

Symbolic Violence Conversations with Bourdieu
Michael Burawoy (2019), Duke University Press

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Written in nine main chapters and 240 pages, the recently published book on the Bourdieusian notion of 'symbolic violence' sets the late sociologist on a critical meeting board with his posteriors to discuss the multifaceted significations, limitations, and overtime evolution of this concept. It opens as the neo-Marxist author Michael Burawoy explains his long-held antagonism towards the French philosopher and sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, which he had been expounding in various conferences in the last decade. The present volume contains the quintessence of his previous critique now rewritten for Anglophone readers.

For many years Burawoy was a Bourdieu skeptic, in simple language, feeling that Bourdieu had rather stolen ideas from critics and sociologists like Fanon, Gramsci, Freire or de Beauvoir than offering a genuine contribution to their ideas, until he enrolled in Loïc Wacquant's Bourdieu Boot Camp course in the spring of 2005, and that broadened his horizons to the ever-expanding panorama of Bourdieu's oeuvre. In the prologue, he offers a comprehensive outline of the major publications of Bourdieu and expounds the pivotal function of the term 'symbolic violence' in the formation of each his works – a term Bourdieu introduces as early as the 1970s in his works (1977, 1992, 2001) as “a gentle violence, imperceptible and invisible even to its victims, exerted for the most part through the purely symbolic channels of communication and cognition (more precisely, misrecognition), recognition, or even feeling” (Bourdieu *Masculine Domination* 1-2).

It is the violence intertwined in power relations that is sometimes not even revealed due to lifestyle or the relationship between agent and victim. Bourdieu started his study as a philosophy student but the experience in Algeria moves him from philosophy to sociology (see Grenfell, 2010). Perhaps it was where his most controversial notion 'symbolic violence' was born. As Craig Calhoun puts it “[c]onfrontation with the Algerian war, and with the transformations wrought by French colonialism and capitalism, left a searing personal mark on Bourdieu,

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solidifying his commitment to the principle that research must matter for the lives of others" (1405), needless to say but his developments of the notions of *habitus*, *capital*, and *field* have also been influenced by his experience in Algeria.

Burawoy brings "Bourdieu into conversation with the enemies he thought he had slayed: in particular, Marx, Gramsci, Fanon, Freire, and Beauvoir" (12). He selects a succession of Marxists whose central concern was cultural domination, beginning with Marx, and then turns to Gramsci, Fanon, Beauvoir, and Mills. Bourdieu had zero interest in these theorists, although they all dealt with the question of cultural domination – a key idea at the core of his controversial notion of symbolic violence. Set in the Bakhtinian aura of un-finalizability and dialogism, Burawoy then creates imaginary conversations (in fact, no real conversation is exchanged, but this makes the book even more challenging) between Bourdieu's work and the mentioned social theorists, also the last two conversations take place first between Bourdieu and the author of the book, and finally with himself – the latter adding a marvelous layer of self-reflexivity to the text.

The author refers to the one-sidedness of most of Bourdieu's critiques: "throughout Bourdieu's writings," he states, "combatants are slain off-stage with no more than a fleeting appearance in front of the readership. Sociologists, economists, and philosophers come and go like puppets, dismissed with barely a sentence or two" (32), and this is why he felt an urge to make all these imaginary conversations – to give a voice to the opponents, Burawoy argues that the main purpose of the book is a level playing field. Because Bourdieu himself looked at sociology as a combat sport, thus Burawoy claims that we need the combatants (the oppositions), also he says: "The purpose of these conversations, then, is to restore at least a small band of combatants who, broadly speaking, are Marxist in orientation" (32).

The first comparison is between Bourdieu and Talcott Parsons, one of the most influential figures in sociology in the 20th century. Burawoy explains how Bourdieu and Parsons are both deeply committed to sociology as a science and how they have same difficulty in developing their theories of social change. For both thinkers the idea of spontaneous differentiation – each subsystem had self-referential capacities and had an internal logic of this own but in historical reality, the spontaneous interaction, communication and mutual enable-ness between the subsystems is of vital importance for subsystem and for the overall development of the social system – makes their inadequate theories of history. Burawoy then mentions Parsons' notion of the rise of subsystems of action and Bourdieu's the emergence of differentiated fields. They both relied on the ideas of the discipline of economics and were against its reductionism. The author also

recalls their attempt to reshape the discipline around the world although none of them see the future as very different from the present (the book refers to the pessimistic spirit of both). "If Parsons' social order rested on value consensus that prevented a brutish Hobbesian war of all against all, then Bourdieu's rested on symbolic violence that secured silent and unconscious submission" (34). Their path diverges when they shape their theoretical framework (see Parsons 1937).

After examining these two sociological critics from different angles, the chapter progresses as Burawoy explains that in Bourdieu's sociology, symbolic violence has a special place and the pressure exerted by power hides itself in this way, not only it is not seen, but it appears as something normal and natural. "It is a domination that is not recognized as such, either because it is taken for granted (naturalized) or because it is misrecognized – i.e., recognized as something other than domination" (37). This normalization sometimes occurs by 'habitus' which is a central concept in Bourdieu's thought – those practices which tend to reproduce the regularities in the objective conditions of the production of their generative principle (see Bourdieu [1972] 1977, 78). Bourdieu depicts habitus as "the strategy generating principle enabling 'agents to cope "with unforeseen and ever-changing situations . . . a system of lasting and transposable dispositions which, integrating past experiences, functions at every moment as a matrix of perceptions, appreciations and actions and makes possible the achievement infinitely diversified tasks" (qtd. in Bourdieu and Wacquant 18): "If society is held together by symbolic violence that misrecognizes the grounds of class domination or gives it false legitimacy," Burawoy emphasizes, "then the task of the sociologist is to unmask the true function of the symbolic world and reveal the domination it hides" (38), thus proposing a certain amount of Marxist-oriented agency to the sociologist to take action by revealing the processes of domination incorporated into the hidden symbolic violence.

In the second imaginary conversation, Burawoy first accuses Marx of being a crude materialist on behalf of Bourdieu, overlooking the importance of symbolic violence only to imagine a dialogue around Marx and Bourdieu's divergent theories as well as around their common points (see Marx and Engels [1845–46] 1978). Marxism, as the creator of 'working class' does not have the tools to understand its own power due to the fact that it did not possess and incorporate a theory of symbolic violence. A mere ideology without a theory of cultural production loses its symbolic power thus the working class turns to something not further than a class on paper "Marxism becomes regressive, an obstacle to the development of social theory"(51). Marx moves towards the working class and Bourdieu moves towards symbolic violence. We can assume that Bourdieu's concern is classifications than classes. Burawoy then compares Marx with several

other critics and returns to Bourdieu "... Marx and Bourdieu then take diametrically opposed paths – the one focuses on the laboring activity of the exploited embedded in production relations, whereas the other [Bourdieu] turns his back on the dominated in order to return to the dominant class producing symbolic relations"(57).

In the following chapters Burawoy takes some other Marxists into account. Primarily, the parallels between Antonio Gramsci's theory of 'hegemony' and symbolic violence are remarkable: "Gramsci and Bourdieu may appear convergent at one level, but at a deeper level they are mirror opposites: Bourdieu attacks Gramsci's organic intellectual as mythical, while Gramsci attacks Bourdieu's traditional intellectual as self-deluding" (98). It is also worth noting that "...one of the main differences between Bourdieu's theory of symbolic violence and Gramsci's theory of hegemony could be that the former requires none of the active "manufacturing," of the work of "conviction" entailed by the latter" (qtd. in Bourdieu and Wacquant 184).

Next, Franz Fanon, and Bourdieu are found similar in their view of colonialism, although they disport in many other circumstances and political standpoints. Bourdieu's account toward Fanon is inimical: "Fanon moves from symbolic violence to social revolution, whereas Bourdieu moves in the opposite direction, from social revolution to symbolic violence" (101). Though Burawoy believes that Fanon should have followed Bourdieu, he further proposes that the difference between the two lies in the fact that they acted contrary to their past experiences; whereas Fanon joined the revolutionary catharsis against colonial violence by living behind the symbolic violence of racism in France, Bourdieu adopted a critical pessimism based on symbolic violence.

This comes to education which, for Bourdieu, exemplifies symbolic violence: "all pedagogic action (PA) is, objectively, symbolic violence insofar as it is the imposition of a cultural arbitrary by an arbitrary power" (Bourdieu and Passeron 5). Burawoy within the book remarks that education and class are directly related to each other. Although there are people who overcome their class through education, this can only be possible through a strong obsession with success. Chapter five then reveals that Bourdieu and Paulo Freire – the Brazilian educator and philosopher who was a leading advocate of critical pedagogy – embarked on their visions similarly and based them on 'domination, however, Freire chooses a controversial word: oppression. Freire also sees the purpose of critical pedagogy to liberate the dominated "Freire had far more faith in the revolutionary potential of the peasantry than of the working class, which "lack revolutionary consciousness and consider themselves privileged" (Freire 1970, 148). For Freire, critical pedagogy is "a necessary part of revolution" (128), which

is impossible for Bourdieu in that he “does not see how education could ever liberate the dominated” (128).

In a sudden turn from pedagogy to feminist debates, the next chapter discusses the various views of the French critic, Simone de Beauvoir as in her book *The Second Sex* vis-à-vis Bourdieu’s *Masculine Domination*, since both of them are strongly against sociocultural aspects of domination: “like Bourdieu, Beauvoir is under no illusion about the depth of female subjugation” (143). As she says in her book: “society, being codified by man, decrees that woman is inferior: she can do away with this inferiority only by destroying the male’s superiority” (Beauvoir 674).

The American sociologist C. Wright Mills’ notion of ‘Power Elite’ is likewise comparable to the very subject of this book: symbolic violence, and this is where the book’s title gets its meaning since in all these discussions on Bourdieu, other socialists and critics are supposed to prop this question what symbolic violence is. It could be also argued that it examines the nature of symbolic violence. Burawoy as a former Bourdieu skeptic created conversations between Bourdieu and Marxism; how Bourdieu used Marx concepts in a totally different direction, how Bourdieu and Gramsci had different opinions about persistence and strength of domination, how Fanon and Bourdieu were in conflict over the means of colonialism’s transcendence while they had similar views of colonialism itself, how Bourdieu and Freire react to education in the field of domination in completely opposite ways, how Bourdieu’s *Masculine Domination* is a replica of Beauvoir’s feminism and at last how Bourdieu and Mills had similarities and their ambivalent views on Marxism despite their temporal and spatial differences.

In all the above so-called debates, he breaks down symbolic violence from the heart of any subject, first by making an introduction to the rival and then by directly attacking the core of each subject. Sometimes he starts with such anger from Bourdieu that it is as if in the end he is going to reject his theories and excites the reader. Sometimes he ends the discussion just before giving the answer that he makes the reader thirsty for. It is thus possible to demonstrate that this book is a kind of unbiased comparison between the two sides that in each chapter expresses the strengths and weaknesses of.

In the chapter dedicated to himself and Bourdieu, Burawoy raises several issues and questions. These issues are directly and indirectly related to symbolic violence and domination. Burawoy further argues the opposite of Bourdieu’s assertion that the convergence of the objective truth and the worker’s subjective experience of work increases with the degradation of work (see Burawoy 1979),

he then questions the concept of habitus and examines it in a variety of challenging areas.

The last chapter of Burawoy's book, which gets its title from Bourdieu's most famous work *The Weight of the World* (1993), is a conflict within his major concepts, what gets the reader's attention is the paradox brought into the surface. It is as if we have two Bourdieus; the pessimist one who has no hope for any changes and improvement, the one who thinks the dominant would never let the dominated breathe freely and cunningly keeps people under the control by the wiles like symbolic violence and legitimating it, on the other hand stands the activist Bourdieu who takes many lectures and injects motivation to working class and warns about neoliberalism (Bourdieu 1998).

The author neither answers the raised questions clearly nor shows mercy to Bourdieu. The book presents him as a collection of complex contradictions. But at the same time, these contradictions give him credibility and make the book much more interesting. What can engage and challenge the reader is the existence of these concepts in everyday life that cannot be denied. For Bourdieu "individual action is the principal site where social structure can be reproduced" (Couldry 5). It means people have to rely on themselves and due to the fact that *habitus* is something embodied within each individual, people have no choice but to turn to neoliberalism "to replace collective provision with private provision" (Saad-Filho and Johnston 56); Bourdieu strongly opposes it and has talked about it extensively. What marks Bourdieu as extraordinarily alluring for literary researchers is the breadth of his practical investigations: he has researched and worked in many fields of human sciences such as literature, colonialism, education, feminism, spanning art, ritual, kinship, religion, science, intellectuals, language, social classes, and political institution (see Ollion 2020).

Burawoy then examines Bourdieu's views specifically on symbolic violence in a particular field and compares them to rival critics who have not had a voice or chance to defend themselves before. It may be inferred that the sociologist in discussion, in a completely paradoxical manner, applied the type of violence which he had conducted years of research, to all scholars whom he was opposed. If we look at it this way, even the name of the book is ironic. However, Burawoy's lack of attention to the issue of radical feminism in this book cannot be ignored. Catharine MacKinnon would be quite a miss in this collection. At first glance Bourdieu and MacKinnon, have opposed analyses of gender: "For Bourdieu, gender appears to be if not immutable then at least extraordinarily resistant whereas, for MacKinnon, gender seems to be a much more fluid, transcendable discourse. In general, it may seem strange to suggest that a radical feminist has anything in common with a mainstream sociologist" (Chambers 325).

More notions are found in the deeper layers of the similarities between the two theorists' views, especially in the area of symbolic violence, which could change the book's orientation and give it a new lease of life. In sooth "[W]ith Bourdieu's account in terms of symbolic violence echoing MacKinnon's account in terms of the eroticization of male dominance and female submission" (326) Burawoy could have done a lot of maneuvering on the main topic of the book. The views of the two are apparently different and each has a different view on the *possibility of change*. As Chambers asserts, "despite his claims to the contrary, Bourdieu risks denying the possibility of women's agency – a key problem for feminists" (326). Although the similarities between the theories of these two critics are greater than they seem, as they both "claim to have negotiated a path between the extremes of determinism and voluntarism" or their similar concern about "gender and gender inequality as overwhelmingly socially constructed while at the same time explicitly theorizing change" (326).

The mentioned similarities give us a place for more discussion and demonstrate the strategies that MacKinnon presents for change can go along with Bourdieu's analysis; it can also be illuminating for a more deterministic moment of his theory. That is why one might contend that instead of making a shallow comparison with Beauvoir on the topic of feminism, Burawoy could consider someone like MacKinnon as well. As the book raises several key questions that at first may contradict Bourdieu's words; however, they give the reader a better understanding of Bourdieu's concepts towards the end. We highly recommend this book to students and researchers who seek to explore the works and ideas of this contemporary sociologist.

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