

Why We Fight: Evolutionary Reconceptualizations of Pierre Bourdieu's Political Economy of Symbolic Power

For all of his popularity in the social sciences, the work of Pierre Bourdieu has yet to have much of an impact on the study of religion. Bourdieu's works provide a model for understanding culture as a sort of political economy of symbolic power and this model, though developed over the course of a long career of studying subjects in a variety of contexts, can easily be applied to religious subjects. Despite the complexity and utility of his theories, there is but one monograph on Bourdieu and the study of religion and only a handful of articles and other books that employ his concepts in analyzing religious topics and subjects. The lack of engagement with Bourdieu's work may stem, at least in part, from his own aversion to focusing on religion, and it probably also does not help that Bourdieu's writings on religion, which are among his earliest, are also some of his least sophisticated. There may be other reasons why his work is unappealing to scholars of religion in particular, two of which I explore in this paper. First, I offer a response to the questions about whether or not it is true, as Bourdieu asserts, that human social existence is thoroughly competitive in nature and that people are somehow programmed, either genetically or socially, to compete with others. Second, I consider a criticism that some have raised against Bourdieu, namely, that he produces what they take to be a thoroughly capitalist notion of human social interactions, one characterized especially by a desire to maximize forms of capital. This criticism goes hand in hand with the previous one as both have to do with the nature of competition over forms of capital, which Bourdieu sees as operative in all social interactions. As I will argue, both of these criticisms can be answered to some extent by situating Bourdieu's model within the broader realm of evolutionary psychology, although my answers will only be tentative and suggestive at this time.

There is a certain irony in that Bourdieu both resisted comprehensive representations of his ideas as though they formed a single coherent theoretical system and yet also held that the concepts he put forward could not be defined in isolation, but only within the system of which they were a part. Given the interconnectedness of these concepts, it is best if we have an understanding, however superficial, of the system Bourdieu puts forward. Bourdieu proposes an understanding of culture that highlights issues of power and domination. He shows that culture, even its most basic manifestations in such things as taste, clothing, or musical preferences, is political in nature, if we understand 'political' to mean having to do with power, hierarchies, competition, and oppression. Bourdieu argues that all such cultural distinctions manifest and reinforce social distinctions between individuals and groups of individuals. His emphasis on symbolic violence and symbolic power foregrounds social hierarchies and competition over scarce cultural resources, thus highlighting the means by which such hierarchies are structured and passed on from generation to generation.

Bourdieu's overall program is significant for a number of reasons, not the least of which is that it provides an answer to two of the more pressing divisions within sociological thinking, broadly conceived. First, his model bridges the materialist view of social existence with the idealist. Bourdieu is a materialist in that he sees human consciousness within the context of practical social life and, following Marx, sees class conflict and the perpetuation of inequalities as topics of central importance in the social sciences. Bourdieu does not reduce everything to a materialist notion of competition and power, but instead, here following Weber and Althusser, extends the notions of capital and competition to the symbolic realm. What distinguishes Bourdieu's work is that he refuses to separate the social, cultural, and economic realms, thus rejecting the Marxist division between structure and superstructure.

Second, Bourdieu's work emphasizes the importance of practice as the central component of social analysis as practices are the locus where social structures are structured and where those structures also do their structuring. This focus on practice allows Bourdieu to bridge the two dominant paradigms in social theory – those of wholism and individualism. Wholist ontologies consider totalities (e.g.: a nation, society, or a culture) as having an existence that transcends the collection of individuals that make up that totality. Wholist ontologies reduce or erase the power of the individual and instead stress rules and structures. Individualist ontologies, on the other hand, propose that such totalities have no existence and little or no power over the individual thoughts, beliefs and choices of the members of said totality. Practice theorists, such as Bourdieu, Anthony Giddens, and Theodore Schatzki, consider both the power of the social group to shape and direct individual decision making as well as the ingenuity and independence of the individual who can never completely be governed by an external totality. The place in which these two ontologies come together is in thus in the practices in which individuals come to learn about and be incorporated into social groupings and where they demonstrate their understanding and commitment to those same groups.

In order to explain the way in which social structures structure individual decisions without dictating them, Bourdieu introduces the notion of *habitus*, which are the internalized dispositions to act or perform in a certain way, a preconscious tendency, a know-what and know-how to get along in a given situation. Despite the determinative sound of this concept, Bourdieu sees *habitus* as dispositions that still allow for individual ingenuity, for changes in the accepted ways of doing things, and for conscious, strategic action as well. In fact, Bourdieu's emphasis on the strategic nature of action as it occurs over time is what distances him from more structuralist approaches which disregard the importance of individual agency. As David Swartz puts it, the

notion of *habitus* points to “a theory of action that is practical rather than discursive, prereflective rather than conscious, embodied as well as cognitive, durable though adaptive, reproductive though generative and inventive, and the product of particular social conditions though transposable to others.”¹ *Habitus* thus connects the individual with the whole by providing the wherewithal to get along in the world and the by allowing for the possibility of social change while ensuring a large degree of social reproduction.

Next we come to the two concepts in Bourdieu’s theory which introduces the notion of competition: symbolic capital and fields of cultural production. Like Marx, Bourdieu sees conflict over scarce resources to be a fundamental truth of social existences, but he extends the notion of capital to the symbolic realm and provides a model for understanding status and power in terms of various forms of symbolic capital. Symbolic capital is “denied capital” in that it pertains to matters of power and influence while ostensibly being dissociated from what is typically considered to be the most fundamental indicator of power and influence – money. Symbolic capital is just that, however, the resources for establishing, perpetuating, or challenging social relations of power and influence. Symbolic capital can take many forms depending on the social world in which it is at play. Religious capital, for example, might consist of the power to designate orthodox doctrines or the ability to provide interpretations of sacred texts that others consider valid or authoritative just to name a couple of possibilities. Such capital can be exchanged for actual capital in Bourdieu’s model, but it is not reducible to it. Instead, symbolic capital can be thought of as a complex of abilities, material goods, authority, respect from others, etc. which allows someone to control or manipulate a given social group or structure.

A given type of symbolic capital is only operative within a field of cultural production. The word ‘field’ is meant to convey positionality amongst members in the field and competition

¹ Swartz, *Culture and Power*, 101.

between them, as in a game or on a battlefield. “Fields denote arenas of production, circulation, and appropriation of goods, services, knowledge, or status, and the competitive positions held by actors in their struggle to accumulate and monopolize these different kinds of capital.”² This can be thought of as similar to more familiar notions like context or milieu, but it highlights the conflictual nature of social existence which is often ignored by these concepts. There are as many fields as there are types of symbolic capital and membership in a field consists simply in buying into the rules of the game and taking an interest in the production and distribution of its related form of symbolic capital. Fields are thus sites of domination, subordination, and resistance in the ongoing struggles for status and influence. Symbolic capital comes to be operative within a field when a multiplicity of individuals come to accept the rules associated with that form of capital, when they acknowledge its worth and seek to compete for it, and when there are people actively engaged in the symbolic labor necessary for masking the interested nature of the field and its participants. This symbolic labor performs what Bourdieu calls symbolic violence, which involves the presentation of the hierarchy within a field as legitimate, even natural and thus the acceptance of said hierarchy by those in subordinate positions within the field. Taken together, fields and symbolic capital, labor, and violence provide a model for analyzing the political nature of culture which, according to Bourdieu, is not a marginal aspect of culture, but is in fact its very nature.

Bourdieu’s approach is useful for the study of religion in so far as he foregrounds the power dynamics involved in social structures and the processes by which those structures are reproduced or reformulated. There are obvious benefits to this approach in terms of understanding such things as the formations of orthodoxies, the creation of new religious movements, or the internal dynamics of religious institutions. Such an analysis of religion is not

² Swartz, *Culture and Power*, 117.

only useful from a sociological perspective, but also from the perspective of various liberation, feminist, post-colonial and other such forms of theological and cultural-critical discourse. In order for his model to be useful for social analysis and for it to survive certain knee-jerk defenses against the types of criticism that one can do using Bourdieu, it is necessary to address two prominent questions or criticisms about his model, namely that competition is a basic fact of human existence and that people seek to maximize their power (i.e., symbolic and actual capital) in a manner that is rightfully criticized as too capitalist in formulation and as not descriptive of forms of renunciation or altruistic behavior.

I suggest that the basic problem with Bourdieu's program, and the problem that is thus the root cause of these two problems in particular, is that he is concerned with power and its effects on people without establishing why power is important or what end it might be itself a means to. If we contextualize symbolic power and fields of cultural production and all the rest of his theory not just in the realm of power but in our most basic understanding of what it means to be human, then not only do we gain clarity on the importance and nature of competition, but we also can improve upon Bourdieu's theory by dismissing the notion that people always try to maximize their capital and by replacing his strictly economic (and capitalist) set of concepts with one that is more appropriately applied synchronically across cultures and diachronically throughout history. The context I suggest we turn to is human evolution and the still nascent field of evolutionary psychology.

The general goal of evolutionary psychology is "to integrate the human and natural sciences by reflecting on human behavior and cognition from the perspective of conventional neo-Darwinian thought."³ Evolutionary psychology is a rather young field, having its origins in the 1960's and '70's, almost a century after the publication of *The Origin of Species* (1859) and

³ Day, 421.

the more important (especially for this paper) *Descent of Man* (1871). Much of evolutionary psychology has dealt with cognition and questions of natural selection and survival fitness and this has also been the case in its early applications to the study of religion.⁴ Focusing on adaptations for natural selection and survival leaves us with many things that cannot be explained, especially when they seem detrimental to one's survival, as is the case with many things that constitute culture as we typically conceive of it. Natural selection is just one part of Darwin's theory of evolution, however. With the *Descent of Man* and in later editions of *The Origin of Species*, Darwin also developed the theory of evolution by sexual selection. Put briefly, genes are selected and passed on by individuals that are found attractive because they possess traits that express or reflect strong reproductive fitness. As Geoffrey Miller argues, it is to sexual selection that we must turn if we are understand such sexual ornaments as language, art, comedy, moral virtue, or religion.

Darwin came up with the theory of sexual selection by mate choice in order to explain how certain traits that seem costly from a natural selection point of view could be preserved generation after generation even though they provided no survival benefits or were detrimental to one's survival. Thus, while natural selection produces adaptations for survival in a particular environmental context, sexual selection produces adaptations for reproduction in a reproductive landscape. Traits are not just selected by chance in an ongoing and somewhat arbitrary process of natural selection, but are selected by mates who are attracted to certain traits that are reflective of strong sexual fitness. Geoffrey Miller suggests that those aspects of culture that evolutionary psychologists have generally been unable to decide from a natural selection perspective should be viewed as such fitness traits in that they are reflective of one's intelligence and abilities as well as one's status within a particular social group.

⁴ See especially Pascal Boyer, *Religion Explained: The Evolutionary Origins of Religious Thought*,

So, if culture consists of a variety of sexual ornaments, of things that are symbolic of sexual fitness either directly or indirectly by being reflective of social status, then what does that mean for our understanding of Bourdieu's political economy of symbolic power? First, it would mean that people are not striving for power necessarily but for sexual fitness. As an innate component of human nature, competition for reproductive opportunities is pervasive and, if you accept the premise of evolution, undeniable. This does not mean that such competition needs to be consciously about sex or that one need be aware of the role it plays in various day-to-day activities and decisions. Such a drive for bettering one's position in relation to other possible sexual competitors, however, does not need such an awareness to still be effective. We can thus think of Bourdieu's fields of cultural production as arenas of symbolic competition in the grand reproductive rat race that is human existence. This explains the drive for power and the pervasiveness of competition among people, even in situations where one might not expect it. In this view, people are not out for power out of greed or out of a desire to wield power even, but out of an innate drive that is common to all and takes quite different forms.

This brings us to the second criticism – that people try to maximize their power in a capitalist sense. Hugh Urban has criticized Bourdieu's model for its capitalist structure, arguing that such a mentality is specific to certain cultures and locals and only in recent history.⁵ Urban states that Bourdieu “has turned us all not simply into laborers, but into *capitalists*, self-interested beings who seek to accumulate and maximize our own symbolic and economic capital.”⁶ Urban argues that this economic model should not be applied to non-capitalist societies as it represents a culturally specific mentality that is then foisted upon cultures for whom it does not apply. This changes, however, if we take Bourdieu's economic model as a metaphor or

⁵ Urban, Hugh B. “Sacred Capital: Pierre Bourdieu and the Study of Religion,” 366-7.

⁶ Urban, “Sacred Capital,” 367.

shorthand for a more basic evolutionary process that *is* common to all people and cultures across time and space, which is exactly the type of universality to which evolutionary psychology would seek to lay claim.

Once we lay aside the idea that people are capitalists and see them instead as sexually reproducing mammals who communicate their sexual fitness through complex symbolic means, we can also lay aside the notion that all people are out to maximize their symbolic power or their sexual fitness. A group of animals that was plagued by constant and violent struggles over the top position in the group's hierarchy would not last long. In the wild, as in human societies, most take up middling positions in a hierarchy with only an elite few struggling to the top position. In human societies, this may be the case for a number of reasons. If someone is born into a poor family with few resources, for example, we would not expect them to seek to compete at the highest levels of any given field of cultural production. In fact, part of the internalizing of a given *habitus* when one is born and raised in such a context consists of them *not* believing they can achieve the highest levels of success and power which is why class differences are reproduced so successfully. In fact, it is just this kind of situation which leads to the type of structural racism that is still prevalent in American society despite the unwillingness of many to recognize such ongoing oppression or to accept responsibility for their privilege. Again, when we move from Bourdieu's more economic model to one of ongoing competition for reproductive opportunities, we can see how competition is important and pervasive, but not necessarily aimed at maximizing one's position in the group.

In this brief paper, I have suggested that Bourdieu's political economy of symbolic power, which is a useful tool for studying the power dynamics of religious groups and organizations, can fruitfully be corrected by situating it within the larger confines of evolutionary

psychology. This gives us a better understanding of the causes of competition, the goal of such competition, and extent to which such competition might go. This corrects for two of the more prevalent criticisms brought against Bourdieu's model. It also allows us to more confidently apply his model in contexts where a capitalist mentality is non-existent or hard to demonstrate.

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