlightening, the subversive and even the engaged sides of art until into the 1990s.[21] This means that for a long time, he did not take aesthetic techniques seriously as possibilities for insight.[22] Where he actually did so in the end, this was limited to admiration for some artists. Even for the most reflexive of all praxis theorists, it was obviously not possible – at least not for a long time – to play with the coercions of social science rationalism and to challenge them with the scientificality of art. This is probably due to the academic field itself and may have been exacerbated by Bourdieu's split position in it.

---

[1]Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1977.

[2]Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, Stanford/Cal.: University Press & Cambridge/UK: Polity Press 1990 (French: *Le sens pratique*, Paris 1980; German: *Sozialer Sinn*, Frankfurt / Main 1987.

[3]Cf. e.g.: Andreas Reckwitz, "Toward a Theory of Social Practices. A Development in Culturalist Theorizing", in: *European Journal of Social Theory*, 5, 2002, p. 243-263.

[4]"Habitus" is not to be taken as a closed system of rules, but rather as schemata that provide certain possibilities, specifically in

an endless diversity that cannot be anticipated. On the relationship between habitus and field, cf. also Pierre Bourdieu / Loïq J.D. Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*, Chicago University Press 1992, p.126 ff. and: Beate Krais / Gunter Gebauer, *Habitus*, Bielefeld 2002.

[5]Pierre Bourdieu / Alain Darbel / Dominique Schnapper, *L'amour de l'art. Les musées d'art et leur public*, Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1966; Engl.: *The Love of Art. European Art Museums and their Public* (with Alain Darbel and Dominique Schnapper; trad. Caroline Beattie & Nick Merriman), Cambridge/UK: Polity Press & Stanford/Cal.: University Press, 1990

[6]For instance, Theodore R. Schatzki writes (with reference to Bourdieu) in his classic work of praxis theory, *The Site of the Social. A Philosophical Account of the Constitution of Social Life and Change*, Pennsylvania University Press 2002, p. XVIII: "As stated, I defend my social ontology through descriptions of empirical phenomena that illustrate and lend it plausibility. Two examples, in particular, are developed in the following, both in great detail: the medicinal herb business of the Shaker village of New Lebanon, New York, in the mid-nineteenth century, and contemporary day trading on the Nasdaq market."

[7]Pierre Bourdieu, *Méditations pascaliennes. Éléments pur une philosophie négative*, Paris: Seuil, 1997; Engl.: *Pascalian Meditations*. Stanford/Ca.: Stanford University Press, 1999

[8]In *The Logic of Practice*, op.cit, he refers to the study "The Kabyle House or the World Reversed", which was strongly influenced by Levi-Strauss, as his "last work as an unselfconscious structuralist". According to Bourdieu, structuralist sociology misunderstands the temporal structure of the observed practices,

because it is too strongly fixed on the opus operatum, the product of praxis, instead of on the course it takes.

[9]Cf. *The Logic of Practice*, op. cit., Chapter 1.

[10]This is also David Strecker's criticism of Bourdieu. Cf. ibid., *Logik der Macht. Zum Ort der Kritik zwischen Theorie und Praxis*. Diss. FU Berlin 2006, p. 125 ff.

[11]Cf. Bourdieu, op.cit. 1980

[12]I have explained this more extensively in: Ruth Sonderegger, "Eine Ästhetik der Kritik muss auch eine Kritik der Ästhetik sein", in: Jörg Huber et al. (Ed.), *Ästhetik der Kritik. Verdeckte Ermittlung*, Vienna / Zurich / New York 2007, p. 53-65.

[13]Pierre Bourdieu / Luc Boltanski / Pierre Castel / Jean-Claude Chamboredon / Gérard Lagneau / Dominique Schnapper, *Un art moyen. Essais sur les usages sociaux de la photographie*, Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, *1965; Engl.: Photography: The Social Uses of an Ordinary Art,* Cambridge/UK etc.: Polity Press, 1989

[14]Cf. Jo Spence, *Beyond the Perfect Image. Photography, Subjectivity, Antagonism*, Barcelona 2005. The work "Beyond the Family Album" documented in it is from 1976.

[15]Pierre Bourdieu et al., *La misére du monde,* Paris: Éd. du Seuil, 1993; Engl.*: The Weight of the World*. Social suffering in contemporary society. Oxford/UK: Polity Press & Stanford/Ca.: Stanford University Press, 1999

[16]For relevant constructive criticism, cf. Angela McRobbie, "A Mixed Bag of Misfortune? Bourdieu's *Weight of the World*", in:

ibid., *The Uses of Cultural Studies*, London/ Thousand Oaks/ New Delhi 2005, p. 175-184.

[17]Pierre Bourdieu, *Les règles de l'art. Genèse et structure du champ littéraire*, Paris: Éd. du Seuil, 1992; Engl.: *The rules of art. Genesis and structure of the literary field,* Cambridge/UK: Polity Press & Stanford/Ca.: Stanford University Press, 1996

[18]For example, in the interview "Die Welt entfatalisieren", in: Josef Jurt (Ed.), *absolute Pierre Bourdieu*, Freiburg 2003, p. 13.

[19]*Küba. Journey against the current*, Vienna: Thyssen-Bornemisza Art Contemporary 2006.

[20]In addition, there is the problem that Bourdieu tended to take only art-art seriously. On this, cf. John Miller "Das (Wasser-)Bett des Prokrustes: Die Definition der Populärkultur in Pierre Bourdieus *La Distinction*", in: Beatrice von Bismarck / Diethelm Stoller / Ulf Wuggenig (Ed.), *Games, Fights, Collaborations*, Ostfildern-Ruit 1996, p. 23-27.

[21]A turning point in this respect is the dialogue with Hans Haacke: Pierre Bourdieu and Hans Haacke, *Freier Austausch. Für die Unabhängigkeit der Phantasie und des Denkens*, Frankfurt a. M. 1995.

[22]This is also the conclusion drawn by Michael Grenfell and Cheryl Hardy, in: *Art Rules. Pierre Bourdieu and the Visual Arts*, Oxford/ New York 2007.