

Can critical theory work without the concept of ‘ideology’?

A Bourdieusian alternative perspective

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Abstract: Analyzing Pierre Bourdieu’s concepts of field and habitus, as well as his theory of social reproduction, the paper aims at showing how Pierre Bourdieu’s perspective constitutes a valid theoretical candidate for developing a conception of domination that aims at going beyond the ideas of ideology and false consciousness. In this respect, the paper highlights how a focus on objective and subjective structural factors can contribute to explaining the stabilization and reproduction of unfair social orders without postulating a weakening of social actors’ critical skills.

Keywords: Pierre Bourdieu; Habitus; Integrative Struggle; Social Field; Recognition.

1. Introduction

In critical theory and social sciences, ideology is often seen as one of the main factors, if not the most important one, for explaining the reproduction of social systems based on domination, oppression, and inequality. From this point of view, first, ideology works not only as a smoke-screen that hides the real nature of the social world, with its injustices and asymmetries of power, from oppressed social actors¹. It is also a system of beliefs, which has a political purpose and nature. Ideologies are capable of orienting social agents’ behavior and actions in a practical way². Second, as a form of false consciousness, ideology seems to be dependent on the weakening of social actors’ critical and epistemic skills. Social agents that are subject to the influence of ideological beliefs, in fact, do not seem capable of grasping the false nature and the social origins of their ideological beliefs themselves³.

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¹ See Marx and Engels (1846), Engl. transl. (1976).

² See Bell (1960).

³ For an account of ideology as a second-order disorder that affects epistemic and critical skills of individuals, see Zurn (2011).

According to the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, misrecognition about the real nature of the social world is not exclusively dependent on the influence of ideological beliefs that distort and falsify human beings' perspective on social reality. Bourdieu states that the social and collective acceptance of unfair and oppressive social systems is rooted in objective and subjective social structures, in particular in the pre-reflexive dimension of human beings and embodied in a very deep way in our body and psyche⁴. For Bourdieu, in other words, social systems that are characterized by domination can reproduce themselves not due to the epistemic agency of ideologies, but because social actors learn to move and act in their constraining social environment in a pre-reflexive way. Therefore, it is hard for social agents who suffer from a condition of oppression to get rid of social practices that are actualized in a spontaneous and quasi-unintentional way, even if they realize reflexively that their social attitudes are wrong, unfair, or advantageous for the reproduction of the *status quo*.

Starting from the analysis of Bourdieu's theory of social reproduction, my main contribution will consist of illustrating how forms of social recognition can strengthen social domination not only allowing the construction of the habitus. The notion of social recognition can help us understanding how, in Bourdieu's account, the conformation of a given social space can reinforce the social status of a dominant group weakening mutualism, cooperative attitudes, and reciprocal recognition between oppressed social agents, allowing the latter to take part only to social struggles that are functional to the preservation of domination.

Emphasizing the role played by social recognition in the constitution of habitus and the functioning of social fields, this paper aims at providing a novel interpretation of Bourdieu's theory of domination and social reproduction without betraying its opposition to methodological individualism⁵. Such reading aspires to overcome a problem that is relevant to

⁴ The fact that Pierre Bourdieu is referring to an idea of domination that is grounded more on the influence of misrepresentation than on the epistemic influence of ideological beliefs has been explained and highlighted very clearly by Michael Burawoy (2012).

⁵ The paradigm of interpersonal and social recognition, especially in the version developed by Honneth (1992; 2011) is consistent with Bourdieu's methodological anti-individualism. For Honneth, intersubjectivity is the basic condition for the realization of those activities that are meant to control and modify the natural environment according to human needs and ends. Collective practices and coordination are not solely outcomes of individual reflexivity. They can be actualized as they are originated by the taking-role capacity of human beings, that is to say, their natural power to take the perspective of their peers of action and acting according to the expectation of the latter. According to this picture, intersubjective interaction is ontologically prior not

Bourdieu's perspective. Bourdieu seems to provide a circular explanation of the tendency of oppressed people to act consistently with the *status quo*. Following him, dominated members of the lower classes are apt to behave accordingly to the interest of the dominant class due to their habitus: dominated people behave as oppressed people because of their submissive habitus⁶. Paying attention to the dynamics of social recognition that intersect social structures, the paper will argue against the objection of circularity as follows. In the case of social domination, the structural interaction between objective and subjective social structures produces practices that facilitate social recognition among agents. Favoring reciprocal recognition among agents with different social statuses, these social structures can reproduce themselves successfully, leaving little room for oppositional agency against the *status quo* to oppressed agents.

In the first part, I will briefly discuss Bourdieu's criticisms against the Marxian theory of ideology and false consciousness. In the second section, I will sketch the general outlines of Bourdieu's viewpoint about the nature of social reality, emphasizing his attention to the *two-fold nature of the objective and subjective structures* that support the process of social reproduction. In the third part of the paper, I will illustrate the idea of *integrative social struggle* proposed by Bourdieu for explaining how dominant groups can preserve their position of power without suppressing social conflicts. In the fourth part, I will describe in detail how the *habitus*, a complex set of bodily, perceptive, and mental dispositions, is acquired unintentionally through a process of socialization based on reciprocal recognition and why it has such an important role in Bourdieu's conception of social domination and reproduction. In the fifth section, I will try to show how, for Bourdieu, domination can also concern the way objective and external social reality is constructed and organized.

only to the emergence of social institutions, customs, and habits but also to individual self-consciousness. Individuals' autonomy and rationality are the product of a process of reciprocal recognition, not the original source of social behavior and social reality.

⁶ Such objection has been moved, for instance, by Burawoy (2012, 197): "The propensity to submission is not an invariant but depends on the inculcated habitus. [...] What sort of folk sociology is this, dependent on conventional wisdom and belied by history? [...] Since we have no way of knowing 'habitus' independent of behavior, the argument is simply tautological – immigrants and women are submissive because of their habitus of submission as demonstrated by their supposed submissiveness".

2. Bourdieu's critique of Marxian concepts of ideology and false consciousness

Karl Marx's and, more in general, Marxist conception of ideology and false consciousness can be seen as the main polemic target of Bourdieu's theory of social reproduction. According to Marx ideologies are sets of beliefs that reflect the ruling class's ideas, orienting the actions and attitudes of dominated groups in favor of dominants' interest. Dominant ideologies have the function to normalize and naturalize social injustices and asymmetries in the eyes of dominated groups and classes. In other words, the main purpose of an ideology is to veil the forms of oppression and subordination at work in a given society depicting them as natural, necessary, even justifiable. An ideology that becomes pervasive all over the society, taking roots among dominated agents, can guarantee the stability of social orders based on socio-political iniquities, driving dominated to accept the *status quo*, if not enthusiastically, at least docilely. The beliefs that constitute distinctive ideologies are always a social product that reflects the ideas of dominant groups in class-divided societies. Ideologies' function is two-fold. On one hand, they depict the dominant class's interest as the universal interest of the whole society. On the other one, ideologies characterize social facts that are historically contingent as they were natural and necessary. In doing so, ideologies hide or normalize relations of dominion in society and contribute to the reproduction of the latter⁷.

Two characteristics of Marx's conception of ideology need to be deepened. First, ideologies are not always totally false, just as a false belief is not necessarily ideological. An ideological set of beliefs can be misleading without being completely false in its content. According to Marx, religions are not ideological because they justify or deny the unfairness and oppressive character of human societies. On the contrary, they do often condemn and stigmatize it. What makes these systems of belief ideological is their promise to overcome human injustices afterlife, sustaining the inutility or impossibility to change the social world through an emancipatory human praxis. In this respect, an ideology can offer an explanation and justification regarding the inequalities and forms of subordination that characterize human societies.

Second, false beliefs that are a result of a simple epistemic mistake do not share the misleading nature of ideological beliefs for the following reason. Ideologies are rooted either in a weakening of social actors' critical

⁷ See Marx & Engels (1846); Engl. transl. (1976, 67-71).

skills or in a deliberate and conscious consent that takes the form of false consciousness. Attributing it especially to members of dominant classes and intellectuals, Marx depicts false consciousness as the false conviction of many intellectuals concerning their capacity to transform the reality changing the ideas of their audience⁸. Lately, however, Marxist theorists like Gramsci and Lukács have begun to employ the idea of false consciousness also referring to the working class. From this point on, the notion of false consciousness starts to define forms of beliefs, experiences, and actions that misrepresent the social origins of inequalities, injustices, and oppression. In this regard, the false consciousness can consist in the inability of dominated social agents to realize that the interest of a particular class cannot be the interest of the whole society or cannot be emancipatory for dominated classes. Otherwise, there is false consciousness also whereas social agents accept social practices, institutions, and relations that produce injustice as the latter were a product of a natural or divine immutable law, not the result of determined social conditions and relations of productions that are historically contingent.

Pierre Bourdieu has often used in his works the notions of ideology and false consciousness, providing an effective critique of ideology from a sociological point of view. As Jan Rehmann has noticed, these operational concepts play an important role in Bourdieu's sociology:

Already on its first page, his monumental study *Distinction* announces its intention to formulate a socio-analytical critique of the 'ideology of charisma', which regards taste in legitimate culture as a 'gift of nature'. The *Homo Academicus* lays bare the ideological mechanisms of the academic field, together with deeply engrained self-deceptions of intellectuals who are more interested in the accumulation of 'academic' and 'intellectual capital' than in understanding reality intellectually. In his book on *State Nobility*, Bourdieu scrutinizes the internal structure of the dominant class together with the ideological mechanisms of consecration and naturalization that mask and help reproduce its domination⁹.

However, starting from his early studies in Kabylia, Bourdieu has always been akin to underline the limits of the Marxist approach to the question of the nature of ideology and false consciousness, ending up in criticizing such notions radically in the last phase of his life. Already in *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, Bourdieu argues against the dichotomy between practice and ideology, which is grounded on the distinction between structure and

⁸ See *ivi*, Engl. transl. (33-36).

⁹ Rehmann (2013, 222).

superstructure introduced by Marx¹⁰. In line with this position, Bourdieu has developed a theory of capital, habitus, and social field that refuses the Marxian ontological prioritization of the economic sphere over the cultural, legal, religious, and political dimensions of human life. Furthermore, in the same work, Bourdieu states that every critical perspective that limits itself to the critique of ideology is insufficient. Bourdieu states that “the most successful ideological effects are those which have no need of words, and ask no more than complicitous silence”¹¹. Considering that, for Bourdieu, every critical approach to social life and science should focus much more on the objective social mechanisms that constitute the precondition for the success and spread of ideological discourses:

The greater the extent to which the task of reproducing the relations of domination is taken over by objective mechanisms, which serve the interests of the dominant group without any conscious effort on the latter’s part, the more indirect and, in a sense, impersonal, become the strategies objectively oriented towards reproduction¹².

The last quote is interesting as it highlights an idea that is pivotal in Bourdieu’s perspective. For Bourdieu, dominant agents do not necessarily support the process of reproduction of society in an intentional way. Such a consideration makes it possible to introduce the main limit that, according to him, characterizes the notions of ideology and false consciousness:

In the notion of ‘false consciousness’ which some Marxists invoke to explain the effect of symbolic domination, it is the word ‘consciousness’ which is excessive; and to speak of ‘ideology’ is to place in the order of *representations*, capable of being transformed by the intellectual conversion that is called the ‘awakening of consciousness’, what belongs to the order of *beliefs*, that is, at the deepest level of bodily dispositions¹³.

The points that Bourdieu wants to highlight criticizing these conceptual tools constitute the core of his intellectual and sociological enterprise. For Bourdieu, domination is mainly and mostly exercised below the level of consciousness. Consequently, critical theories that rely solely or mainly on the critique of ideology are partial and insufficient as they do not consider the structural nature of social agency. Social practices that are consistent with the interests of dominant groups are actualized by dominated agents almost instinctively. In this regard, for Bourdieu, social practices

¹⁰ See Bourdieu (2000a); Engl. transl. (1977, 179-180).

¹¹ *Ivi*; Engl. transl. (188).

¹² *Ivi*; Engl. transl. (189).

¹³ Bourdieu (1997); Engl. transl. (2000b, 177).

are not the result of the pure intentional calculation of agents. On one side, they are influenced by the opportunities of actions determined by the objective morphology of agents' specific social environment. On the other side, social practices are generated by an integrated system of bodily skills, acquired schemes of perception, and pre-reflexive beliefs embodied in the agents' bodies and minds. Such agential predispositions are produced by objective social structures, transmitted through the process of socialization, and enacted by human beings in a pre-intentional and pre-reflexive manner. Rooted in the bodily and pre-reflexive dispositions of agents, such practices cannot be transformed only through a process of awakening of consciousness. The social practices that both dominant and dominated agents enact in their social life are therefore strongly dependent on the interaction between objective and subjective structures. If it is so, understanding the process of social reproduction requires grasping the social conditions that determine the non-conscious adoptions by social agents of those social practices consistent with dominants' interests. The next sections will deepen this specific aspect of Bourdieu's sociological perspective.

3. Bourdieu's conception of society: a matter of first-order and second-order objectivity

The critical sociology of Pierre Bourdieu is grounded on a set of ontological presuppositions that makes it distinctive and alternative to those social theories that mainly focus on the rationality and intentionality of human beings. Bourdieu's conception of social reality is, in fact, relational and non-essentialists, insofar as the basic bricks of the social world are not entities like institutions, organizations, or individual rational agents, but the particular relationships that structure the social reality itself. In this regard, the social world can be seen as a complex cluster of relationships of opposition and alliance, domination and resistance between social agents endowed with unequal material and symbolic resources.

Such a conception of social reality goes hand in hand with an understanding of social agency that stresses the priority of social structures over the actualization of human social actions. More precisely, Bourdieu is akin to describe the origins and nature of social actions pinpointing mainly the variety of cultural and social schemas, as well as the material and symbolic resources, which empower and constrain social actions of human beings. According to Bourdieu, to grasp the practical logic behind the actualization of human oppositional and cooperative agency means to take into

account: norms and rules that are embodied into our practical dispositions; the criteria that rule access to different social fields; the distribution of economic, cultural, political resources among individual and collective agents that belong to the same social context¹⁴.

Generally, Bourdieu understands human society as a set of different social spaces, or rather *social fields*, in which social actors interact, cooperate, and fight against each other for preserving their *status quo* or improving their social conditions. Every social field is characterized by a distinctive practical logic, which obeys rules and norms that cannot be transplanted in social spaces in which social agents aim at maximizing completely different forms of capital and resources. For instance, in the economic field, the logic of maximization of profit is the main one to follow if an agent aspires to improve his economic power and social conditions. However, the logic of profit is not the form of practical logic that an agent usually observes for acquiring cultural capital in the academic field or credibility and power inside a religious community. To accumulate cultural capital in form of academic titles, artistic taste, educational pursuit and accessories require the adoption of practical attitudes that could be considered detrimental and counterproductive from the perspective of an entrepreneur. In fact, the acquisition of a high-level education might involve an investment of time and financial resources that could not produce any meaningful economic return in the short term. Similarly, to gain religious prestige and credibility commonly requires embracing values (like frugality) and enacting practices (like charity) that cannot work when it is time to maximize the economic profit.

Although distinctive forms of practical logic characterize different fields, Bourdieu states that all social fields share an invariant structural trait: the division and struggle between dominants and dominated. Inside each field, the ruling class (or group) struggles with dominated social actors, which can be dominated fractions of the ruling class or subordinated social groups, for preserving or increasing a given distribution of power in the field itself. In the economic field, producers and employers can try to increase their profit by decreasing the costs of production and adjusting their prices, while waged workers can defend their interests by creating cooperative and strong labor unions. In the scientific field, scholars, research institutes, and universities fight each other over having their own scientific paradigms and programs acknowledged as legitimate. In the family, there

¹⁴ For a more elaborate and deep analysis of the idea of “structure” see Giddens (1979, 92-100), and Sewell (1992, 1-29).

can be gender conflict among parents concerning the distribution of care work, or between parents and children related to the life-choice of the latter (the type of scholarly education, professional aspirations, or marriages with partners that belong to different classes, cultures, and religions).

A different allocation of the capital at stake in a given field affects the nature of the relations among agents that belong to the same class or divergent groups. This implies, for instance, the possibility of conflict for power inside the ruling class, or coordination and cooperation between classes or groups that occupy conflicting positions inside a field. In the sphere of consumption, producers presumably have more economic capital than consumer associations and, most likely, can employ it for sustaining a massive marketing campaign for manipulating the needs and desires of consumers themselves. In the scientific field, researchers and academics can use their scientific capital (credibility, position in the academy and international system of ranking, etc.) to impose on other members of the scientific community with less prestige a particular agenda of scientific investigation or prerequisites for taking part in the scientific community. In the family, for instance, asymmetric distribution of emotional capital can be determined by the order of birth of children or a prominent masculine culture, which generates conflict for parental love among siblings of different ages and genders.

However, given such conditions according to which social struggles are a constant factor in our social life, how is it possible to stabilize a social order that, usually, favors a narrow dominant group and guarantees its reproduction? Clearly, in order to survive, it is reasonable to assume that a society must be able to ensure, first, its own material reproduction, which is grounded in the social division of productive and sexual labor. In other terms, on the one hand, social agents should be enabled to enact forms of collective action, which allow the creation of commodities and goods (food, clothes, services, education, etc.) that are essential for the satisfaction of human material needs. On the other hand, it is only through the actualization of effective intimate relationships that a society can achieve a satisfying birth rate, which is indispensable for its existence. Nevertheless, in Bourdieu's picture, such practical activities seem governed by an antagonistic and competitive logic in which individuals and social groups aim to increase the capital they have in a specific field. Therefore, in which way can such a competitive dynamic be coherent with the process of social reproduction?

In order to answer the latter question, it is necessary to focus on two distinct problems. The first one concerns an ontological question, which is

the two-fold nature that Bourdieu attributes to social reality. Bourdieu in fact states that social reality has two distinguished levels of existence. The first one can be labeled as first-order objectivity, which consists of the set of relationships of power, domination, and cooperation that subsist between social agents that occupy a different social position. In this regard, the first-order objectivity of a given society is determined by the volume and composition of the capital of social actors, as well as by capitals' specific distribution among them. Furthermore, the particular nature of a given society is also forged by all the norms and rules that limit and govern social struggles and the dynamics of alliance and opposition between society's members.

The second level of societies' existence is defined by Bourdieu as second-order objectivity and consists of the mental, perceptive, and bodily patterns of social agents' habitus. In other words, for Bourdieu, society does exist also in the body and mind of human beings in form of perceptive, mental, and bodily dispositional properties, which work below the threshold of consciousness and intentionality of social agents. Such practical dispositions mirror the morphology of the external and objective social reality. In this regard, objective social structures acquire a subjective but embodied form of existence, the habitus, which allows human beings to move in their social environment naturally and almost instinctively.

This characterization of social reality as a material dimension that exists also in the bodies of human beings has relevant consequences if we focus on the consistency of the idea of ideology within Bourdieu's critical sociology. According to Bourdieu, the emergence and permanence of social systems based on unfair and unjustified asymmetries of power, wealth, privileges do not rely on the false consciousness of oppressed agents. Its functioning is possible exactly because the habitus, which mirrors the objective shape of the external social world, works below the level of consciousness, and determines the extensions and limits of possible reasonable practices that an agent can enact in a specific social environment. Bourdieu, therefore, has no need either to always refer to, or use, the concept of ideology in his critical approach. Dominated subjects behave consistently with the interests of dominant groups simply because the perceptive schemes through which they evaluate and see social reality, as well as the set of bodily skills that they actualize for moving properly in their social environment reflect the objective structures of societies that are organized for favoring dominant agents. Their condition of subjugation is never causally related, neither correlated, to an epistemic misrepresentation of social reality. It depends on a set of embodied social dispositions that cannot be transformed

by gaining awareness or through the awakening of consciousness. Nevertheless, for the moment, the main point that it is worth considering is that, for Bourdieu, social reality has a two-fold nature, and its ontological existence and permanence are guaranteed by the harmonization between its external objective social structures and social agents' habitus.

The second problem that is necessary to address for grasping the main core of Bourdieu's critical sociology is to focus on the dynamic of the symbolic reproduction of society. If consensus by ideology is not the key feature of social reproduction of domination, what is the mechanism behind it? My hypothesis is that, in Bourdieu's account, the process of reciprocal recognition between dominant and dominated plays a pivotal role in supporting social reproduction. The next three sections will explain how this factor works both at the micro-level, fostering the process of the acquisition of habitus consistent with the interests of the ruling class or group, and at the macro-level, determining the way symbolic capital is distributed among social agents.

4. Social struggles and domination

The interesting idea that, first, deserves our attention derives from Bourdieu's assumption according to which social fields are invariantly characterized by social struggles and conflict between social agents, for preserving the *status quo* or changing and subvert the relations of power in social fields. Given that premise, how can continuous dynamics of social struggle leave room for the actualization of complex social activities that, at first sight, seem to rely on mutuality and cooperation?

Bourdieu's answer seems to be as follows: the stabilization of a specific social order in accordance with the interests of a ruling class does not mean necessarily the disappearance of the competition and conflict between the dominants and the dominated groups:

social contradictions and struggles are not all, or always, in contradiction with the perpetuation of the established order; [...] permanence can be ensured by change and the structure perpetuated by movement; [...] the 'frustrated expectations' which are created by the time-lag between the imposition of legitimate needs [...] and access to the means of satisfying them, do not necessarily threaten the survival of the system¹⁵.

¹⁵ Bourdieu (2016, 184); Engl. transl. (1984, 164-165).

Dominated groups can be driven to accept the principle of competition as a natural fact as far as they recognize themselves as social subjects that can benefit from some social qualities that belong to the ruling class. Once this happens, the social diffusion and production of categories of judgment and perception, which mirror dominants' norms, values, and interests, can work as a principle of division inside the society. After the members of the dominated groups interiorize such schemes of perception, thought, and action, they likely tend to justify the existing unequal distribution of capital and power as an outcome that does not depend on previous objective asymmetries in the allocation of material resources and opportunities of social ascent:

Competitive struggle is the form of class struggle which the dominated classes allow to be imposed on them when they accept the stakes offered by the dominant classes. It is an integrative struggle and, by virtue of the initial handicaps, a reproductive struggle, since those who enter this chase, in which they are beaten before they start, as the constancy of the gaps testifies, implicitly recognize the legitimacy of the goals pursued by those whom they pursue, by the mere fact of taking part¹⁶.

Bourdieu observes that if a dominated group engages in a struggle that is regulated by norms, rules, and values that reflect the interests of the dominant group or class, the same dominated group acknowledges "the legitimacy of the goals pursued by those whom they pursue, by the mere fact of taking part"¹⁷. In doing so, subjugated agents take part in a social game that is constitutively regulated by a practical logic that favors from the beginning the dominant groups or classes. Furthermore, Bourdieu highlights the fact that those social transformations that, in theory, guarantee social mobility between members of classes or groups can ensure, at the same time, the conservation of relative gaps among dominant and dominated classes or groups. More specifically, a dominant group can preserve its social power by conserving its specific position in society by reproducing the objective disparity between itself and the adverse classes.

For instance, the democratization of the educative system in France has had, according to Bourdieu, an interesting two-sided effect. On the one hand, its public nature gave young women and members of the French working-class a very realistic and concrete opportunity to gain a higher academic title, a better education, and, consequently, at least in theory, a better job and social position compared to their parents. Bourdieu registered the fact that, in France, after the schooling boom, even the members of the

¹⁶ *Ivi*, (185); Engl. transl. (165).

¹⁷ *Ibidem*.

dominated class increased the possibility to obtain a high-level academic degree. On the other hand, this phenomenon led to a devaluation of those academic degrees that, traditionally, were accessible only to the social elite of the country and the creation of a new, narrower set of certificates and titles that ensured that only the high-class social agents had access to the best work positions in the labor market:

the changes visible in conditions in fact conceal permanent features in the relative positions: the leveling-out of the chances of access and rates of representation should not be allowed to mask the inequalities which persist in the distribution of boys and girls among the various types of schooling and therefore among possible careers. More girls than boys obtain the baccalaureate and enter higher education, but they are much less represented in the most prestigious sections: they remain considerably underrepresented in scientific sections whereas they are ever more represented in literary courses. [...] The same logic governs access to the various professions and to the various positions within each of them: in work as in education, the progress made by women must not conceal the corresponding progress made by men, so that, as in a handicap race, the structure of the gaps is maintained¹⁸.

This means that subordinated individuals perceive as competitors not only members of the ruling class but even other social agents that experience situations of subordination. In this way, a ruling class can prevent or, at least, reduce the possibilities of alliance and cooperation among different social agents that suffer from domination and do not benefit from the social acknowledgment of their groups' interests:

the logic of the processes of competition [...] condemn[s] each agent to react in isolation to the effect of the countless reactions of other agents, or, more precisely, to the result of the statistical aggregation of their isolated actions, and which reduce the class to the state of a mass dominated by its own number¹⁹.

In this regard, the merit of Bourdieu's account is to underline the *integrative and conservative nature* that *social struggles* can assume. Bourdieu highlights the fact that a dominant class or group can maintain and reproduce its position of domination by promoting a sort of *handicap race* in which the dominated are competing for the same kind of social aims that the dominants strive for, but without the same head start. As far as the dominated compete in a struggle that follows the rules of the dominant class, they have little opportunity to increase their capital and power, both in symbolic and material terms. In fact, playing such an agonistic compe-

¹⁸ Bourdieu (1998); Engl. Transl. (2001, 90-91).

¹⁹ *Ibidem*.

tion, dominated agents will tend to consider other subjugated agents not as possible allies against the ruling class, but as competitors in up-warding mobility. At the same time, the categories of perception, evaluation, and judgment that coalesce to depict a specific social order as natural, generalizing and fostering the perspective of the ruling class, might be capable of favoring the self-perception of dominated agents as non-dominated subjects that are working in favor of their social interests.

However, how is such an account of conservative and integrative struggle interlinked with the idea of social recognition, habitus, and field? The answer to such a question might emerge aiming attention at the links that Bourdieu identifies between the disadvantaged agents' achievement of positive individual self-relationship, the process of acquisition habitus, and stabilization of unfair social orders through the unequal distribution of symbolic power.

5. Habitus, recognition, domination

In a canonical passage of *Esquisse d'une Théorie de la Pratique*, Pierre Bourdieu defines habitus as

a system of lasting, transposable dispositions which, integrating past experiences, functions at every moment as a matrix of perceptions, appreciations, and actions and makes possible the achievement of infinitely diversified tasks, thanks to analogical transfers of schemes permitting the solution of similarly shaped problems²⁰.

In accordance with this picture, habitus is the conceptual tool that allows Bourdieu to develop a “theory of practice as the product of a *practical sense*, of a socially constituted ‘sense of the game’”.²¹ Habitus, as a theoretical prompt, suggests that strategies of action of social agents are grounded not exclusively in their rational and reflexive choices, but in a set of individual, embodied dispositions that reflect the objective structure of social reality and predispose agents to act coherently with the latter. Put briefly, habitus has a *cognitive* role, as it shapes human mental and perceptive schemes, and possesses a *practical* function, as it enables our individual and collective actions. In addition, the notion of ‘habitus’ is a logical and methodological tool that can help social theorists and scientists to explain

²⁰ Bourdieu (2000a, 261); Engl. transl. (1977, 82-83).

²¹ Bourdieu & Wacquant (1992, 96); Engl. transl. (1992, 120-121).

how it is possible, for human beings, to be involved in multiple social practices at the same time without a continuous reflective activity.

The habitus allows the realization of the most reasonable practice, considering a given set of external social conditioning, thanks to an array of expectations regarding the possible outcomes of different practical reactions in a given social situation. The habitus permits agents not only to perceive the available practical options of agency in a tangible social situation. The activation of habitus dispositional properties also depends on the expectations that, as agents, we possess in relation to the consequences of the adoption of a certain line of action. For Bourdieu, the activation of a particular social disposition is operated by the habitus through a quasi-instinctual evaluation of the objective opportunities of action that is based on empirical and normative expectations that an agent has acquired through past social experiences. Therefore, it is possible to assert that external triggers that can be perceived as opportunities to perform a certain action are ineffective if the agent does not possess any expectations that can motivate the actualization of the corresponding disposition that produces such action. However, what is the origin of such expectations?

The habitus is not only a structuring structure, which organizes practices and the perception of practices, but also a structured structure [...] This means that inevitably inscribed within the dispositions of the habitus is the whole structure of the system of conditions, as it presents itself in the experience of a life-condition occupying a particular position within that structure²².

As a product of external social conditions, habitus is composed of schemes of perception and unconscious beliefs (beliefs about the state of the social world, normative and empirical expectations regarding the effects of our social conduct and others' reactions) that reflect the system of position in which agents are inserted. In this regard, the array of expectations that allow the actualization of practical dispositions determines agents' practical preferences in a conditional way. In other words, according to Bourdieu, the content of practical expectations embodied in the habitus always reflect the objective social conditions in which the agents grow up, namely their position in the social fields. Practical choices of social agents are always the expression of preferences that are dependent on external social conditioning: the content of the expectations that allow the actuation of a given disposition in a specific social context reflects the

²² Bourdieu (2016, 191); Engl. transl. (1984, 170-172).

objective conditions in which a social agent has developed her own habitus. In the light of this dialectical relation, we can say that the possession of a specific habitus can be inferred by the objective conditions that make possible the realization of a particular action.

Meaningfully, Bourdieu asserts that operations of the habitus are possible if the agents perceive their own actions as a result of a free choice and subjective preference, and not as the result of social constraints imposed on them by the objective morphology of the social fields where they are situated. Nevertheless, what mechanism guarantees the subjective acquisition of a structure that mirrors the characteristics of the external social world creating an illusion of free will and choice from the agents' perspective? Bourdieu is likely to agree with the idea that both transmission and dissemination of habitus operates through mimetic socialization that involves the interpersonal level of interaction:

the process of acquisition – a practical *mimesis* (or *mimeticism*) which implies an overall relation of identification and has nothing in common with an imitation that would presuppose a conscious effort to reproduce a gesture [...] What is 'learned by body' is not something that one has, like knowledge that can be brandished, but something that one is. [...] It is never detached from the body that bears it and can be reconstituted only by means of a kind of gymnastics designed to evoke it, a mimesis which, as Plato observed, implies total investment and deep emotional identification²³.

Such a mimetic transmission of practices that involves emotional identifications seems to have a fundamental role in the process of production and reproduction of individual social conducts. The idea that intersubjective recognition may play an important role in respect of habitus' existence and bodily acquisition seems plausible in the light of Bourdieu's perspective. As we have mentioned previously, the social field has a generative role in relation to individual habitus. According to Bourdieu, the social field is nothing more than a web of relations of power among individuals, whose norms and rules of functioning are determined by the nature of the capital at stake in the field itself. Consequently, to say that social agents develop a specific habitus as they act and move in a particular field means to assert that social agents acquire their habitus through interaction with other human beings. In other words, Bourdieu's conception of the social fields seems to imply the idea that an objective structure can generate embodied habitus only by means of the mediation of the set of actors that, through their particular relations, constitute a field in

²³ Bourdieu (1980, 122-123); Engl. transl. (1990, 73).

its specific form. If this is so, intersubjective negotiation seems to play an important role in mediating the relations between the objective fields and subjective dispositions of the agents in the fields. As Wendy Bottero underlines:

The milieu of the field is partly made up of other agents, so the relation between habitus and field is also an encounter *between agents*, with more or less similar dispositions and characteristics. [...] The operation of the habitus, and its intersection with field, is partly a question of the interactional properties of networks, in which our practice is subject to the contingently variable characteristics and dispositions of the people around us²⁴.

At the micro-level, reciprocal recognition in the form of interpersonal interaction fosters the development of an individual habitus that is coherent with the objective structure of a field. Through recognition social agents acquire and employ symbolic hierarchies and patterns of social actions that are dominant in a given society. If acting in a specific mode satisfies our impulse for social recognition, then human beings tend to develop a habitus that is coherent with their social environment. In this respect, we could say that specific forms of successful interpersonal recognition favor social agents' acquisition of that habitus that is coherent with dominant class interests and capable of mystifying the arbitrary nature of socially prevalent relations of power:

One may suppose that, to obtain the sacrifice of self-love in favor of a quite other object of investment and so to inculcate the durable disposition to invest in the social game which is one of the prerequisites of all learning, pedagogic work in its elementary form relies on one of the motors which will be at the origin of all subsequent investments: *the search for recognition*²⁵.

The connections between social recognition, reproduction of the social order, and habitus are better underlined when Bourdieu talks about the conditions that determine the social diffusion and affirmation of waged labor in capitalistic societies. Following Bourdieu, the objective truth, the real and material mechanism of this mode of production (that is, the unpaid exploitation of labor) works because the social actors who are involved in the economic field cannot grasp it. In fact, Bourdieu thinks that the mechanism of the exploitation of labor that is at the base of capitalism as a mode of production is normalized by the subjective experience that social agents have of the capitalist society:

²⁴ Bottero (2010, 18-19).

²⁵ Bourdieu (1997); Engl. transl. (2000b, 166).

Workers may contribute to their own exploitation through the very effort they make to appropriate their work, which binds them to it through the freedoms - often minute and almost always 'functional' - that are left to them, and under the effect of the competition born of the differences - relative to unskilled workers, immigrants, the young, women that are constitutive of the occupational space functioning as a field²⁶.

However, how can the subjective truth about social reality result, if not positive, at least bearable and acceptable to dominated agents? For Bourdieu, it must rely on a symbolic system of rewards and some forms of satisfaction that are available for the oppressed. In other words, a social system that is objectively characterized by asymmetries of power and competition (that is, for Bourdieu, a specific form of class struggle) can reproduce itself only if the dominated can enjoy "compensatory satisfaction and consolation prizes that tend to blur the perception and evaluation of self and others"²⁷. The capitalist system of production, for instance,

while taking care to keep control of the instruments of profit, leaves workers the freedom to organize their own work, thus helping to increase their well-being but also to displace their interest from the external profit of labour (the wage) to the intrinsic profit²⁸.

In this respect, we may affirm that, in a capitalist society, exploited workers are driven to endorse, willingly or not, the interests of the ruling class. This happens through a set of social rewards and gains that do not represent a threat to the process of accumulation of economic capital that is enacted by the dominant (in the specific case, employers and big capitalists). Furthermore, we can say that the production of schemes of perception, evaluation, and action that are coherent with the interests of the dominant classes is obtained and reinforced, in every social field of a given society, by this procedure of symbolic reward itself. The latter must offer social agents in a position of subordination the achievement of some form of well-being:

Adapting to a dominated position implies a form of acceptance of domination. The effects of political mobilization itself do not easily counterbalance the effects of the inevitable dependence of self-esteem on occupational status and income, signs of social value previously legitimated by the sanctions of the educational market²⁹.

²⁶ *Ivi*, (203).

²⁷ *Ivi*, (190).

²⁸ *Ivi*, (204-205).

²⁹ Bourdieu (2016, 448); Engl. transl. (1984, 386).

Consequently, it can be argued that the habitus' categories of perception, evaluation, and judgment that concur to depict a specific social order as natural, generalizing, and fostering the perspective of the ruling class, should be capable also to favor the self-perception of dominated agents as non-dominated subjects that are working in favor of their social interests. More specifically, following Bourdieu's example, the capitalist mode of production ensures the realization of surplus labor driving waged workers to experience their own activities as a result of a free choice, as a form of labor that is under their control. In this way, waged workers can perceive themselves as independent workers that have the right and power to sell their labor force coherently with their plans and individual aspirations.

Briefly put, it looks like that, for Bourdieu, members of dominated groups tend to endorse the symbolic framework that is coherent with the interests of the dominant class as far as such a framework, once it is interiorized in the form of habitus, guarantees oppressed the possibility to achieve a compensatory form of social recognition and, thus, positive self-relationship, despite their disadvantageous social condition. In other words, we could say that the symbolic framework of a dominant class can be accepted and unintentionally adopted by the dominated if it allows the implementation of relations of reciprocal recognition that show themselves being positive to the dominated themselves. We can think about several ways to reach such a condition of spontaneous acceptance by referring to successful practices of recognition. For instance, when the dominated tend to attribute to themselves some qualities that traditionally belong to the members of the dominant class, or when ideas and values of the dominant classes do not prevent the dominated to enact successful forms of reciprocal recognition with other members of their own group. In other words, the naturalization of the relations of power in a given field or society is dependent also on the partial recognition, direct or indirect, that the dominated concede to the dominants. When the latter perceive themselves as agents that share some substantial properties with the dominant, or when they can actualize positive relations of recognition with members of the same class or group, it is reasonable to think that the dominated might tend to justify or, at least, acknowledge the dominants' system of norms and value and, thus, objective asymmetries of power.

6. Social fields, recognition, domination

In the previous section, we have seen that, according to Bourdieu, social systems characterized by domination are capable of reproducing themselves to the extent it allows social subjects in a disadvantaged position to achieve some type of positive self-relationship. This means that the dominated habitus should produce social practices that not only preserve the *status quo*, but consent dominated themselves to experience, at least to some extent, self-confidence, self-respect, and self-esteem.

In addition, struggles for the acquisition of symbolic power and capital, which are based on social recognition that dominant social agents accumulate, are an invariant factor of social life. Nevertheless, what are the features and mechanisms that support the social reproduction of unfair societies if we consider the level of first-order objectivity? In this case, Bourdieu seems to attribute a significant relevance to the way social fields are structured and organized. Briefly put, Bourdieu thinks that the particular morphology and amplitude of fields might contribute to perpetuating the *status quo*, balkanizing the social conditions of the oppressed agents, and reducing the possibility of realizing forms of cooperation and opposition that could undermine the dominant position of the ruling classes. The first way through which an objective system of power relations can weaken the oppositional agency of dominated agents is related to the criteria that regulate access into a given field. Imposing access criteria that limit the participation to a specific social game, excluding social agents that could have an interest in supporting the oppositional agency of the dominated, can serve the purpose of preserving the *status quo*. The second factor that can undermine the subversive actions of oppressed subjects concern the set of values and norms through which the players involved in a specific social game can judge if a determined social practice is worthy or not. In fact, the symbolic framework imposed by a dominant group will tend to add value to social practices that are consistent with dominants' goals, while devaluating those that go against the ruling classes' vision of the world.

Having these points in mind, I would seek now to explain to which extent, in such a condition of domination, effective forms of social recognition can actively work in favor of dominant social agents from a macro-social perspective, focused on the analyses of the first-order objectivity of the social world. As has been said several times, Bourdieu considers social fields as characterized by a never-ending struggle between classes (and fractions of classes) for the monopolization of different forms of capital and, especially, for the control of symbolic capital. This last form of capital,

which is common to every field, is necessary for exercising symbolic power, that is, to impose the definition of the world that is most congruent with a class' or group's particular interests. If we accept this picture, then we can advance a licit question: if the social struggle for the accumulation of different kinds of capital is endless, how is it possible for a social group or class to prevail over another one and stabilize its position of power, once the capital at stake is the symbolic one? If we look more carefully at Bourdieu's account of domination, we realize that the process of recognition plays an important role in the perpetuation of domination at the macro-level. My thesis is that, if we focus on social dynamics on a macro-level, recognition is fundamental as well. The dominating class can control subjugated groups through the exercise of symbolic power; that is to say, the power to define what counts as relevant social property in a given social context. Social agents can exercise symbolic power if and only if they have a certain amount of symbolic capital, namely social recognition that they receive from other agents that are in a subordinate position:

agents possess power in proportion to their symbolic capital, i.e. in proportion to the recognition they receive from a group. The authority that underlies the performative efficacy of discourse is a *percipi*, a being-known, which allows a *percipere* to be imposed, or, more precisely, which allows the consensus concerning the meaning of the social world, which grounds common sense to be imposed officially, i.e. in front of everyone and in the name of everyone³⁰.

In other words, Bourdieu states that the exercise of symbolic power is strongly intertwined with the acquisition and accumulation of symbolic capital, which Bourdieu depicts in term of social prestige and honor and, thus, social recognition:

Symbolic capital enables forms of domination, which imply dependence on those who can dominate by it, since it only exists through the esteem, recognition, belief, credit, confidence of others, and can only be perpetuated so long as it succeeds in obtaining belief in its existence³¹.

In this respect, until they are involved in successful reciprocal relations of recognition with the dominated (at least, with a relevant part of them), the dominant classes can exercise their symbolic power easily. The idea that agents in asymmetric social positions can realize reciprocal forms of recognition properly is indeed counterintuitive at first sight. Nevertheless, it

³⁰ Bourdieu (1991, 106).

³¹ Bourdieu (1997); Engl. transl. (2000b, 204).

might appear clearer if we consider how Bourdieu sketches social struggles for acquiring and controlling symbolic capital. As in the case of economic, social, and cultural power, the possession and exercise of symbolic power are determined by a struggle to impose “the legitimate vision of the social world and its division”. The central role of the symbolic struggle for the process of reproduction of every social field is clearly highlighted in the final pages of *La Distinction*:

The individual or collective classification struggles aimed at transforming the categories of perception and appreciation of the social world and, through this, the social world itself, are indeed a forgotten dimension of the class struggle³².

In summary: Bourdieu asserts that a dominant class can stabilize its social position through the exercise of symbolic power, that is to say, through the imposition of those schemes of thought, perception, and action that concur to foster dominant class interests. When a group of social agents controls and monopolizes media, educational institutions, public administrations, and the main centers of power inside the State, such a group acquires the power of ruling the process of social dressage and shaping the dispositional properties of other agents. To possess symbolic power means to be able to forge the agents’ habitus imposing on subordinated classes the adoption of schemes of categorizations, perception, and evaluations that favor the interests of dominant groups, thus making the nature and dynamics of a given society appear as a natural, necessary order. Once the categories of perception, reasoning, and judgment of the subordinated reflect the ruling class’s perspective and are interiorized in the form of bodily habitus, the oppressed cannot realize that the asymmetric relations of power in which they are involved are socially construed and unfair. They perceive them as natural and necessary.

Nevertheless, the acquisition and acceptance of the dominants’ symbolic framework and narrative are always the results of a previous process of reciprocal recognition among individuals, social groups, and classes that occupy different positions of power in a field. In this picture, reciprocal recognition precedes the acquisition and the possibility to exercise symbolic power and, in the end, it is necessary for guaranteeing the success of interaction among objective social structures and subjective embodied dispositions, namely, the harmonization of social fields, capital and agents’ habitus. In other terms, the dominants’ position of material and symbolic power is not only dependent on the social recognition that they can gain

³² Bourdieu (2016, 564); Engl. transl. (1984, 483).

from oppressed agents. For being preserved, a situation of domination also requires that dominants actively recognize the dominated in some sort of way.

In this respect, how could a situation of domination be described considering social reality's first-order objectivity? Furthermore, is it possible to do so taking into account the idea of reciprocal recognition, putting aside the idea of ideology at the same time? On one hand, it has been stated that, following Bourdieu, objective domination concerns the way in which fields are *de facto* built up, organized, and ruled. On the other hand, the interpretation here presented supposes that the accumulation, distribution, and, eventually, monopolization of symbolic capital is a matter of obtaining and providing recognition to agents that are active in a particular social context. If it is so, domination could be characterized as follows: a situation in which dominant agents can entertain successful relationships of recognition with a plurality of dominated agents and impede or weaken the actualization of successful forms of recognition among dominated subjects themselves. Given this state of affairs, the field is organized in such a way that the fluxes of recognition favor dominant agents in the field, while the dominated agents support the position of power of a dominant class or group objectively, without being recognized properly by other groups in a position of subjugation³³.

According to the present account, the dominated can experience, roughly, two conditions of social subjection considering first-order objectivity. In the first condition, there can be some dominated agents who objectively belong to the field in question, but who are not recognized as legitimate players by other agents in the field. More specifically, in such circumstances of domination, several agents that are objectively involved in the practices of the field are not perceived as such by the majority of the agents in the field who recognize each other as legitimate players. In other words, there is a discrepancy between the objective morphology of the field and the extension of the field as it is perceived by the agents who belong to it *de facto*. While many agents are effectively taking part in social activities and practices that are constitutive of the field, the norms and rules that govern relationships of recognition and access to the field tend to exclude partly or completely such a fraction of oppressed groups from a qualified context of recognition. This can happen in different ways,

³³ The analysis of the idea of domination proposed here has been strongly influenced by the ideas of Renault (2007, 121-139). Also, the reading of Hegel's Master-Slave dialectic that has been provided by Todorov (2001, 22) has meaningfully influenced the following.

which covers the whole spectrum of the types of misrecognition and lack of recognition that can be actualized. Dominant patterns of recognition in a field can exclude agents from tested practices of recognition on the basis of their status. Furthermore, they can depreciate the social value of the set of practices in which excluded agents are involved, although they are fundamental for the existence of the field itself.

In the second case, dominated agents that objectively belong to the field of concern are recognized as players by other agents but can accumulate symbolic capital only thanks to the recognition that comes from dominant agents. In both cases, the dominated agents cannot accumulate symbolic capital through the recognition that comes from other dominated agents. Such limited accumulation of symbolic capital restricts the symbolic power of the dominated, allowing them, in the best-case scenario, to claim only for modifications of the social structure that do not weaken the privileged position of dominant agents. In such a situation, the dominant agents can preserve and accumulate symbolic capital with the spontaneous contribution of a part of the set of the dominated agents.

7. Conclusion

In the previous pages, I have sought to show how Bourdieu's conception of society and social reproduction constitutes a valid theoretical candidate for developing a conception of domination that aims at going beyond the ideas of ideology, false consciousness, dulling of agents' critical skills. First, Bourdieu has shown how the oppositional agency of oppressed social agents can be neutralized thanks to the legitimation of social conflicts that are functional to social reproduction and maintenance of the *status quo*. Second, the concept of *habitus* can help social theorists and scientists to understand how the agents might simply ignore critical reflections, due to the interiorization of practical patterns that can guarantee social recognition and a functional individual self-relationship. Third, the concept of *field*, reinterpreted through the idea of *social recognition*, can shed light on the mechanisms that can pre-empt criticisms and the oppositional agency of subjugated people. The latter can have critical ideas and opinions regarding the *status quo*. Nevertheless, they are unable to express and enact them due to the lack of support and solidarity from other oppressed agents, or because social fields are organized in such a way that their speech acts and symbolic powers are silenced, labeled as irrelevant, weakened to the extent that they cannot be heard.

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